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REMBRANDT AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES

dThe Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg and the Hermitage in Amsterdam organised 30 exhibitions together between the fall of the Soviet Union and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In exchange for contributing to the renovation of the St Petersburg museum, the Amsterdam exhibition centre shared its name and was given access to St Petersburg's treasures.

The relationship ended abruptly. "The war started on February 24th, and we cut ties on the 4th of March," says Annabelle Birnie, director of the Hermitage Amsterdam. "We were very strict about not wanting anything to do with the Russian state."

During the Covid pandemic, Birnie jokes, she had a collection but no public. When Russia invaded Ukraine, she had a public but no collection.

Arthur K. Wheelock was for 45 years the curator of Dutch painting at the National Gallery in Washington, and is today senior adviser to US billionaire Thomas Kaplan, owner of The Leiden Collection. Wheelock

received a call from the Hermitage asking if Kaplan would loan his paintings.

Kaplan began collecting 17th-century Dutch paintings with his wife Daphne 20 years ago. They have purchased more than 250 Dutch masters, including 17 Rembrandts, the largest number in private hands. The Kaplans have posted the entire collection online and lend the masterpieces to museums around the world in the interest of cultural understanding.

Kaplan and Wheelock proposed showing history paintings from The Leiden Collection at the Hermitage Amsterdam. The show, entitled Rembrandt and his Contemporaries, is the first designed specifically for the Hermitage Amsterdam since it broke ties with Russia.

Rembrandt and other 17th-century Dutch painters took from the Flemish theoretician Karel van Mander the idea that history painting – allegorical scenes and subjects from the Bible, antiquity or Greek and Roman mythology – was the most noble, prestigious form of art.

"Van Mander believed that history painting was at the highest echelon of art because it required knowledge of the Bible and mythology, and it required imagination to tell these stories through gestures and expressions," Wheelock explains.

Rembrandt's *Minerva in Her Study* (1635) is the signature painting for the exhibition. Rembrandt's beloved wife Saskia served as model for the goddess of wisdom and war. Dressed in pale blue and gold, crowned with laurel leaves, Minerva rests her forearm on a book – knowledge – and shuns war by turning her back on a



Minerva in Her Study, 1635, by Rembrandt; *Hagar and the Angel*, 1643-45, by Carel Fabritius. Photographs: The Leiden Collection

shield emblazoned with the head of Medusa, a helmet and spear.

Kaplan has also loaned Rembrandt's *Bust of a Bearded Old Man* (1633). The painting resembles the trionies – Dutch for faces – which Rembrandt often painted as sketches for larger history paintings. But the fact that he signed and dated the tiny portrait – his smallest painting ever – shows he considered it a work of art in its own right.

Rembrandt painted elderly men and women throughout his life. The large, squarish head with unruly hair and a white beard is charged with emotional energy. The US banker, industrialist and art collector Andrew Mellon, a previous owner, had a velvet-lined leather case built for the painting, which accompanied him everywhere.

History paintings by Ferdinand Bol, Franc van Mieris, Caspar Netscher, Godefridus Schalcken and Jan Steen, all better known for genre scenes and portraits, are included in the exhibition. Two paintings show figures being comforted by angels, with great poignancy.

Hagar and the Angel (1645) is one of only 13 surviving paintings by Carel Fabritius, Rembrandt's most talented pupil. Christ on the Mount of Olives (1715) was painted by Arent de Gelder, the student who

remained faithful to Rembrandt's style after late 17th century painters turned to French-style classicism.

Rembrandt and his Contemporaries runs until August 27th and coincides with the reopening of Rembrandt's house on March 18th. Combined with the fabulous Vermeer exhibition at the Rijksmuseum until June 4th, these events constitute a stunning celebration of 17th-century Dutch painting.

But could there have been a Dutch Golden Age without the enslavement of more than half a million Africans? Contemporary Dutch society has virtually banned the term Golden Age from its vocabulary, though one is still allowed to refer to the Golden Age of Dutch painting. The word slave is now seen as the equivalent of the N-word, and has been replaced by enslaved person.

The Rijksmuseum, the Netherlands' most important cultural institution, contributed to the debate by organising an exhibition on slavery in 2021. Last December, prime minister Mark Rutte declared that slavery had been a crime against humanity. King Willem-Alexander may apologise next July 1st, on the 150th anniversary of abolition.

"I am troubled when the beauty of the art somehow gets compromised by the other story," says Wheelock. "These are miraculous paintings. The other side of the equation of slavery is there. We have to deal with it, but it shouldn't take away from the beauty of the art that was created."

LARA MARLOWE