

The New York Times

A Homecoming for Dutch Masters, Thanks to an American Billionaire

Last year, the Hermitage Amsterdam cut ties with Russia. This spring, they're filling their walls with pieces from Thomas Kaplan's treasure trove.



Thomas Kaplan with Rembrandt's "Minerva in Her Study." Mr. Kaplan, a "Rembrandt evangelist," has collected some 250 paintings by the old masters, 35 of which are now on view in a temporary exhibit at the Hermitage Amsterdam. Photographs by Herman Wouters for The New York Times



By **Nina Siegal**

March 2, 2023, 5:00 a.m. ET

AMSTERDAM — “She is our ‘Mona Lisa,’” said Thomas Kaplan, the American billionaire art collector, standing in front of Rembrandt’s “Minerva in Her Study.”

“Whenever I look at her,” he said, “I can’t believe that she’s in anyone’s collection, let alone ours.”

“Minerva,” which Rembrandt painted in Amsterdam in 1635, is one of 35 works that Mr. Kaplan and his wife, Daphne Recanati Kaplan, have lent to the [Hermitage Amsterdam](#) from their personal trove of Golden Age masters, known as the [Leiden Collection](#), for the museum’s current exhibition, “Rembrandt & His Contemporaries.”

Filling two floors of the grand museum on the banks of the Amstel River, the show, which [runs through Aug. 27](#), explores a type of Dutch old master painting that has received little attention in recent years: the so-called “history” painting.

The Hermitage exhibition adds to the Dutch capital's luster for art lovers this spring, especially for old-masters aficionados already visiting Maastricht for TEFAF. Not only is the Rijksmuseum hosting its [blockbuster "Vermeer" exhibition](#), but now Mr. Kaplan's private collection provides a glimpse of more of his contemporaries. Visitors who haven't been able to purchase a ticket to the sold-out Vermeer show can take a short walk across the river to a look at his 17th-century predecessor, Rembrandt, instead.

Crowned and wearing a large golden cloak, "Minerva" might not be everyone's idea of a mysterious Mona Lisa beauty. She's stolid and broad jawed with tired eyes, her hand resting on a book. The Roman goddess represents both wisdom and war, and the struggle between these two contrary forces plays out in her expression.

"She takes my breath away," said Mr. Kaplan. "She represents the apogee of Rembrandt's aspirations as a history painter. He's painting what he loves and what he most believes in. She's everything he finds noble in his profession."

Today, Rembrandt is often [most appreciated for his portraits](#), especially the nearly 80 self-portraits he produced in his lifetime. But during his own era, he aspired to a loftier goal with history paintings, which were considered at the time to be the apex of artistic achievement.

This genre of paintings didn't really depict history as we think of it today, but rather subject matter that was taught as history in the 17th century: Old Testament stories, mythology and allegory.



Visitors studying "Elisha Refusing Naaman's Gifts" by Lambert Jacobsz, on view in the "Rembrandt & His Contemporaries" exhibit at the Hermitage Amsterdam. Photographs by Herman Wouters for The New York Times

“History painting in general is less known, and less appreciated, but it’s a very important part of Dutch art,” said Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., a senior adviser to the Leiden Collection, in an interview. He had served as curator of northern baroque paintings at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. until 2018.

“These pictures tell stories about moral and ethical issues that we all have to deal with in life,” he said. “There’s no reason that they shouldn’t be as pertinent and important today as they were in the 17th century.”

Mr. Kaplan, who made his fortune in silver and gold mining, as well as natural gas production, is currently the chief executive of the Electrum Group, an investment firm specializing in natural resources. He currently owns 17 Rembrandt paintings, an estimated half of all those still left in private hands; two of them are featured in this show. They are part of a larger collection of some 250 old master paintings that he and his wife have [amassed over the last two decades](#).

They began buying in 2003 and purchased works at “a rate of about a painting per week” said Mr. Kaplan, until about 2008. They have continued to collect since then, but at a slower rate.

On a recent afternoon, Mr. Kaplan dashed through the museum’s galleries, pointing out his prized works — Isaac de Jouderville’s portrait of Rembrandt, Carel Fabritius’s “Hagar and the Angel,” and “Old Testament Figure, Probably King Solomon” by Arent de Gelder — like a child showing off his favorite toys. “I just want to show you two more things,” he said, even though there were more.

Mr. Kaplan likes to refer to himself as a “Rembrandt evangelist.” It’s his feeling that the 17th-century Dutch master might need a slight boost to his reputation.

“Rembrandt is a brand all over the world and the name is well known, but it is a brand name that needs, as it were, to be refreshed,” he said. “It’s like being able to refresh Gucci.”

That is part of the reason he wanted to bring the collection to Amsterdam. The other was that an opportunity presented itself.

The Hermitage Amsterdam, a privately funded Dutch museum, was established in 2009 as a branch of the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia. The Dutch museum contracted with the State Hermitage Museum to receive art on loan from the Russian collection for temporary exhibitions.

After Russia invaded Ukraine last February, however, the museum [renounced its link to Russia](#), bringing an abrupt end to the partnership. Since then, the Amsterdam museum has been working to redefine its identity and has not yet settled on a long-term solution.



Rembrandt's "Bust of a Bearded Old Man" on view at the Hermitage Amsterdam. Mr. Kaplan, who once considered the miniature portrait his "Moby Dick," finally convinced the former owner to sell it by offering an extraordinary sum. Photographs by Herman Wouters for The New York Times

With the museum facing a gap in its program schedule for the spring, the Leiden Collection stepped in. It was the first time Mr. Kaplan was bringing his old master artworks "home," to the place where many of them were created.

"We are in transition, and we're in the midst of finding new strategies for the future, and we gave ourselves at least a year to do that," said Marlies Kleiterp, the Hermitage Amsterdam's head of exhibitions. "It's quite easy to find exhibitions, but it's not that easy to find exhibitions with as high a quality collection as Mr. Kaplan has. He has done us a great, great favor."

Ms. Kleiterp said the museum had not yet discussed the possibility of an ongoing relationship with Mr. Kaplan. "It's filling in a gap but also perhaps a steppingstone for the future, we don't know," she said.

Mr. Kaplan did not say if the current partnership would lead to a more permanent connection to the museum. "When you have a positive experience, it gives you positive reinforcement," he said. "And this experience has been extremely positive."

The Kaplans have never exhibited their collection at home, he said. For the first 13 years that they were amassing works, he and his wife tried to remain anonymous, naming the Leiden Collection after Rembrandt's birthplace, rather than after themselves. They regarded the collection as a kind of "lending library" and have lent works from the collection to about 80 museums since 2003.

In 2016, he “came out” as the owner, just before lending some [30 works to the Louvre in Paris](#) for the show “Masterpieces from the Leiden Collection: The Age of Rembrandt.” Many of the same works later traveled to the [Louvre Abu Dhabi in 2019](#) and were supplemented by paintings from the Louvre’s own collection for “[Rembrandt, Vermeer and the Dutch Golden Age](#).”

The collection was scheduled to travel more, but when the pandemic hit, the paintings were put in storage, said Mr. Wheelock — until now.

Mr. Kaplan is confident that history painting is still very relevant. “That’s an angle that’s best test-driven in Amsterdam,” he added, because the public in the Dutch capital is already familiar with Rembrandt’s larger body of work.

If “Minerva” is the painting the collector considers his “Mona Lisa,” there’s another he once considered his “Moby Dick,” he said, “my great white whale.” As his handlers pressed him to stay on track for a scheduled lunch, Mr. Kaplan said, “Can I just show one more thing?” He led the way to the smallest painting in the exhibition, Rembrandt’s 1633 “Bust of a Bearded Old Man,” a miniature portrait, curiously contained in a velvet-covered traveling case.

The work once belonged to the American banker and U.S. Treasury Secretary Andrew W. Mellon, who appreciated it so much that he wanted to be able to take it with him anywhere.

Mr. Kaplan had wanted to buy the portrait for years, from the moment he saw it on display in 2004, but he could not convince its former owner to part with it. He finally persuaded him by offering an extraordinary sum — a price Christie’s told him was the highest price ever paid for an artwork per square inch.

“It was worth it to me,” said Mr. Kaplan.

But what is the connection to history painting?

“That’s very personal,” he said. “When I look at it, I feel as if I’m gazing upon the face of God. If that’s not history, then what is?”

Nina Siegal has been writing about European art, culture and history for The Times from Amsterdam since 2012.