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A Tiny Rembrandt Drawing Sells for \$17.9 Million

The Dutch master's sketch of a lion—the last still in private hands—now ranks as one of the priciest drawings ever sold at auction

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'Young Lion Resting' smashed Rembrandt's \$3.7 million record for a work on paper. [SOTHEBY'S](#)

A tiny chalk drawing of a recumbent lion by Rembrandt sold for \$17.9 million on Wednesday, the latest sign that the art market is roaring back following a yearslong slump.

Rembrandt's "Young Lion Resting" smashed the Dutch master's \$3.7 million record for a work on paper and now ranks as one of the priciest drawings ever sold at auction.

The overall auction high bar for any drawing is still held by Raphael, whose drawings have sold at auction for around \$48 million a couple times over the years, most recently 14 years ago with the sale of a [young apostle](#).



'Young Lion' only measures about 4.5 inches tall, but Rembrandt used black chalk and white gouache to render it in minute detail. SOTHEBY'S

Sotheby's strong result for the "Young Lion" this early in the art market's spring season could serve as a broader signal of the art market's overall recovery since sales first perked up last fall following several downturn years. Or it could simply indicate that collectors feel safer splurging on a household-name artist like Rembrandt, a Renaissance man famed for his pensive, realistic self-portraits in earthen hues.



Christie's will offer Michelangelo's estimated \$1.5 million preparatory drawing of a foot with ties to the Sistine Chapel. CHRISTIE'S IMAGES LTD. 2026

Christie's will test Michelangelo's draftsmanship by offering up his estimated \$1.5 million preparatory drawing of a foot with ties to the Sistine Chapel on Thursday.

"Young Lion" only measures about 4.5 inches tall, but Rembrandt used black chalk and white gouache to render it in minute detail, down to the animal's eyelashes and the chain around his neck. He is depicted relaxing, but the intensity of his gaze "gives it a menacing feel," said Gregory Rubinstein, Sotheby's head of old master drawings.

Animals were rare in Rembrandt's oeuvre. His surviving notebooks contain about 15 sketches of animals, from ordinary pigs and horses to exotic species such as elephants and lions he may have encountered in the annual town fair held near his home in Leiden in the Netherlands. Of the six lions he drew, five now belong to museums including the Louvre in Paris and the British Museum in London. This was the last remaining lion in private hands.

In 1634, Rembrandt attempted to depict a lion for a scene of "St. Jerome Reading," but Rubinstein said the shaggy creature in the print wasn't realistic. "That's not by someone who has seen a real lion," he said.

Rubinstein tracked down records in Amsterdam that indicate that lions were featured attractions in fairs in that city in 1644, 1645 and 1648, though, so the artist could have easily seen and studied them there, firsthand. Sotheby's dates its lion to the 1640s.



Rembrandt attempted to depict a lion for a print depicting 'St. Jerome Reading,' but Gregory Rubinstein, Sotheby's head of old master drawings, said the creature wasn't realistic. METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

An unidentified man in Sotheby's saleroom won Rembrandt's subsequent, more accurate depiction of a lion.

The sellers were precious metals investor Thomas Kaplan and philanthropist Jon Ayers, who oversees a nonprofit, Panthera, co-founded by Kaplan two decades ago to protect the world's 40 species of large cats, many of which are endangered.

Kaplan, whose Leiden Collection with his wife Daphne Recanati Kaplan includes 17 Rembrandt paintings and a Johannes Vermeer, said proceeds from the Rembrandt sale will help establish an endowment at Panthera. The nonprofit wants to buy land in Brazil connecting a pair of national parks there so that big cats can roam there without being hunted down.

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