

The \$18 Million Lion: How Rembrandt's Sketch Bridges Art and Survival

A historic auction record transforms a Dutch Master's fleeting observation into a modern lifeline for biodiversity, proving that the quietest works often hold the greatest power.



Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn, *Young Lion Resting*, ca. 1638–42, Black chalk with white chalk heightening and grey wash on brown laid paper, 115 x 150 mm



LISBETH THALBERG | 5 February 2026, 8:05 am

The distinction between cultural heritage and the natural world is often treated as absolute, yet the recent sale of a delicate 17th-century drawing has collapsed that distance entirely. When the market assigns an extraordinary valuation to a small sheet of paper, it usually signals prestige; in this instance, it signals a rare transmutation of artistic memory into biological survival.

This shift was cemented in New York this week when a small, delicate drawing by Rembrandt van Rijn achieved a price of \$17.86 million, establishing a new auction record for a work on paper by the Dutch master.

Titled *Young Lion Resting* (ca. 1638–42), the work is physically diminutive—measuring just 11.5 by 15 centimeters—but culturally substantial.

Rendered in black chalk with white heightening and grey wash, the drawing captures a predator in a moment of vulnerability, eyes closed and heavy-headed.

Unlike the heraldic, stylized lions that populate much of art history, Rembrandt's subject is palpably alive, observed from nature rather than imagination.

The sale, conducted at Sotheby's during its Master Works on Paper auction, attracted bidding from around the globe before the hammer fell to a buyer present in the room. However, the transaction carries a significance that extends beyond the revaluation of the Old Master market.

The work was offered from the Leiden Collection, the private assembly of Dutch Golden Age art held by Thomas S. Kaplan and Daphne Recanati Kaplan.

In a move that explicitly links cultural legacy with biological survival, the proceeds from the sale are dedicated entirely to Panthera, a global charity focused on wild cat conservation.

There is a compelling symmetry in the exchange: the sale of a static, immortalized image of a lion to fund the protection of its living, breathing counterparts.

Kaplan, who co-founded Panthera, described the sale as a transformation of cultural heritage into conservation action, a sentiment that reframes the act of collecting as one of stewardship rather than mere accumulation.

The drawing itself likely stems from Rembrandt's direct observation of a lion brought to Amsterdam by the Dutch East India Company, a rare sight in the 17th century that drew crowds and artists alike.

While the lion was an exotic curiosity to the Dutch public of the 1600s, today the species represents a dwindling biodiversity, adding a layer of urgency to the drawing's calm demeanor.

Financially, the result underscores the robust health of the high-end drawing market, coming shortly after the Diane A. Nixon collection realized \$10.8 million, doubling its low estimates.

Yet, *Young Lion Resting* stands apart, not merely for its price tag, but for the philosophical weight it now carries.

It serves as a reminder that the value of art is not strictly inherent in the paper and chalk, but in its ability to interact with the contemporary world.

Rembrandt captured the weight of a sleeping animal with a few rapid strokes nearly four centuries ago; today, that same weight has been transmuted into resources for the future.

In this context, the auction room becomes more than a marketplace; it becomes an arena where history is liquidated to preserve the present.