

THE VALUE



Small Rembrandt lion drawing sells for record US\$17.9m at Sotheby's New York

By: Kayan Wong

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A small lion drawing by Rembrandt sold for around US\$17.9 million at Sotheby's New York on Wednesday (4 Feb), making it the most valuable work on paper by the Dutch master ever sold at auction.

Titled *Young Lion Resting* and measuring just 11.5 x 15 cm, the work is the only known animal study by Rembrandt still in private hands and was consigned by the Leiden Collection, one of the world's most important private holdings of 17th-century Dutch and Flemish art.

The price more than quadrupled the previous auction record for a Rembrandt drawing, set in 2000 when *The Bulwark De Rose and the Windmill De Smeerpot, Amsterdam* sold for US\$3.7 million at Christie's New York.

Proceeds from the sale will go to Panthera, a nonprofit focused on the protection of wild cats and their ecosystems through science-driven conservation, fieldwork, and policy efforts in more than 40 countries.



Auctioneer David Pollack (Head of Old Master, New York) brought the hammer down at US\$15 million



Lot 201 | Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn (Leiden 1606-1669 Amsterdam) | *Young Lion Resting*, black chalk and gray wash, heightened with white, on paper washed light brown (Auction record for a work on paper by the artist)

115 x 150 mm (11.5 x 15 cm)

Provenance:

- Jean-Jacques de Boissieu (1736–1810), Paris1;
- Robert Lebel (1901–86), Paris, by 19682;
- with Hazlitt, Gooden & Fox, and Artemis Fine Art, London/New York, 2000;
- with Otto Naumann Ltd., New York, 2005,
- from whom acquired by the present owner

Remarks: Sold to benefit conservation organization Panthera

Estimate: US\$15,000,000 - 20,000,000

Hammer Price: US\$15,000,000

Sold: US\$17,860,000

Auction House: Sotheby's New York

Sale: Master Works on Paper from Five Centuries

Date: 4 February 2026

Animal studies are exceptionally rare in Rembrandt's oeuvre. Only around 15 animal sketches by the artist are known to survive, depicting subjects ranging from domesticated animals – dogs, pigs, and horses – to more exotic species such as elephants and birds.

Lions appear in just six of these known drawings. Five are held in public collections, including the British Museum, the Musée du Louvre, and the Rijksmuseum, leaving *Young Lion Resting* as the only extant example still in private hands.

The drawing is thought to date from the late 1630s to early 1640s. In both style and handling – including the use of toned paper and comparable media – it closely resembles two lioness sketches in the British Museum. The remaining three known lion studies by Rembrandt belong to a later phase in his career and differ markedly in character.

Lions also appear occasionally in Rembrandt's prints, though usually as background figures. One such example, *Saint Jerome Reading in an Italian Landscape from the Sam Josefowitz Collection*, sold at Christie's London in 2023 for £1.55 million (US\$2 million).



The Bulwark De Rose and the Windmill De Smeerpot, Amsterdam | Sold: US\$3.7 million, Christie's New York, 2000 (Previous auction record for a work on paper by the artist)



A later lion sketch by Rembrandt | Collection of the Louvre





Later lion sketches by Rembrandt | Collection of Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam (top) and Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (bottom)



Saint Jerome Reading in an Italian Landscape from the Sam Josefowitz Collection | Sold for £1.55 million at Christie's London, 2023

Contrary to popular belief, exotic animals were not readily available to artists in 17th-century Holland. Although Dutch maritime trade reached Africa, Asia, and the Americas, transporting large wild animals remained expensive and logistically difficult.

Lions were only intermittently accessible, typically through touring exhibitions, city fairs, or commercial menageries set up in inn courtyards, such as Blauw Jan and the Witte Oliphant in Amsterdam.

The diary of Ernst Brinck, a scholar and mayor, records lions being exhibited in Amsterdam, Delft, The Hague and Harderwijk throughout the 1640s. A young lion was shown in Amsterdam in both 1644 and 1645. These exhibitions were held near Waterlooplein, a short walk from Rembrandt's studio on Jodenbreestraat, making it likely that he observed the animal firsthand.



Close-up of *Young Lion Resting*

Almost certainly a study from life, the drawing shows Rembrandt's ability to capture both physical form and psychological presence with relatively few strokes. The young lion's calm but alert posture, its sinewy musculature and, above all, its intense gaze – directed just to the viewer's left – give the sheet an arresting charge.

Executed in dense black chalk or charcoal, probably bound with an oily medium and accented with grey wash and touches of opaque white, the drawing is on lightly toned paper, a technique consistent with Rembrandt's practice during this period.

Unlike the two related lioness studies in the British Museum, which show the animals in profile, *Young Lion Resting* presents the lion in three-quarter view. The angle brings greater emphasis to the eyes, which seem fixed on something just beyond the edge of the sheet.

The lion's left paw appears in two positions, suggesting rapid observation from life – quick, searching gestures counterbalanced by more controlled passages. The body is laid in with broad, energetic strokes that suggest latent movement, while the head is described with slower, more deliberate marks that create a feeling of stillness.



Two lioness sketches by Rembrandt at the British Museum, created around the same period as *Young Lion Resting*

The drawing once belonged to Jean-Jacques de Boissieu (1736 - 1810), a French artist and printmaker. It disappeared from view for roughly a century before resurfacing in 1968 in the collection of Robert Lebel, the French writer and Marcel Duchamp biographer. It later passed to the Old Masters dealership Otto Naumann Ltd. before entering the Leiden Collection.

Founded by Thomas Kaplan, an American investor with an estimated net worth of around US\$2 billion as of last year, and his wife Daphne Recanati Kaplan, the Leiden Collection grew out of the couple's shared admiration for Rembrandt. Named after the artist's birthplace, the collection now comprises more than 200 paintings and drawings, including 17 paintings by Rembrandt and the only work by Vermeer still in private hands.

Works from the Leiden Collection have been exhibited at institutions worldwide – including the Pushkin Museum in Moscow, the Long Museum in Shanghai, and Louvre Abu Dhabi – with *Young Lion Resting* frequently among the loans.



The Leiden Collection, founded by Thomas Kaplan



In 2017, *Young Lion Resting* was exhibited as part of The Leiden Collection's show at Shanghai's Long Museum