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Thomas Kaplan Identified as Buyer of $9 Million Rembrandt Painting
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Image: The Art Newspaper

New York collector **Thomas Kaplan**, owner of the Leiden Collection, has been identified as the anonymous buyer of **Rembrandt's** painting St John on Patmos.

The work sold for **£6.75 million ($9 million)** at **Sotheby's** in **December** of last year. This acquisition marks the **18th Rembrandt painting** added to Kaplan's collection over the past two decades.

The purchase may seem surprising given that Kaplan sold a **Rembrandt** drawing, Young Lion Resting (circa 1638-42), for nearly **$18 million** at **Sotheby's** in **February**, just two months later. Kaplan acknowledged that this might appear "paradoxical," explaining that the sale was intended to create "a life-saving fund for big cat conservation." The proceeds established an endowment for the charitable **Panthera** organization, a cause important to Kaplan and his wife, **Daphne Recanati Kaplan**.

Regarding the acquisition of St John on Patmos (circa 1661), Kaplan stated that it is "about preserving, and indeed returning to the public domain, a breathtaking late masterwork that has been hidden from sight for over a century," thereby enriching "the core narrative of our collection."

This oil painting, from late in **Rembrandt's** career, has a complex history. Last publicly exhibited in **1923**, it was known primarily from a low-quality black-and-white photograph until recently. In **1904**, an American dealer sold the picture for just **$160**, attributing it to **Carel Fabritius**. In **1913**, German

art historian and **Metropolitan Museum of Art** curator **Wilhelm Valentiner** recognized it as a **Rembrandt** and acquired it for his personal collection for **$525**. Valentiner believed the sitter was the artist's son, **Titus**, due to facial resemblances with two known portraits.

Around **1923**, **Fritz Thyssen**, heir to a German steel company, purchased the **Rembrandt**. Thyssen's relationship with the **Nazis** was complicated; he was an influential supporter of **Adolf Hitler** from the late **1920s** but became a critic by the late **1930s**. In **1941**, while attempting to flee **Vichy France**, he was arrested and subsequently sent to the **Sachsenhausen** and **Dachau** concentration camps. Following the war, the Allies fined him for his early Nazi support, and he immigrated to **Argentina** in **1950**.

The **Rembrandt** was among works seized by the **Nazis** in **1940** but was restituted to Thyssen in **1950** and sent to **Buenos Aires** just before his death in **January 1951**. The painting was eventually inherited by his grandson, **Federico Zichy Thyssen**, who bred **Arabian horses**. After Federico's death in **2014**, the **Rembrandt** passed to a family charitable foundation.

Before the **Sotheby's** sale, it was determined that the painting depicts **St John on Patmos**, not a portrait of **Titus**. Cleaning and conservation revealed a palm tree, symbolizing the Greek island of Patmos, and an eagle, the emblem of St John, in the background. These features were barely visible in earlier reproductions. The painting shows the young evangelist resting his hands on a leather-bound manuscript containing letters he used in writing his apocalyptic vision for the New Testament book of **Revelation**.

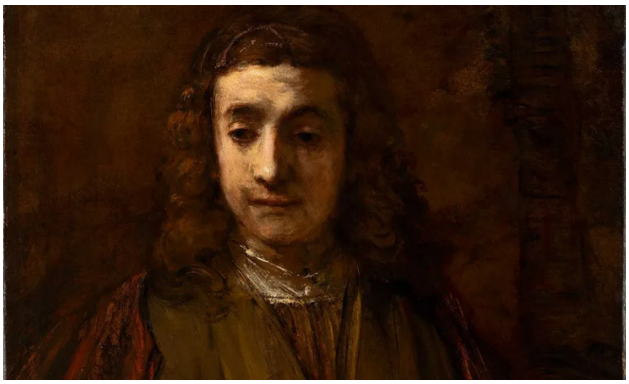
Although the now-defunct **Rembrandt Research Project** did not consider the painting previously due to its inaccessibility, **Arthur Wheelock**, a **17th-century Dutch** specialist who advises Kaplan, confirmed that the **Sotheby's** attribution is now fully accepted by all specialists. Wheelock believes that **Rembrandt** used his son as a model, even though it is not a direct portrait. Wheelock stated, "Rembrandt's decision to ask Titus to model for St John suggests that he felt an underlying connection between his own affection for his son and the evangelist's place in the Christian story."

The Leiden Collection plans to announce a European exhibition of a portion of its holdings for **autumn 2027**. This exhibition will feature St John on Patmos, marking its first public display beyond a brief showing at **Sotheby's** last year.

Kaplan's acquisition of **18 Rembrandt** paintings has raised questions about his influence on the market. Sellers of significant **Rembrandt** works often anticipate Kaplan's interest, potentially leading to a direct purchase or increased bidding at auction. When asked if this affects prices, Kaplan responded, "perhaps, in specific moments." However, he emphasized that the market for **Rembrandt** masterworks is driven by their extreme scarcity. Kaplan added, "When a painting as intensely personal as St John on Patmos emerges after 100 years in private hands, the enthusiasm is already built into the sheer rarity of the moment."







Source: The Art Newspaper

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