

# Rembrandt and his Contemporaries



History Paintings from  
The Leiden Collection

 BOOKS

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# PREFACE

Annabelle Birnie

Directeur Hermitage Amsterdam

Dutch people often say that they are not nationalistic. Especially academics and art-lovers. But in fact we are no strangers to chauvinism. More often than not, when we visit museums in other countries, we are proud to see Dutch Old Masters on display there. Especially in the case of the great American collections, like those of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, or the museums in Los Angeles, Baltimore and Philadelphia (to name just a few). When we go there, we are thrilled to see how seventeenth-century Dutch paintings found their way into the hands of collectors in the United States. The great American vogue for collecting Dutch Old Masters may be a thing of the past, but even now there are sharp-eyed people in the US who put their hearts and souls into collecting Dutch art of the seventeenth century. And it is particularly interesting when such a collector chooses an aspect of art history that may have been rather neglected here in the Netherlands.

Thomas S. Kaplan is just such a collector. For decades he has been building a collection with a clear mission in mind. Firstly, he wants to make it

available for research. Secondly, he aims to gather together paintings that show the extent of the role played by *fijschilders* and history painters in the success story that is seventeenth-century Dutch painting. Both these aspects of Dutch Golden Age painting – the *fijschilder* style of which Gerard Dou was the undisputed star and the history painting genre in which Pieter Lastman played the leading role – have come to be under-appreciated in the Netherlands. This is not the first time that wonderful loans from The Leiden Collection have been on display in Dutch museums. But the loan of such a generous overview of history paintings is completely unprecedented. That fact makes us all the prouder to be able to cast light on this particular subject. *Rembrandt and His Contemporaries, History Paintings from The Leiden Collection* tells the enthralling story of this often forgotten facet of Dutch art.

Many of the works on show have not been on view in the Netherlands for decades. The centrepiece of the exhibition is Rembrandt's striking and majestic painting of the goddess of wisdom, *Minerva in Her Study* (1635). The more than 30 other works on display give an overwhelming impression of Dutch Golden Age painting. They include unique history paintings by artists now known primarily for genre scenes and portraits: not only Frans van Mieris, Caspar Netscher, Godefridus Schalcken, and Jan Steen, but also Ferdinand Bol, Arent de Gelder, and Carel Fabritius. We

are extremely grateful that these works have been allowed to travel to Amsterdam. Our thanks go to the collector, his staff, his advisers and all those who have helped to make this exhibition a reality. This catalogue is yet another result of the splendid ambition to make The Leiden Collection accessible to all.



Rembrandt van Rijn, *Minerva in her Study*, 1635

## ‘REMBRANDT GAVE PAINTING A SOUL’

Renée Steenbergen in conversation with art collector Thomas S. Kaplan

Businessman Thomas Kaplan was over forty when he started collecting art. It all began with his fascination with Rembrandt and his circle. Kaplan and his wife discovered that there were still plenty of seventeenth-century Dutch paintings on the market and for the first few years they bought an average of one a week.

During this interview on Zoom, Kaplan looked relaxed and was eager to talk about his passion.

**Congratulations on the twentieth anniversary of your collection. Is it a coincidence that you are celebrating it in Amsterdam?**

Thomas Kaplan gives a contented laugh. ‘It’s a happy accident that the anniversary falls just when the collection is on show in the city where Rembrandt achieved greatness. But the collection my wife and I have built up is named after the town where it all began for him, and that’s Leiden. Not many people now know that Leiden was then a lively artistic centre popular among artists. The same goes for the kind of art at the heart of our collection: paintings by *fijnschilders*, historical and allegorical pictures full of gods and heroes, and biblical scenes. These days, all that is seen as a niche interest, a byway in the history of

art. But in the seventeenth century painters like Gerard Dou and Frans van Mieris were popular all over Europe and their pictures fetched high prices.’

**Do you aim to use The Leiden Collection to some extent to correct art history?**

‘*Fijnschilders* and their genre scenes went out of fashion when Impressionism took off at the end of the nineteenth century. And the arrival of photography meant that such precise depictions of the material world came to be regarded as superfluous. But even a painter like Arent de Gelder, one of Rembrandt’s most talented pupils, is underappreciated these days. The show at the Hermitage includes an almost Surrealist, Goya-esque work by him: *Christ on the Mount of Olives*. It’s the kind of discovery every collector would like to make.’

**Why is Rembrandt so central to your collection? You possess seventeen works by him, including one from his late period.**

‘He was the artist who made an indelible impression on me, even as a child. I saw his *Aristotle with a Bust of Homer* at the Metropolitan Museum in New York when I was only eight. The melancholy expression of the old philosopher makes it a deeply moving picture. That overwhelming impression was what prompted my first acquisitions more than thirty years later. It also gradually led to the focus of the collection: the school of Rembrandt and contemporaries. For that reason, it includes works by his teacher Lastman and by an impressive array of talented artists



Thomas S. Kaplan. Courtesy by The Leiden Collection

trained by Rembrandt himself in his own studio: Fabritius, Bol, Dou, Flinck and Van Hoogstraten. The broader circle around Rembrandt is also represented: Steen, Metsu and Van Mieris, together with the latter's whole family. The broad picture of the golden age of Dutch painting, in which Rembrandt was an essential linchpin – that's what I want to show as fully as possible.'

**Your mission is to use the collection to complement the work of museums in areas of relative current neglect. But surely Rembrandt is anything but an undervalued artist?**

'Over the centuries, appreciation of his oeuvre has varied widely. His Leiden period is still judged by some people to be

'of lesser quality'. But we've been able to acquire three of the five panels from his allegorical *Five Senses* series, and they are sharp and full of humour. And mythological scenes like his monumental *Minerva*, showing the Roman goddess of wisdom, have also fallen out of fashion in modern times. But we regard *Minerva* as the Mona Lisa of The Leiden Collection.'

**Throughout the centuries, Rembrandt has always been highly appreciated by fellow artists.**

'That is a remarkable fact, and it is one of the main motivations for our collection. Painters with completely different styles all extol his merits: Goya, Delacroix, Van Gogh, Picasso, Bacon, Lucian Freud – his influence continues right through to



## 2. Isaac de Jouderville

Leiden 1612 – Amsterdam 1645

### ***Portrait of Rembrandt in Oriental Dress*** ca. 1631

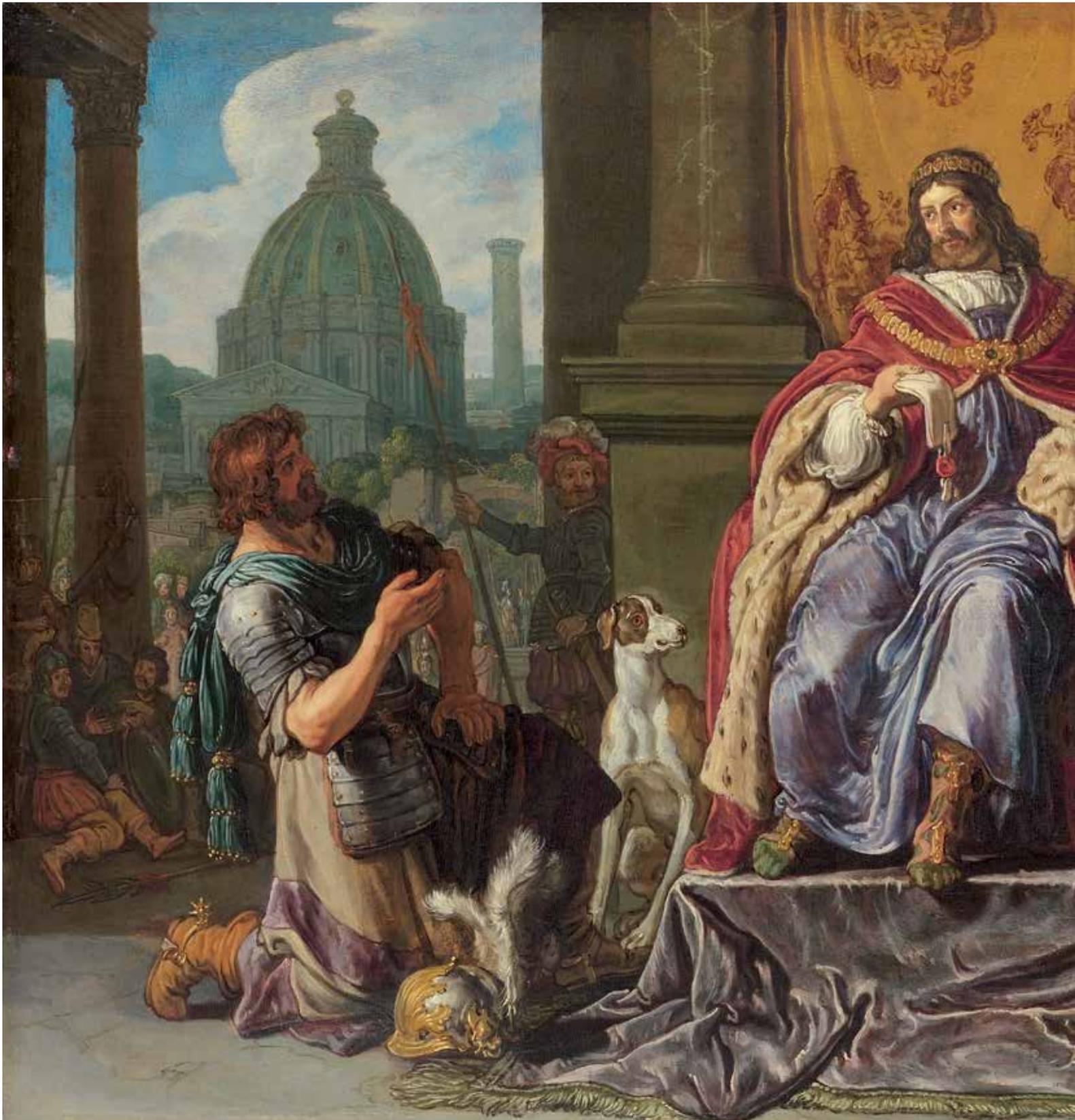
Oil on panel, 70.8 x 50.5 cm

False signature and date, upper left corner:

*Rembrandt ft. 1641*

*Portrait of Rembrandt in Oriental Dress* is a fascinating workshop copy by Isaac de Jouderville, executed during his apprenticeship with Rembrandt. The painting is directly derived from Rembrandt's only known full-length self-portrait which is signed and dated 1631 (Petit Palais, Paris). De Jouderville likely painted his version alongside his master, as the panel represents Rembrandt's original composition and does not include the large, long-haired poodle in the foreground that he added at a later stage. The painting offers a unique insight into Rembrandt's early teaching practice and indicates that copying and making variations of Rembrandt's paintings was standard workshop procedure.

De Jouderville's portrait shows Rembrandt in a confident contrapposto pose, one hand resting on a cane, the other on his hip, and wearing an extravagant costume. His eastern-inspired attire includes a turban adorned with an *aigrette* (feathered pin), a velvet cloak, and a short silk tunic, with golden brocade and fringe, tied with a sash at the waist. Rembrandt, fascinated by these exotic-looking accessories, often purchased historical objects and old clothes at auction, which he kept as studio props. The master and his contemporaries used them to portray the historical, mythological, and biblical protagonists in their history paintings. De Jouderville's image does not depict Rembrandt as a specific character from the Bible or ancient literature but alludes to his master's reputation as a prominent history painter.





### 3. Pieter Lastman

Amsterdam 1583 – Amsterdam 1633

#### ***David Gives Uriah a Letter for Joab*** 1619

Oil on panel, 42.8 x 63.3 cm

Signed and dated along lower right corner:

*PLaftman fecit 1619* [PL in ligature]

The erudite Pieter Lastman, one of the great innovators of history painting in early seventeenth-century Amsterdam, demonstrates his extraordinary gift for storytelling in *David Gives Uriah a Letter for Joab*. The painting, executed in 1619, depicts a pivotal moment in the story of the Old Testament King David. After having committed adultery with Uriah's wife, while her husband is obediently serving in his army abroad, David learns she is with child. This painting depicts the crucial turning point in the plot: the king's final attempt to conceal his misdeed, concluding Uriah's life. David hands his faithful soldier a letter addressed to his commander Joab with the order to place Uriah in the front line of battle, essentially condemning him to death.

According to Karel van Mander's influential *Schilder-Boeck*, history painting was the most distinguished pictorial genre. A great history scene focused on the depiction of "passions, desires, and sorrows of men," which he called "the core and soul of art," with the aim to inspire the viewer to pursue a moral life. *David Gives Uriah a Letter for Joab* exemplifies these aspirations. By powerfully capturing the climax of the story and the conflicting passions of betrayal, guilt, and loyalty, Lastman encourages the viewer to reflect about their own moral and ethical decisions. The artist's expressive approach to history painting served as a model for later Amsterdam painters, and most notably his student Rembrandt van Rijn, who travelled from Leiden to Amsterdam to study with him for six months in 1625.





## 10. Ferdinand Bol

Dordrecht 1616 – Amsterdam 1680

### *Angel Appearing to Elijah*

ca. 1642

Oil on canvas, 162.6 x 177.8 cm

Ferdinand Bol, a native of Dordrecht, entered Rembrandt's studio in Amsterdam around 1635, and stayed until he became an independent artist in 1642. Executed soon after his apprenticeship, Bol boldly executed *Angel Appearing to Elijah* with a tonal color scheme that lends the composition great unity. Bol gained his fascination with Old Testament narratives from Rembrandt. Like his teacher, he was particularly interested in scenes that stressed God's spiritual guidance through the interactions of a young, golden-haired angel with an aged, bearded patriarch, as, for example, in Rembrandt's compelling *Sacrifice of Isaac* (State Hermitage, St. Petersburg).

This painting depicts an episode from the complex story of the Old Testament King Ahab and his wife, Jezebel, who reject the God of the Israelites and worship the false god Baal. The prophet Elijah then challenges the priests of Baal to set up a sacrificial altar to rival his own. When only Elijah's sacrifice is consumed by fire, do people reject the false god, Baal, and turn again to the God of the Israelites. Subsequently, Jezebel threatens Elijah who flees into the wilderness where, starving and parched, he prays for death before falling asleep. Bol depicted that moment of divine intervention when an angel comes to the prophet to fortify him with food and water.

A Jewish patron may have commissioned this painting. The inventories of Jewish burghers in Amsterdam reveal a preference for subjects that include Elijah, who was considered the protector of the oppressed and persecuted people of Israel.





## 14. Arent de Gelder

Dordrecht 1645 – Dordrecht 1727

### ***Edna Entrusting Tobias with Sarah***

1690s

Oil on canvas, 112 x 155 cm

Signed in the upper right: A(??)lder f.

Arent de Gelder studied with Rembrandt in the early 1660s. The master's continued influence on his pupil, even thirty years later, is evident in this evocative painting, both in De Gelder's technique of scratching away paint with a palette knife and in his choice of subject matter. Like Rembrandt, De Gelder based several paintings on the Apocrypha, particularly the story of the blind Tobit. Here, De Gelder focused on a moment in the life of Tobit's son Tobias, who had journeyed on his father's behalf to meet one of his kinsmen, Raguel, and his wife, Edna. Upon meeting their daughter, Sarah, Tobias immediately fell in love with this beautiful and wise young woman. Unfortunately, Sarah was beset by a demon, who had killed each of her seven earlier bridegrooms. After his travel companion, the Archangel Raphael, promised to conquer the demon, Tobias obtained permission to marry Sarah. De Gelder depicted a gently smiling Edna entrusting her daughter to the young Tobias. Raguel, seen in profile, reacts to the moment with a welcoming gesture.

The elegant dresses of Sarah and her mother are consistent with fashions of the 1690s, whereas the sumptuous wardrobes of Raguel and Tobias reflect De Gelder's knowledge of Oriental dress, which he collected to use as studio props. Tobias' decorated gloves allude to their importance as a marriage pledge in seventeenth-century wedding ceremonies. De Gelder likely based his figures on live models, which indicates that the painting is a *portrait historié*.

## COLOPHON

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