

COLLECTORS & COLLECTING



George and Ilone Kremer have formed a major collection of Dutch and Flemish Old Master paintings in just 15 years. As they explain to Louise Nicholson, they take great pleasure in sharing their remarkable achievement with the public. Portraits by John Angerson.

GOING DUTCH



We talk about art all the time', said George Kremer when we met in a booth at the Maastricht art fair this year. 'Yes', grinned his wife, Ilone. 'Even in the bath.'

'And in bed', he added. The art they mostly talk about is Dutch and Flemish 17th-century painting, of which they have assembled a formidable collection in just 15 years. Born and brought up in Amsterdam, they have a fervent belief that this is 'one of the truly great painting schools of Western art', and their aim is to enlighten as many other

1 *Man Reading a Letter to a Woman* by Pieter de Hooch (1629-84), c. 1670-74. Oil on canvas, 77 x 69.9 cm

2 *George and Ilone Kremer in front of St Peter Penitent* by Gerrit van Honthorst, c. 1618-20

people as possible. So, while they live between Texas, Spain and Amsterdam, and encircle the globe to visit art exhibitions and fairs, the collection is kept at the Mauritshuis in The Hague, where part is exhibited, the rest available for easy lending. Most of their 55 pictures have just completed their first tour – Cologne, Kassel and then the Frans Hals Museum in Haarlem.

Talking to Mr and Mrs Kremer about their collection therefore involves first coinciding with them paying a visit to it, then keeping up with them on a busy day in Haarlem, Amsterdam and The Hague. For 14 hours they talk about art incessantly. They seem not to eat; art is their food.

We kick off in Haarlem, where, because it is Monday, the museum is closed. Mrs Kremer fetches us coffee in white plastic cups from a machine in the staff room. Then she leads me quickly through the galleries to stop in front of a landscape by Aelbert Cuyp (Figs 3 and 4). It is their latest acquisition, added to this final stop of the tour. 'We are the dream', she says, wasting no time. 'Some people want to become Angelina Jolie. We are the collector's dream – and we've done it ourselves.'

Brushing back her blonde hair, she gestures with both hands to the picture, her animation increasing as she tells the story of its acquisition. 'He painted this when he was very young, 19 years old – it is fully signed and dated, 1639. George saw it at Sotheby's in London. It was completely covered in very dirty green-brownish varnish'. She turns from the picture to me. 'And that's the most difficult part. That's the gamble we took. We bid against the dealers on the telephone. We brought it to Martin Bijl, who used to restore for the Rijksmuseum, he's been our restorer for all of our collecting time. He cleaned it layer by layer.' She turns back to the painting and points to the lower part. 'Here he took the over-paint off and revealed the shadow of a standing bargeman, see. It shows Cuyp making changes, still looking for the right composition.' As she moves her hands upwards, she continues her commentary, totally absorbed. 'He becomes famous





for his skies, for the beautiful light he brings into them. And even though this is a very early work he's already getting there. You can see it's a typical Dutch day, with rain clouds. See the sun trying to get through the clouds to illuminate the bridge. The way he plays with the weather is just beautiful.'

Summing up, she pays tribute to one of the leading dealers in Dutch art, who died in 2007: 'Robert Noortman taught us how to use our eyes, how to see through the dirt. So you gamble and sometimes you find the jewels. And that's what this is. Not many collectors do that; they play it safe, let the dealer take the risk, do the cleaning, then they pay a little bit more.'

Mr Kremer takes his turn. In the next gallery, he goes straight to *St Peter Penitent* by Gerrit van Honthorst (Fig. 2). Like his wife, he is informed, eloquent and committed – the teacher who is still excited by his subject. 'There are only 17 of these Italian period Honthorsts in existence today, eight in Italy, seven in museums, two in private collections. Of those, one is in an old British one, the other is here', he grins.

Then he focuses on the painting intensely. 'You see, it's after denying Christ three times, Peter is desperate, he turns to his god and prays. He's not just got red eyes, but look at these hands, that's the genius, the desperation expressed in his wringing hands. It has the psychology, the realism, the *chiaroscuro* of the Caravaggists of Utrecht.' He pauses, but only for a moment. 'I think this was painted at the end of his Italian period, around 1619 or even 1620 before he returns to Utrecht, because it is full of masterly development. Gerrit van Honthorst is by now a celebrated man in Italy, he gets commissions from cardinals.' Then he adds, triumphantly: 'today, this is the only Honthorst from his Italian period in the Netherlands'.

3, 4 *Lumberyard near Dordrecht* by Aelbert Cuyp (1620-91), 1639. Oil on panel, 43 x 53 cm. The image on the left shows the painting before it was cleaned for the Kremers by Martin Bijl

To assemble such Old Masters today might seem impossible – as it does occasionally to the Kremers themselves. 'The moment you make the last bid and you get it', says Mr Kremer, 'you put down the phone and you say "how is it possible we bought this painting?" Really! Truly, this painting should have been bought by a museum. And this is true of many of our paintings. For private collectors like us to find and buy paintings like this tells you this can still be done.' If one doubted Mr Kremer's belief in his pictures, then Peter C. Sutton, executive director of the Bruce Museum and a specialist on the period, affirms the achievement. 'It's a very good collection. It's about as good as you can put together these days.'

We move on through the exhibition, both collectors talking all the way. '17th-century Dutch paintings are not dark, not sombre,' emphasises Mr Kremer. 'On the contrary, they are full of light, full of colours.' He steps back into the middle of a gallery, opens his arms. 'Look around you. Visually, Impressionism is easier – we also collect French Impressionism, it's on our walls in our homes. Dutch painting is more difficult, but around 1650 it begins to play with perspective and light to portray space and depth in an amazing manner. It's extraordinarily successful.' 'That's what's so important about it, it's all about light', adds Mrs Kremer. The banter continues as her husband responds: 'People say this about Impressionism, but it's the same for Dutch painting. Everything that came later builds on this. The Impressionists copied Dutch Old Masters in the Louvre.'

We have paused at their second Honthorst, at Emanuel de Witte's church interior, at Pieter de Hooch's *Man Reading a Letter to a Woman* (Fig. 1), and come to rest for a moment in front of a tender portrait of a young woman by Michael Sweerts



(Fig. 7). 'It's a monumental painting. He paints a vulnerable young girl with great dignity', explains Mr Kremer. 'It was painted in Amsterdam around 1660.' Usually, it hangs in the Mauritshuis in the same room as Vermeer's slightly later *Girl with the Pearl Earring*. 'It was in store for years, then they put it up in a small room', explains Mrs Kremer. 'The guards reported so many people talking about it, asking for postcards, so they moved it.'

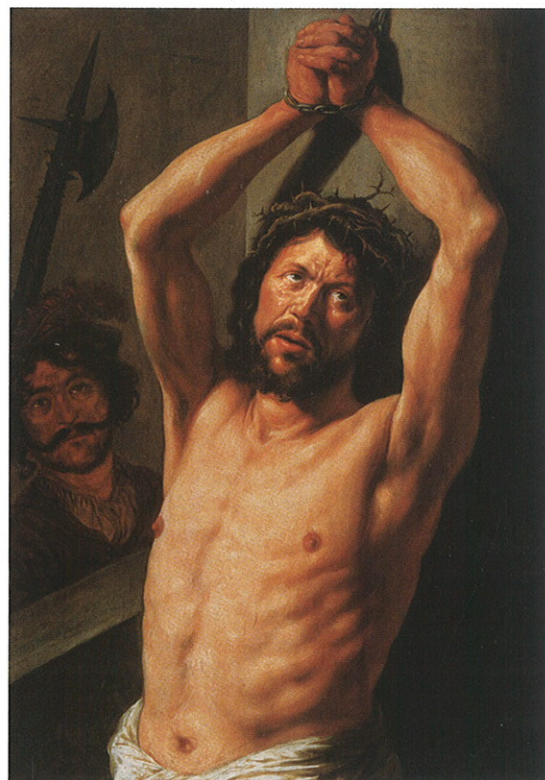
Surprisingly, they don't miss their pictures. 'Normally, when we are in Holland', reasons Mrs Kremer, 'we go to the museum at least once a week. It feels so good when you have your own paintings on display.' For the rest of the time, 'we talk about them' says Mr Kremer. 'We're used to it. At the start, we were buying fast, 16 the first year. Frits Duparc, the director then, offered his storage facilities. We took the decision to lend as much as possible.' So, Mrs Kremer reveals, 'when this exhibition tour opened in Cologne in 2008, it was the first time we saw all our paintings hanging together'. 'It was dazzling', he adds. 'You suddenly realise what you have done', she counters. 'I cried. And George, for once, got very silent.'

5 *Bust of an Old Man with a Turban* by Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-69), c. 1627/28. Oil on panel, 26.5 x 20 cm

6 *Christ at the Column* by Jan Lievens (1607-74), c. 1625. Oil on panel, 106.5 x 74 cm

We move past a Hals and a van Ostade ('these two hang here all the time, on loan') and on to Jan Lievens's *Christ at the Column* (Fig. 6) – 'an early masterpiece, around 1625', says Mr Kremer. 'At this stage Lievens was ahead of Rembrandt. We bought this early. We were sitting in Noortman's gallery in New Bond Street. Robert said "You shouldn't buy this, it's for a museum, not a private collection." But my eye was drawn to it, drawn to it', he repeats. They first bought a painting from Noortman when they were introduced at the 1995 Maastricht fair. 'First off it clicked', says Mr Kremer. 'He was a businessman, so was I.' (Mr Kremer's business has been in oil trading in London and real estate in Texas.) The Kremers had a lot of questions. 'Rob said if you want to know more you have to start reading. We left with 12 books, Rob's reading list and the picture.' Today, their extensive art library is divided between Texas and Spain.

We have reached the Rembrandt, a portrait of an old man in a turban (Fig. 5). 'We bought this in '95, too', recounts Mrs Kremer. 'It was our third painting. We were not collectors yet. We bought it as a Jacques des Rousseaux, two dealers had got it at a small sale in San Francisco. One was Noortman. It was a good strategy to tell us it was not for sale, George bought it the next day.' She turns to the light-drenched painting. 'When we saw it we said "this is one we must have"'. It was probably the light, this painting is a study of light.' She points here and there. 'Look here, the light is coming on





7 The Kremers in front of *A Young Maidservant* by Michael Sweerts, c. 1660

For information about the Kremer Collection and forthcoming exhibitions visit www.thekremercollection.com

the turban and shoulder, and then coming back from the wall to his moustache, and it lights up the feather on his turban.' After extensive tests by the Rembrandt Research Project, it is now considered to be by Rembrandt and dated 1627-28. 'Knowing that changes the collection completely', explains Mrs Kremer. 'It takes it to a higher level. You don't want to buy the little ones any more. It gives you that extra push.' She is silent for a moment, then: 'It is the dream come true. It's not just being the proud owner of a Rembrandt, it's a beautiful Rembrandt. We are very lucky.'

What of the collection's future? The Kremers are unlikely to give it to a museum or build their own. They would like to keep the collection together but it will be up to their children – 'you can't rule from the grave'. Meanwhile, their mission is to achieve maximum exposure and education. 'I could have the Rembrandt at home, sit in front of it', says Mr Kremer with a wry smile. 'But these things were made to be enjoyed. By the time this

tour ends, about 100,000 will have seen our collection. Now I want to show it in bigger cities.'

Time is up, we have a schedule to keep. Soon we are back in Amsterdam listening to Arthur K. Wheelock Jr of the National Gallery of Washington lecture on Jan Lievens, whom Mr Kremer considers 'a child prodigy who did not develop his own point of view to live up to his early promise, and this makes him disappointing'. After a cup of tea at the Kremers' home, hung with French Impressionists ('this Jongkind seascape shows the less-exposed painters can be very good'), off we set for The Hague, where Mr Kremer gives a lecture to the Mauritshuis's young collector circle. They sit rapt as he explains what he has done, encouraging them. 'There's a lot we don't know. And the good thing is, you can still discover great paintings.' Returning to Amsterdam at midnight, the Kremers are still talking about art. 'It's just great having this hobby,' says Mrs Kremer. 'And there's something else. It's even better when you can do this together.'