

Alfred Baber fonds

Chemistry and Art
More Adventures of a Chemist Collector

Chapter 3 -
Great Paintings By Oil
Masters

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Chapter 3

Great Paintings by Old Masters

After my expulsion from Sigma-Aldrich, my efforts as a dealer changed dramatically. I teamed up first with two international dealers, Otto Naumann in New York and Clovis Whitfield in London, and later with another dealer in London, Philip Mould, and the Galerie Arnoldi-Livie, owned by Angelika and Bruce Livie, in Munich, to buy truly major paintings.

My first major purchase with Otto was Rembrandt's *Portrait of Johannes Uytenbogaert*, bought at Sotheby's in London in July 1992 and sold in the same year to the Rijksmuseum. This was followed by our purchase of Rubens' *Entombment* at Christie's in London in December 1992 and quick sale to the J. Paul Getty Museum. Rembrandt's paintings have always moved me most, as even his portraits of rather boring people are first-class paintings. And so we purchased the *Portrait of a Young Man*, fully accepted by the Rembrandt Research Project (RRP) as A60, from a bank in Geneva, and Otto sold this to Peter Ludwig, whose widow recently gave it to the museum in Aachen. Rembrandt's *Man in a Red Coat* is a far more interesting subject, and we purchased this with a fine Rubens of a ghastly subject, *The Head of John the Baptist Presented to Salome*, at the same sale at Sotheby's in New York in January 1998. Otto sold both quite quickly to Steven Wynn, the Las Vegas casino operator, but Wynn didn't keep them long. The Rubens was transferred to the MGM Grand Hotel when Wynn sold the Bellagio Hotel and was later sold to a private collector in New Jersey. The *Man in a Red*



Coat was sold at Christie's in New York in January 2001, bought there by Robert Noortman, a dealer who was our major competitor for Rembrandts.

We purchased our finest Rembrandt, the last great historical Rembrandt ever likely to come on the market, the *Minerva* ^(fig.) of 1635, from owners in Japan in 2001. Its beauty and great condition had been obscured by layers of dirty varnish. It was one of the masterpieces in the Amsterdam and Berlin exhibitions of 2006, which celebrated the four hundredth anniversary of Rembrandt's birth.

The *Minerva* and one of the finest van de Cappelle ^(fig.) seascapes I have ever seen, purchased from the Earl of Northbrook's family in 2001, have not yet sold. You would think that the better the painting, the faster it would sell, but that just isn't so. But as we don't owe any money to a bank, keeping great works in inventory is no great concern, and such great masterpieces steadily increase in value.

My collaboration with Otto has not been limited to only Rembrandt and Rubens. A beautiful Aert de Gelder of *Tobias*, bought in 1994 from a Dutch dealer, was sold to a collector in New York; one of Ter Borch's finest works bought from Sotheby's New York in a private sale also went to a private collector; and a great Paulus Potter, from Sotheby's in London, went to the Chicago Art Institute. And so on - great works by van der Heyden, Aert van der Neer, Jacob van Ruisdael, and Frans Hals. The last, bought in Christie's in New York in January 1999 for less than a million dollars, gave us particular pleasure. It was offered at auction ill-framed and ill-restored and looked so much better after conservation by our good friend and conservator Charles Munch that Otto was able to sell it to a knowledgeable private collector for well over twice our cost. Otto published



his reasons for this "high" price, and in retrospect, in comparison with similar works by Hals sold since then, \$2 million plus seems low.

Another painting bought with Otto and Konrad Bernheimer of Munich and now Colnaghi's in London, gave me immense pleasure for a different reason, best explained by quoting from Konrad's booklet prepared for this painting:

The focal point of our display is a magnificent work of early German art and the present catalogue is indeed dedicated exclusively to the presentation of this masterpiece.^(fig.) It is a large-format Calvary of unique beauty and quality. This impressive depiction is without doubt one of the most significant of its kind within German post-war art trade.

The recent history of this masterpiece is also most poignant. Following expropriation from the Seligmann family in Paris by the Nazis, after the war it was in the Louvre. It was not until last year that it was returned to the heirs of Seligmann, namely the two daughters now living in the United States. The two ladies had their recovered family treasure auctioned in New York, and my colleagues Alfred Bader and Otto Naumann and I were fortunate enough to jointly purchase the painting. The most impressive elderly ladies were quite obviously deeply moved when we were introduced to them as the new owners of "their" painting.

It is with the greatest of pleasure that I am now able to present this masterpiece of early German painting. I would like to thank my colleagues Alfred Bader,



Milwaukee, and Otto Naumann, New York, for their unceasingly pleasurable (and hitherto without exception successful!) cooperation.

The Christie's New York estimate in January 2000 had been only \$800,000-\$1,200,000, and the owners of the painting were of course really happy that the hammer price was \$3,200,000. Eventually, Konrad was able to sell this masterpiece to the National Gallery in Washington.

With Clovis, I have worked mainly with Italian paintings, one of which, the Caravaggio with full details in Chapter 5, may be the most valuable painting I have ever acquired. Another truly interesting puzzle was a self-portrait of Guido Reni offered with a most intriguing period letter affixed to the unlined canvas at Sotheby's London in October 1999. Sotheby's described it as Bolognese School, first half of the seventeenth century, portrait of Guido Reni, and estimated it modestly at £6,000-8,000. Clovis has now proven beyond a doubt that it really is a Reni ^(fig.) self-portrait.

Philip Mould is the ablest expert of British portraits I have ever met. Our unsuccessful effort to buy a John Singer Sargent portrait of Balfour is described in Chapter 5. Our happiest collaboration was the purchase at Phillips in London in July 2001 of a portrait of Lady Mary Villiers by Van Dyck. ^(fig.) Cleaning improved it greatly and, more important, removal of the relining showed King Charles I's royal cipher. The King had adopted Mary Villiers after her father, the first Duke of Buckingham, had been murdered, and Van Dyck had painted this portrait for the King. This is now one of the masterpieces in the Timken Museum of Art.



My happiest and most challenging collaboration with the Arnoldi-Livies was the purchase of the Menzel, also described in Chapter 5.

An Old Woman by Rembrandt

One of the most interesting auctions I ever attended was Christie's in London on 13 December 2000, where a genuine Rembrandt in wonderful condition, RRP A-63, an oval portrait of a sixty-two-year-old woman, from the estate of Baroness Bathsheva de Rothschild in Israel, was offered with a very low estimate, £4-6 million. Just before the sale, Rob Noortman asked me whether I liked this painting, and I replied that I loved it and would bid on it. He said that his greatest teacher, many years ago, had taught him two principles that Rob would pass on as his advice to me: "One, never buy an oval, and two, never buy a portrait of an old woman."

But the painting is so beautiful and was in such fine condition that I was determined to try to buy it anyway. Otto Naumann, Johnny van Haefen, a major dealer in London, and I had decided to bid together to £11 million. Johnny, sitting in the second row, was to bid for us, and Otto and I, sitting right behind him, were surprised when Johnny got carried away and bid £12 million. At £13 million, he stopped, and I decided to carry on, now alone with Otto, who told me later that he was worried when I bid up to £16 million. But that was my limit, and the auctioneer knocked it down to Rob Noortman for £17 million, a world auction record for a work by Rembrandt. With commission the total cost was £19,803,750.

After the sale, Rob came up to me and inquired whether I might like a share. I said I thought the price was too high but asked him about the two principles his master



had taught him. He said, "Ah, I forgot to tell you the third principle: Times have changed." We both smiled. My dealings with Rob have been varied, almost always pleasant and always instructive. He even came to my gallery in Milwaukee and purchased two paintings. Well, the oval portrait is a beautiful painting, but Rob paid close to \$30 million and it took quite a while for him to sell it. Perhaps I was lucky not to acquire it for a hammer price of £16 million.

Sadly, Rob Noortman died of a heart attack, though he was only 60, in January 2007. The previous summer he had sold his company to Sotheby's. In the autumn of 2006, he had been diagnosed with cancer but was responding well to treatment, and so his death came as a tremendous shock. His son William wrote to me, "His determination never faltered and his vision never dimmed. As you know, he was indefatigable." Of course, this reminded me of what was said of Moses, "...his eye was not dim, nor his natural strength abated." But Moses was 120, Rob only 60.

The most important old master in the last few years was offered at Sotheby's in London on 10 July 2002. The *Massacre of the Innocents* was painted by Rubens around 1610, a time when he still worked alone, without workshop, and was at the height of his powers. For the previous three decades, it had hung in a covered courtyard in the Stift Reichersberg monastery in Upper Austria. The eighty-eight-year-old owner who had loaned it thoroughly disliked the violent subject of the painting, which she had inherited in 1923. Before that, in 1920, a small auction house in Vienna, Glückselig & Co., had sold it as a work by Jan van den Hoecke, a minor follower of Rubens. It had been thus misattributed since 1780, when it belonged to the Princes of Liechtenstein, who had acquired it as a Rubens in 1702. In October 2001, a relative of the owner had brought a



photograph to Sotheby's in Amsterdam, where Judith Niessen, thinking of Rubens, passed it on to George Gordon, their great Old Master expert. They immediately flew to Austria and were most excited by what they saw with the aid of a flashlight. George had seen only one similar painting, Rubens' *Samson and Delilah*, in the National Gallery in London, and it, too, had belonged to the Princes of Liechtenstein.

George showed me the *Massacre* a month before the sale, telling me that the estimate was £4-6 million. My first question was whether I might be able to purchase it privately at a higher price. The answer was no. Otto Naumann and I discussed buying it together. Knowing that Rob Noortman was also interested, we met with him at 4 p.m. the afternoon of the sale and agreed that the three of us would bid together to £34 million, with Rob bidding for us. Rob and I were sitting in front, to the left of Henry Wyndham, the auctioneer, whom Rob had told minutes before the sale started at 7 p.m. that we would bid together. Bidding opened at £3 million with Ben Hall from Sotheby's New York shouting, "£6 million," to which Wyndham replied coolly, "Now I'll take 12 million!"

Bidding continued briskly, in million pound increments, from 7 to 34 million, with Rob bidding two or three times. At £34 million, he turned to me and asked "One more?" I said yes, but even with that we were not the underbidder; that was a telephone bidder for the Getty. The climax came a minute later, with Wyndham calling, "£45 million - last chance at £45 million," and down the hammer came amidst a burst of applause and Wyndham's reminding us that "We have many more pictures to sell" - this was only lot 6 of 83. The successful bidder was Sam Fogg, acting for David Thomson or his father Ken, the richest men in Canada. The total cost was £49,506,650, a world



record for a Rubens and a world record for a painting sold at auction in London. What a painting, and it went to Canada!

Rembrandt A-84, Portrait of a Woman

In 2001, Otto and I made an offer to a very likeable elderly couple in New York who owned a great early Rembrandt portrait of a woman. Signed and dated 1633, it had been in the family since 1954 and was accepted by the RRP as A84. The comment in Volume I of the RRP Corpus states that it “shows an uncommonly subtle treatment of the face, which is modelled softly against a dark background, yet the execution and the handling of light and plasticity achieved are so characteristic of Rembrandt’s style that there can be no doubt as to its authenticity.”

Neither Otto nor I had any doubt, although we thought that it needed a gentle cleaning. Our offer to the couple was fair, with payment at once. But Sotheby’s suggested that the owners would do better if they sold it at auction, and that is what they decided to do. For their part, Sotheby’s tried very hard to ensure that the couple got a good price. The painting was on the catalogue cover of the great auction that also included the magnificent Rubens, *The Massacre of the Innocents*. Thirteen pages of the catalogue dealt with the Rembrandt, lot 35. For comparison, five other Rembrandt portraits were illustrated, one of which was the first undoubted Rembrandt Otto and I had purchased at Sotheby’s and sold to the Rijksmuseum. Another was the oval of a sixty-two-year-old woman that Rob Noortman had bought.

Before the auction on 10 July, I had a long discussion with George Gordon and Henry Wyndham, who conducted the sale. We talked mainly about the Rubens, but



Wyndham asked me what I thought of the Rembrandt A84. He saw no reason why it should not bring as much as Noortman's oval. The reason seemed simple to me. I had been the underbidder on the oval, from around £12 million to £17 million. Otto and I had already made an offer to the owners for this painting, A84, and did not intend to bid at auction. The estimate of £10-15 million, presumably with a reserve of £10 million, well over \$14 million at the time, seemed high. Would there be at least two bidders to send it up to that price? Perhaps some buyers were put off by the alleged similarity of the sitter's face with that of Dede Brooks, the dethroned head of Sotheby's New York. Newspapers like to stress such foolishness. But bottom line: there was no bid at all, and the painting was returned to its owners who, I'm sure, were not at all happy.

Even before our trip to New York for the sales in January 2003, I had asked Otto whether we might talk to the owners once again and make a new offer without being hurtful. So Otto called, and we were invited to their apartment. To my surprise, I learned that the husband had been in the chemical industry and knew a good deal about me. We had a lot to talk about before we got to the painting, and it was no surprise that Isabel and Otto had a good rapport with his wife, whose father had bought the painting. Over a cup of tea, I made my offer, again with immediate payment, and was told that they would think about it and let us know. The next day, Isabel and I were invited to their apartment at 2 p.m. on Sunday - it had to be early because we were flying back to Milwaukee from LaGuardia at 5:30 p.m. But, of course, we knew that the offer would be accepted - a phone call would have sufficed for a "no." As luck would have it, their lawyer, Ralph Lerner, knew about us, since he had handled the Japanese owners' sale of the *Minerva*. There were no problems, the money was wire transferred as soon as we returned to

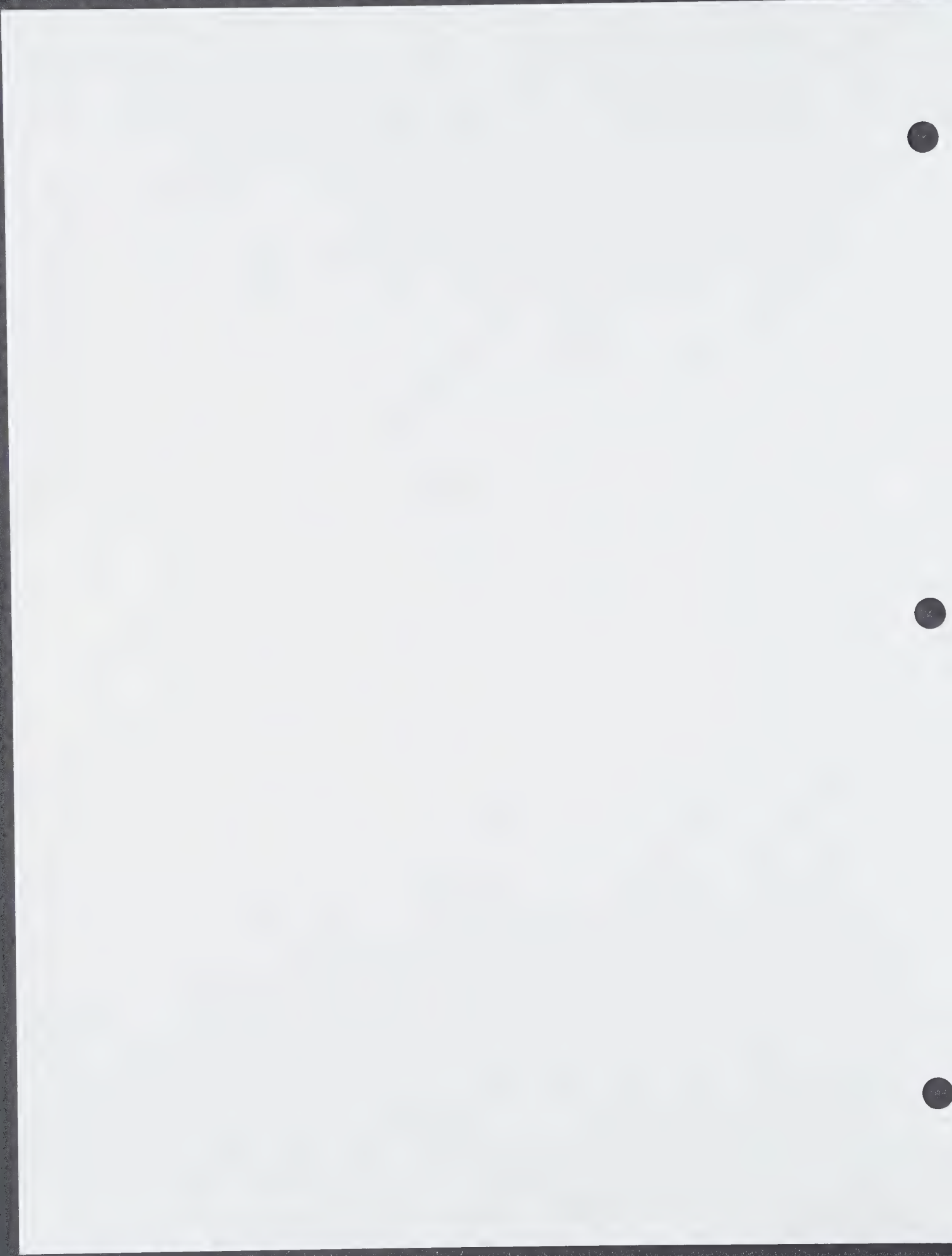


Milwaukee, and that same day Otto took the painting to Nancy Krieg, one of the country's great restorers who lives in New York, for the gentle cleaning that would greatly improve the sensitive portrait.

Shortly afterwards, Otto called with the exciting news that cleaning revealed a line of swirling brush strokes conforming to the oval shape of the painting. This was very important information, since there was much speculation about the original shape when it had been offered at Sotheby's. Like the *Man in a Red Doublet* that Otto and I purchased a few years ago, Rembrandt painted an oval-shaped painting on a rectangular panel that was subsequently cut down to the inner oval. Although the spandrels in the corners are gone, we are not missing much. In Rembrandt's *Self-portrait*, offered at Sotheby's London on July 10, 2003, for instance, the spandrels are more or less roughly indicated. Clearly Rembrandt meant them to be covered by a frame. About a year later, the museum in Houston decided to purchase our fine painting at a price considerably less than they would have had to pay to Sotheby's in London in July 2002 if they had bid for it in the auction. All's well that ends well.

Bredius 112, Barent Fabritius, Preti, Mantegna and others

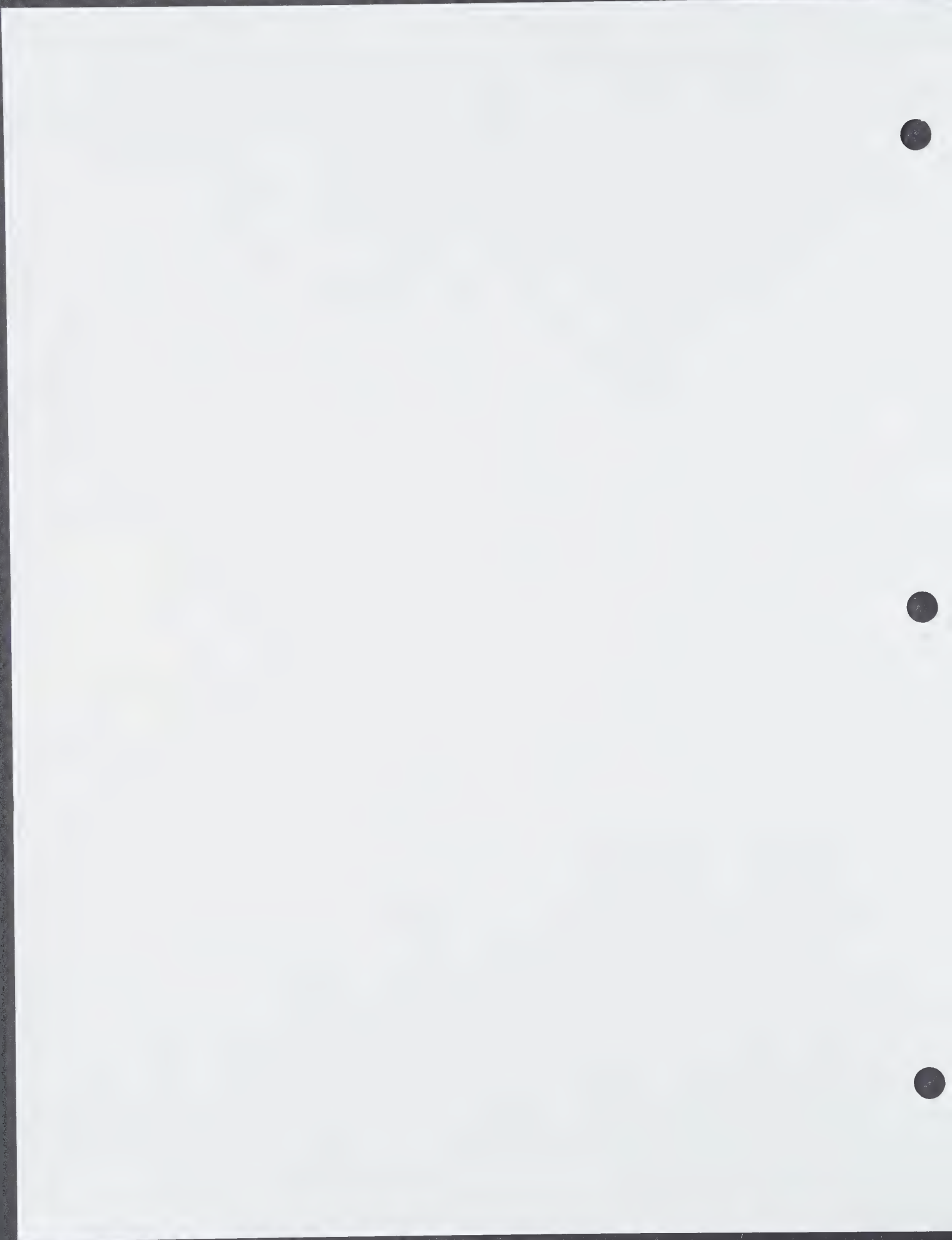
I don't think I have ever been offered as many very interesting paintings in the short period of six days as I was between the 21 and 26 January 2003. Isabel and I flew to New York specifically to bid on two works at Sotheby's. One was the last Mantegna not in a museum. Eighteen pages of the Sotheby's catalog were devoted to the life and work of the artist; to the beautifully rendered ghastliness of the subject of Jesus descending into limbo, the waiting room at the entrance of hell, before his resurrection;



and to Mantegna's sources and the history of this painting. Barbara Piasecka Johnson, who had bought this powerful painting in Paris in 1988, had decided to send it to auction, even though she was reported to have said at one time, "It's my greatest painting and I'll never sell it!" The reserve now was \$20 million. Otto Naumann and I tried to persuade George Wachter, head of Sotheby's old masters, to lower the reserve because we thought the subject almost unsaleable. He assured us this would not be necessary and bet me \$100 that the hammer price would be \$30 million or more. It sold at \$25.5 million, not to me, and George's \$100 paid for many of the taxi rides around the city.

The second painting we bid on was a fine portrait of a man by Frans Hals on which Otto and I had been the underbidders at Christie's London in July 1999. The Nazis had stolen many paintings, including this and two other portraits by Hals, from the Austrian branch of the Rothschilds. Recovered after the war, they were taken to the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna but were not returned to the Rothschilds until 1998. The California collector who bought this portrait in 1999 paid £2,201,500 for it. In January 2003, it had a reserve of only \$2 million and brought a hammer price of \$2.6 million, paid by the Prince of Liechtenstein. After the last war, the Prince sold several great masterpieces but has been rebuilding his collection in recent years. Otto and I were rather concerned by the attribution. Claus Grimm, the expert on Franz Hals, had labeled it "workshop", but we were even more concerned by the condition. The blacks in the lower left looked very flat, so although the face was beautiful, we were not disappointed at being unsuccessful.

After the Sotheby's sale, Isabel and I visited several art dealers, one of whom, Budi Lilian, had a very interesting Rembrandt school work that I had seen at auctions



over the years. Painted in 1660, it was said to be a self-portrait of Barent Fabritius as a shepherd. There is no Barent Fabritius in my collection, but the price the New York collector had paid at a small auction in 1979 seemed outlandishly high. Budi had bought it from that collector much more reasonably, and, true, it was signed, dated, and colorful, yet unlike his brother Carel, Barent was a minor master. I was tempted but undecided.

Budi then offered me two other Rembrandt school paintings of great interest. One, which he attributed to Willem Drost, had previously been called Rembrandt, Bredius 260 and is one of two versions; the other, at the National Gallery in Washington, is superior. The author of the excellent book on Drost, a Canadian, Jonathan Bikker, does not think that either version is by Drost, and I asked myself, "Was he really an artist to repeat himself?" Budi was asking \$ 500,000, perhaps excessive for a work with a questionable attribution, and I decided to pass. He had acquired it very inexpensively at an auction in California and did eventually sell it for \$225,000 to the Marquette University Museum in Milwaukee. Years ago, it had belonged to a collector in Milwaukee, Harry John. What is there about Milwaukee that attracts paintings by Rembrandt and his students?

The other painting Budi was offering was of much greater interest to me. All the Rembrandt experts, including the great naysayer Horst Gerson, had accepted Bredius 112, a portrait said to be of Hendrickje Stoffels ^(fig.) as a Rembrandt of the 1650s. Jakob Rosenberg, from whom I first learned about Rembrandt, had written glowingly about it. Norton Simon had purchased it in 1957 from Joseph Duveen, the greatest dealer of his time, who sold it for \$133,500, as a Rembrandt, of course. It was his wife Lucille's favorite painting, and hung in their living room. When they divorced, she took the



painting. I had admired it in the great Rembrandt exhibition in Chicago in 1969, where it was the frontispiece in color in the catalogue. Since then the experts of the Rembrandt Research Project have turned it down. Lucille Simon's estate sent it to Christie's New York in June 2002, where it was offered with an estimate of \$300,000-\$400,000, but without a reserve and was bought by a consortium of four dealers, which included Budi and Johnny van Haefen. The hammer price was only \$130,000. Had I known there was no reserve or had I been at the auction, I would certainly have bid higher.

Since that sale, I had seen it several times at Johnny van Haefen's gallery, really liked it, and had countered Johnny's offer to sell it at \$300,000 with my offer of \$200,000, which he politely declined. Now Budi was offering me both this beautiful portrait and the Barent Fabritius at what I considered a reasonable price, and I accepted without further bargaining. I am getting old. Isabel was with me, and she has always looked askance at my bargaining. Perhaps she doesn't fully realize that if I had not bargained hard years ago, I would have many fewer paintings, and, after all, the seller can always say no.

On the first day of our stay in New York that January, we had viewed an enormous canvas without a stretcher at the home of a very likeable dealer, Larry Steigrad. This *Jacob Blessing His Grandchildren* by the Neapolitan Mattia Preti, of about 1680, was too big to be taken into Larry's gallery! Clovis Whitfield, who knows a great deal about such paintings, had liked it when he saw it and brought it to my attention. These days our worries are whether such paintings might have been stolen during the war, but the Preti had come to this country from Cuba before the war and been in storage all these years. I liked the painting and loved the subject. One of my favorite paintings in Kassel



is Rembrandt's depiction. In the *Festschrift* for Ulrich Middeldorf, published in 1968, Wolf Stechow wrote a moving article, "'Jacob Blessing the Sons of Joseph' from Rembrandt to Cornelius". He pointed out that the subject is quite rare. Rembrandt, Jan Victors, Guercino, and Johann Carl Loth were the only artists I knew who had painted the subject in the seventeenth century. When I was the curator of the exhibition *The Bible Through Dutch Eyes* at the Milwaukee Art Museum in 1976, Oberlin College had loaned us its Adriaen van der Werff, but it contains Prussian blue, so it must be eighteenth century.

I had never owned a painting of the subject, and this one was certainly striking, but the asking price was high. I offered Larry a third less, plus his commission, and my offer was accepted. Clovis and his associate, Edward Clark, who had come to New York, rolled it around a big tube to ship to London and then to Naples for restoration. When I saw it later in the year, carefully restored and well framed ^(fig), I realized how right I had been to acquire it. Here was another quite unknown seventeenth century work! Art historians will always compare paintings of that subject with Rembrandt's masterpiece painted in 1656. As Stechow wrote, "Its beatific calm, its restraint in referring to the quarrel between Jacob and Joseph, its suggestion of a spirit of accord between the children, its emphasis upon their mother, Asenath – all these features are without parallel in seventeenth century painting." Now we have one more comparison. Clovis sold the Preti to a collector in Hong Kong in January 2007.

Here was yet another link with Wolf Stechow, that human masterpiece, as I think of him. Wolf transformed the Allen Memorial Art Museum at Oberlin from a minor into a major museum, one of the best in the country. Isabel and I have always looked



forward to going to Ohio and talking over old times and memories of Wolf with his widow. Intelligent and witty, Ursula shared Wolf's love of art and music, and is still living in Oberlin. On one such visit, she showed us one of his essays, "Rembrandt and the Old Testament", which had never been published. It was of great interest to me! Another, "The Crisis in Rembrandt Research", had been published in 1975 but was not well known, yet so succinct in its criticism of the then-current state of Rembrandt research.

Surprisingly, some young art historians have never heard of Stechow. I very much want to remind them of this great man but have only partly succeeded. Luckily, Marjorie Wieseman, the acting director of the museum in 1998, knew a great deal about Wolf and really admired his work. I suggested to her that we honor Wolf's memory, first by dedicating a volume of the Oberlin Art Museum's *Bulletin* to him, and then by preparing an exhibition of the masterpieces he acquired for the museum. Marjorie arranged for a beautiful publication. Volume L I, Number 2, and L II, Number 1, both of 1998, were combined into one and included Wolf's two essays, and also one by David Levine and Nicola Courtright titled "Wolfgang Stechow and the Art of Iconography, and an Appendix: Table of Contents and Addenda for Stechow's 'Gesammelte Aufsätze'." Marjorie ended her introduction to this volume with, "Finally, I am pleased to dedicate this publication to two very special people, who have enriched my appreciation of Stechow the scholar with an understanding of the man: Wolf's widow, Ursula Stechow, who continues to be a devoted supporter and beloved friend of this museum; and Dr Alfred Bader, who not only underwrote the cost of this publication, but whose continued



generosity to this museum and to the Department of Art is a powerful and lasting memorial to the intellect and character of Wolfgang Stechow.”

The plans were to follow this publication with an exhibition of the Stechow masterpieces, all at Oberlin. This should have been done quickly while Ursula, who is in her nineties, and I, in my eighties, are still alive. Sadly for the project, Marjorie Wieseman moved to the Cincinnati Museum of Art and then on to the National Gallery in London. Her successor, Dr Sharon Patton, had no interest in preparing what could have been a wonderful exhibition of the truly exceptional paintings Wolf had been able to collect for Oberlin.

I learned so much from Wolf about the quality of paintings and was so impressed with his contributions to Oberlin that I was inspired to try to build up a collection at my own university, Queen's, that might some day be the “Oberlin” of Canada. When I am considering buying a painting, I often ask myself whether he would approve of my choice. He certainly would have approved of the Mattia Preti and of the portrait, perhaps of Hendrickje Stoffels, that I bought in January 2003.

Teniers, Drost

The second week of July 2003 was a very interesting auction week in London. On Wednesday the ninth, Christie's had two paintings of great interest to me; lot 18 was a David Teniers interior of an inn which, but for its history, would have been fairly estimated at £150,000. Since about 1700, it had belonged to the Wittelsbach Princes and Electors of Bavaria, then by inheritance to the King of Bavaria. In 1836, King Ludwig I transferred it to the newly built (Alte) Pinakothek where it remained until August 1938.



Perhaps directed by Hitler, who preferred early German paintings, the museum decided to deaccession it. Fritz Nathan, a dealer in Zurich, bought it directly from the Pinakothek and sold it to his friend, Walther Bernt, in Munich. I first met Walther and Ellen Bernt in 1954 and visited their home every June for almost fifty years. Each time I had the great pleasure of looking at their fine collection, including this Teniers, so I knew the painting well. When Walther died, his widow Ellen remained in their beautiful home in the Mottlstrasse until her death in September 2002.

Their two daughters decided to divide the family home into two apartments so that they and their families could move into the house they love. Such renovations are costly, and both Walther and Ellen had recommended that if the daughters had to raise funds at any time, they should first sell the Teniers. Isabel and I knew this because when we visited the daughters on 19 June 2003, they told us of their plans and hopes that the Teniers would do well at auction. I assured them that I would be bidding on that painting and believed that there would be a great deal of interest. We would do our best to make sure that it would do well.

In discussions before the sales in July, it became clear that many dealers were anxious to buy the Teniers. I believed that the dealer most likely to be able to sell it easily was Konrad Bernheimer, who owns Colnaghi's in London as well as a splendid gallery in Munich. When Otto Naumann and I discussed this with Konrad the day before the sale, Konrad explained that he knew of several potential customers in Germany, and with the painting's Bavarian provenance, it would be most fitting for it to return there. Otto often bids with his good friend Johnny van Haeften, but we could not involve Johnny because he had agreed to bid with Richard Green, a very aggressive London



dealer, who insisted on a half share. So the three of us, Otto, Konrad, and I decided to bid jointly. A delightful fight was in the offing, which would greatly help Walther Bernt's daughters.

When you are hoping to buy a painting it is always good to be able to see the other bidders - it heightens the excitement - and our seating made it possible to do just that. Otto and I were sitting two rows behind Konrad, who was bidding for us. Johnny sat just behind Konrad and directly in front of us. Richard Green was across the aisle, also easily observed by us. We all knew the Teniers would go much higher than the estimate, and we three knew how high we were prepared to go. When we reached our limit, all our eyes were on Johnny and Richard Green. Would they bid one more? Richard Green did, and the successful bid of £460,000 was over three times the low estimate: a very good result. I was so happy to be able to call one of Walther's daughters in Munich and relate the details. She and her sister were delighted with the outcome. They hoped that it would end up in a museum, and that may happen eventually.

The second painting of particular interest to me was lot 34 in Christie's sale, a splendid self-portrait by Willem Drost ^(fig.), one of Rembrandt's ablest students. Only some thirty-eight of Drost's paintings are known, and Professor Werner Sumowski (see Chapter 10) had told me that this was one of Drost's two best paintings, the other being the magnificent *Bathsheba* in the Louvre. Well, that's a matter of taste. I also like Drost's portraits of women in the Wallace Collection and in Budapest, and I was concerned about how high this self-portrait would go. Not long ago, a Drost portrait of a man, which I did not like as well, sold at Sotheby's in New York for over \$2 million. Again, Johnny van Haefen was bidding with Richard Green, and I had to go to £400,000,



over three times Christie's low estimate. A high price, but when again might I have a chance to acquire such a great Drost?

The next day, 10 July, Sotheby's offered three paintings of interest to me. This was the same date on which I had failed, the year before, to acquire that great Rubens, *The Massacre of the Innocents*, that was bought for Lord Thompson. The 10 July 2002, catalogue cover had featured the Rembrandt portrait that did not sell at auction but which Otto and I were able to buy in January 2003. The 2003 cover was of lot 19, a Rembrandt self-portrait, signed and dated 1634, with a very curious history, most of which I knew well before the sale. Shortly after Rembrandt finished this self-portrait, it was overpainted, perhaps by one of his students, with an imaginary portrait of a man with a high Russian hat, gold chains, and pearl earrings. Around 1640, such a "tronie" might have been easier to sell than a rather bland Rembrandt self-portrait of 1634. When a copy of this overpainted work was shown to Professor Sumowski in 1955, he suggested to the German owner that it was likely based on an original overpainted Rembrandt. And so it was. The original turned up at a sale in Paris in 1955 and since then has been cleaned in stages. The last restoration, by Martin Bijl, the chief restorer of the Rijksmuseum, took two years to complete, as Bijl had to use a fine scalpel under strong magnification to remove the last of the overpaint: truly painstaking work.

George Gordon first showed me the partially cleaned painting at Sotheby's in 2001. I was struck by the quality of the lower half and what seemed to me an authentic signature and date in the lower right. Since then, Professor Ernst van de Wetering has written a long article about this restoration saga for the publication of the Rembrandthuis that exhibited the self-portrait early in 2003. I was able to examine the original carefully



several times in London at Sotheby's. It is undoubtedly a genuine Rembrandt, in remarkably good condition considering its history, yet it is one of Rembrandt's blandest self-portraits - and that was probably the reason for the "more exciting", though poorer, overpaint.

In December 2002, Rob Noortman asked Otto and me whether we should bid on this Rembrandt together, as we had tried to purchase the Rubens. But the more Otto and I thought about the painting, the less we liked it. The reserve was said to be £3 million, a high price it seemed, for Rembrandt's most boring self-portrait. Then, the day before the sale, Noortman again talked to us - with my son David listening carefully - and forcefully made the argument that this was likely to be quite easily sold, particularly if we just put it away for a year or so. We all knew that together we had four far better Rembrandts that have not been easy to sell, but Noortman was a superb salesman, and we agreed to go to a hammer price of £4.2 million, with Noortman bidding. Just before the sale, I wished him luck, and he invited all of us for lunch - if he was successful. I was not really certain whether or not to look forward to lunch.

Noortman was sitting in the front row, close to Henry Wyndham, the auctioneer, whom he had advised that we would be bidding together. Next to Noortman were his two sons, and close by were Isabel, David, and our granddaughter Helena, a serious eight-year-old interested in auctions. Otto and I were on the other side of the aisle, where we were able to watch Noortman and also the bank of Sotheby's staff, including George Gordon and George Wachter, taking telephone bids. At 10:56, Wyndham opened the bidding on lot 19 with £3 million. Noortman went on to £4.2 million as agreed, but bidding continued rapidly by telephone, ending at £6.2 million on a bid from Stephen



Wynn. Wynn has long been interested both in major Old Master and impressionist paintings, and in 1998, he had purchased a Rembrandt portrait of a man in a red coat and a Rubens from Otto and me. He has sold both since then, and the man in a red coat now belongs to Noortman. Sadly, Wynn's eyesight is very poor, and that may explain his buying this portrait for so high a price.

The only other paintings of real interest to me were a pair or great Vernets, sold together as lot 65, the last lot of the sale. Usually I am not interested in French paintings, but these are such beautiful works, a sunset and a shipwreck, ordered from the artist in the summer of 1772 by the King of Poland. When difficulties with payment arose, Lord Clive of India purchased the pair, in the frames chosen by Vernet, for 400 louis, the price quoted to the King of Poland. And the paintings had remained in the possession of Clive's family until 12:15 that Thursday noon.

Naturally this magnificent pair should go to a museum, but who could sell them? Certainly could not I, from Milwaukee, and probably not Otto in New York. Loathe not to have had any hand in the purchase of these beautiful paintings, I turned to Konrad. At first, we agreed that he would bid to £1.5 million, but when a higher bid was made, I quickly urged him to go to £2 million. But even that was not enough, and Konrad was the underbidder when the hammer fell at £2.2 million. Noortman and his sons had left, disappointed, right after the Rembrandt sale, and so Isabel and I invited Hubert van Baarle, an old friend from Rotterdam, to a simple lunch at Debenham's, just soup and salad, certainly less expensive and perhaps healthier than lunch would have been if we had bought the Rembrandt. And so the week ended with my buying only one great



painting: the Drost. But the silver lining was that I enjoy working with both these major dealers, and we may collaborate even more closely in the future.

Lievens

It doesn't happen very often that I am really happy that a painting at auction "got away". Not often, but sometimes. So it was at 4:30 in the morning on Wednesday, 1 October 2003, when a very pleasant young lady from the Dorotheum in Vienna called me at home to bid on lot 85, a portrait of a man in profile, painted by Jan Lievens in Leiden around 1630. Isabel and I had examined the painting carefully at the Dorotheum in June, and Dr Wolf, the Director of the auction house, had explained that it came from an Austrian nobleman who had no idea what the painting was. But there was no question that it was a fine Lievens, and in the catalog, Dr Wolf illustrated it with a photo of my painting of *Rembrandt's Mother* by Lievens, painted at about the same time.

The young lady told me there were no less than 13 bidders on the telephone. Bidding started modestly enough at 12,000 Euros and climbed very rapidly to 120,000 Euros, where I stopped bidding, but then listened for what I thought was the final result, which was 650,000 Euros, a result that was accompanied by applause. I told the young lady that I presumed that Richard Green was the buyer, and she replied that she could not tell me that but that she could tell me that he was bidding and Johnny van Haefen was also.

I am a compulsive buyer, so in fact I was happy about the result, because at home we have three works by Lievens that I like very much better, and Queen's University has three better works that we have given them. After the telephone call, I was able to sleep



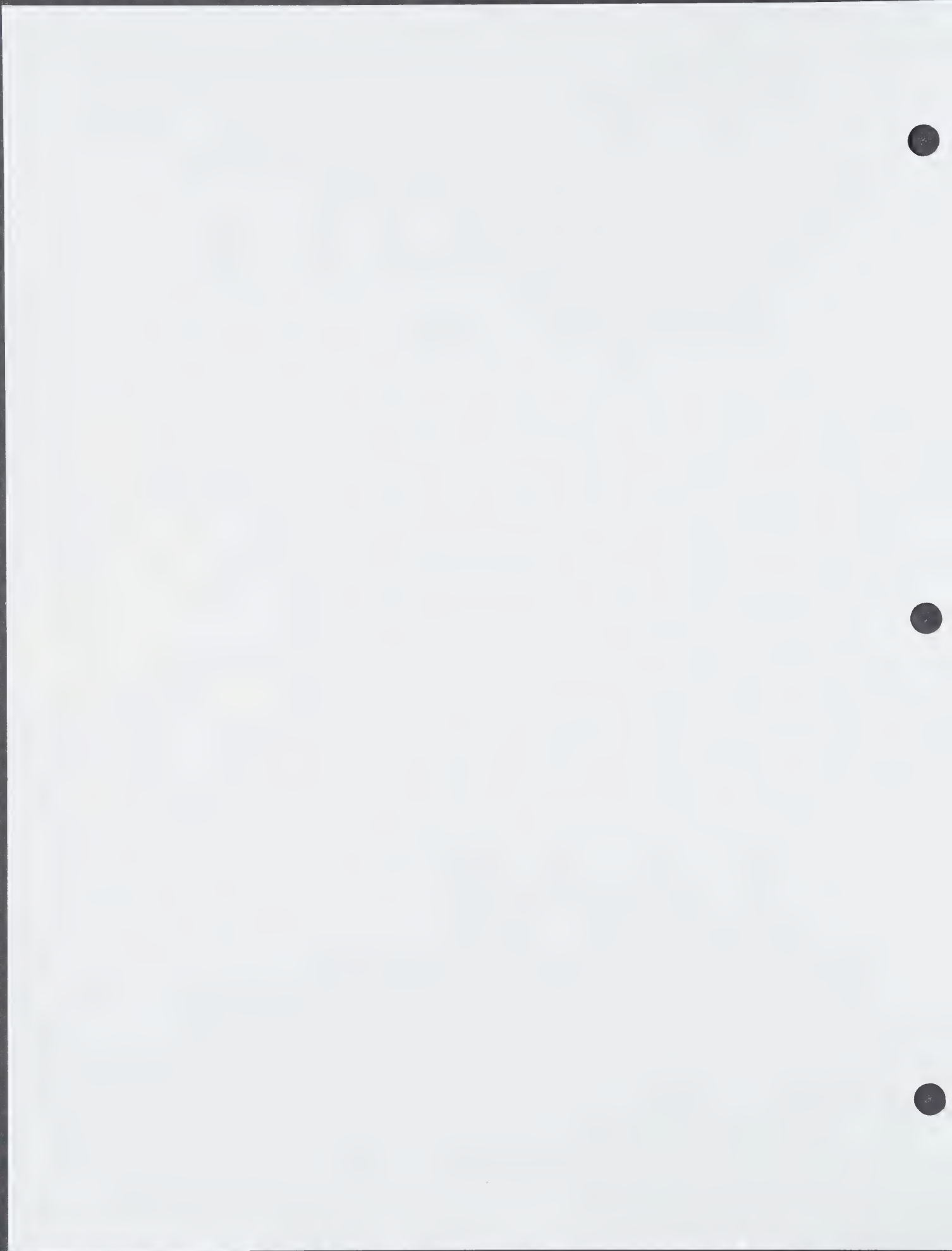
soundly for another two hours after reflecting that this Lievens had cost about as much as I had to pay for the wonderful Drost self-portrait at Christie's on 9 July 9 2003, and, of course, there is really no comparison.

The next day I learned about an amazing sequel to the bidding. Among the telephone bidders were Richard Green, Lucca Baroni, and Johnny van Haefen, all well-known dealers, and the hammer went down when Johnny bid 650,000 Euros. A few minutes later, unbeknownst to me at the time, the auctioneer reopened the bid. Lucca Baroni had been bidding on his cell phone from Florence and the girl talking to him had misunderstood him, thinking that he would not go higher than Johnny's bid of 650,000 Euros. But Baroni called back, and the Dorotheum called both Richard Green and Johnny van Haefen to tell them that the bidding was being reopened. The painting was finally knocked down to Baroni for 760,000 Euros, which means that Baroni had to pay a total of 912,000 Euros, about \$1 million, for this competent painting which is certainly not Lievens' best. Johnny was furious, but I think that he should really be happy not to have to pay that amount for a painting that might not be all that easy to sell.

Bredius 515

From October 2003 to May 2004, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and the Art Institute of Chicago had an important exhibition titled Rembrandt's Journey showing many works by Rembrandt the painter, the draftsman, and the etcher.

Whenever I look at catalogs of Rembrandt exhibitions, I check who the lenders are. Museums are unlikely to sell their works of art; individual lenders might.



There were three privately owned paintings in this great exhibition. The first, No. 31, I knew well. It is the bust of an old man of 1633, a tiny oil on paper, laid down on panel, RRP A-74. Richard Feigen, the well-known New York dealer, had sold it to Saul Steinberg in New York in 1986 and then it came up at a Sotheby's New York sale in January 1997 where it was bought by a collector in Japan. It is a tiny painting, perfectly genuine, but I believe not as attractive as the painting of an old man, RRP C-22, that I had just given to Queen's University.

The second privately owned painting was a small masterpiece, only 16 x 21 cms., oil on panel, Bredius 515 ^(fig.), to be described in RRP Vol. V. That painting, owned by the Aurora Art Fund, was certainly of such beauty that it was worth considering carefully.

The third painting, owned, I believe, by a collector in Boston, was the last painting in the exhibition, No. 216, the Apostle James, signed and dated Rembrandt f. 1661. In the exhibition, it hung close to the second-to-last painting, a Rembrandt self-portrait of 1659, in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, perhaps the finest painting in the exhibition, and the comparison was very hard on the Apostle James. I had seen that painting several times before, and I simply do not like it. And, of course, I did not bid on it when it was bought by a Japanese collector at Sotheby's in New York in January 2007.

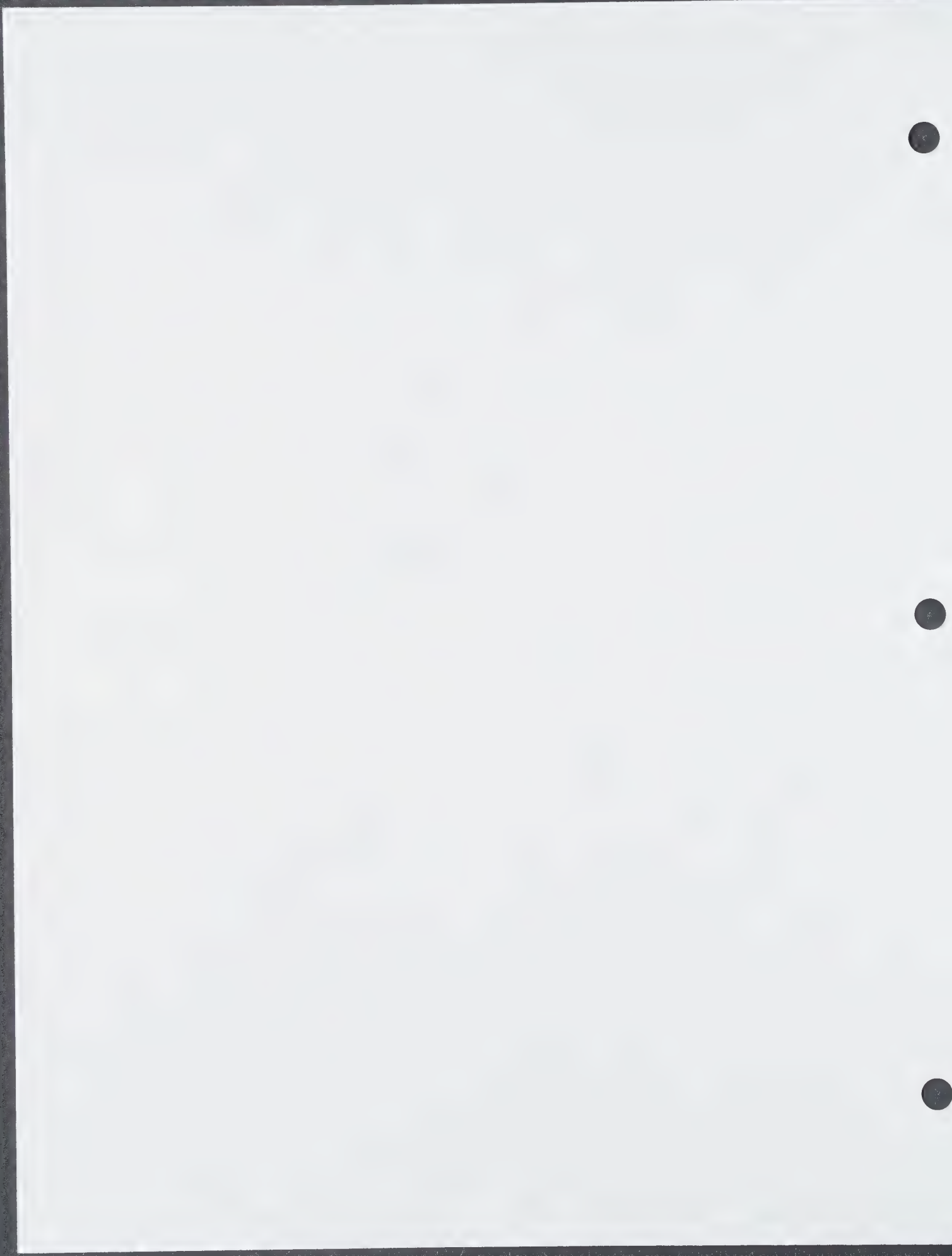
That left Abraham and the Three Angels, signed and dated 1646, for careful consideration.

I discussed this with Otto Naumann, who knows Gerald Stiebel of Stiebel Ltd., who had arranged for the loan. Otto said that Stiebel was both able and straightforward and that he would speak to him.



When he told me later that he had offered \$6 million, I said that this seemed much too low and that he should go very much higher, subject to our examining the painting very carefully. Of course, we soon made the much higher offer and the answer came back very quickly: The painting is yours at the price offered plus 10 percent, provided we can work out all the delivery details, with handover after the exhibition ended in Chicago in May.

The provenance of the painting is most impressive. It was probably first mentioned in a transaction in March 1647 in which one merchant agrees to exchange diamonds, silverwork, and several paintings for a supply of ropes, masts, and iron. Among the paintings was an *Abraham and the Three Angels* by Rembrandt. Then, in 1669, it had belonged to Ferdinand Bol, Rembrandt's student, and to Jan Six, in whose sale in 1702 it was lot 40. It had then belonged to Benjamin West and several well-known English collectors, of which Sir Thomas Baring was the best known. In 1923, it was acquired by Walter and Catalina von Pannwitz. Around 1950, Catalina von Pannwitz established the Aurora Trust, and in 1986 the painting was placed into the Aurora Art Trust Fund. Thus, there was no concern whatever about where the painting had been during the last war. The Art Fund was owned by the Pannwitz descendants, one of them in Argentina and another in England. Barry Kessler, Trustee of the Aurora Art Fund in New York, confirmed that Gerald Stiebel, as art advisor to the trust, was authorized to sell the painting. Where to transfer the painting became a bit complicated, and finally we agreed that the invoice would be written "CIF Chicago", which would allow the painting to be picked up there on Monday, May 10, the day after the exhibition ended, and taken directly to restorer Nancy Krieg.



Otto called me the next day to tell me that Nancy Krieg had begun cleaning the *Abraham* and that it was clear that it would be much improved. By Friday, May 14, the cleaning was complete, Otto had acquired a fine little frame and was ready to offer it to interested customers; on 27 May 2004, Otto e-mailed me, "This is the most precious and beautiful object I have EVER handled."

Isabel and I first saw the painting in Chicago, together with David de Witt, the Bader Curator, and Janet Brooke, the Director of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, on Sunday, 14 March. Before that, I had, of course, discussed the quality of the painting with Otto Naumann and Bill Robinson (at Harvard), both of whom liked it immensely. So did I, realizing how much improved the painting was likely to be when cleaned and placed in a fitting frame.

Rembrandt's vision of the visit to Abraham was very different from mine. I always thought of the three angels as being messengers from God, but Rembrandt depicted the central angel, from whom light emanates so wonderfully, as God himself. While the painting is tiny in scale, it is executed very freely and really looks like a finished work. Traditionally the scene has always been placed during the middle of the day, but surprisingly, here it is just at sunset, almost in darkness. That makes the light from the central figure appear all the more stunning.

The Rembrandt Research Project had examined the painting in August 1971 and then again in May 1992. On 15 January 1999, Professor Ernst van de Wetering, the remaining member of the original RRP, sent Gerald Stiebel a twenty-two-page report which was to become the entry for RRP Corpus, Vol. V. In that letter, Professor van de Wetering wrote, "This is to enable them [the owners] to propose corrections or additions



for which we will be grateful and to react on our opinions.” In the report, Ernst van de Wetering had some reservations, particularly about the condition, stating “Condition: good insofar as can be assessed through the thick varnish layer. No clear paint loss can be observed.” Now, of course, with the painting cleaned, we could see so clearly how excellent the condition is.

When Otto showed this painting to Professor Ernst van de Wetering in Amsterdam in November 2004, he had no doubt about the authenticity and condition of the painting, and revised the entry for *Corpus Vol. V* and the catalog of the great 2006 Rembrandt exhibition in Amsterdam and Berlin, celebrating four hundred years since Rembrandt’s birth.

Two dealers, Konrad Bernheimer in Munich and Richard Feigen in London, decided to exhibit this painting in their galleries. Eventually, in April 2005, an old customer and friend of Otto’s, Mark Fisch, decided to purchase a three-year option, which I have little doubt that he will exercise. In the meantime, the painting was being admired in the Metropolitan Museum and was in the great Rembrandt exhibitions in Amsterdam and Berlin. Mark Fisch has purchased many great old masters from Otto before, and this will, I believe, be the jewel of his collection.

