Rembrandt in the Blood: An Obsessive Aristocrat, Rediscovered Paintings and an Art-World Feud

No one had spotted a new painting by the Dutch master for four decades — until the scion of a storied Amsterdam family found two.

By Russell Shorto

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The discovery that upended Jan Six's life occurred one day in November 2016. Six is a 40-year-old Dutch art dealer based in Amsterdam, who attracted worldwide attention last year with the news that he had unearthed a previously unknown painting by Rembrandt, the most revered of Dutch masters — the first unknown Rembrandt to come to light in 42 years. The find didn't come about from scouring remote churches or picking through the attics of European country houses, but rather, as Six described it to me last May, while he was going through his mail. He had just taken his two small children to school (in true Dutch fashion, by bicycle: one seated between the handlebars and the other in back). The typical weather for the season, raw wind and spitting rain, would never deter a real Amsterdammer from mounting his bike — and Six's roots in the city go about as deep as possible — but by the time he arrived at his office, he was feeling the effects. *Waterkoud*("water cold") is the Dutch word for the chilly dampness of the Low Countries that seeps into the bones.

The antidote to that feeling is encompassed in another word. *Gezelligheid*, loosely translated as coziness, is the condition people in the Netherlands strive for in the interiors of their homes. It's often what's being depicted and celebrated in old-master canvases from the Golden Age of the 17th century, the era that is Six's specialty: warm domestic scenes, merry companies hoisting tankards, still lifes of tables laden with food. Six's office, on the ground floor of a building on the Herengracht, one of the city's main canals — a canal that Rembrandt himself used to stroll — has its share of *gezelligheid*. The building dates from the early 1600s. Ancient beams cross the ceiling. The views out of the windows are of bicyclists racing by and the evocative, ever-somber surface of the canal reflecting the gabled facades of the buildings on the opposite side.

Six made coffee that morning, then sat down to a stack of mail. He dispensed with the bills and other annoyances first so as to settle into the catalogs of coming art auctions. One was for a December event at Christie's in London. He skimmed it quickly, almost dismissively; it was for the daytime sale, which featured lesser objects. The top paintings and sculptures are always reserved for the evening.

[Rembrandt died 350 years ago. Here's why he still matters today.]

And then, he told me, he stopped cold. The slightly miscolored photograph in the catalog was a portrait of a rather dazed-looking young gentleman with a lace collar and a proto-Led Zeppelin coif. What first spoke to Six was the gaze of the subject (whose identity remains unknown): “He pierces the image,” he said. Six felt that he had seen the work before, but after tearing through his library in search of it, he came to believe it wasn’t the actual image that struck him as familiar but the sum of all the telltale features of an early Rembrandt. These include, in Six’s estimation, the humanness of that gaze, a “rounded” brush stroke and a willingness to employ different painting styles within the same work.

The painting dated from somewhere between 1633 and 1635. The giveaway was the particular type of lace collar, which was the height of fashion in that brief span and then quickly went out of style. What especially excited Six was not just that Christie’s had failed to see that the painting was most likely from the hand of the master, but also that the auction house had labeled it “circle of Rembrandt” — i.e., from a follower. “You see the problem, right?” he asked me. I was puzzling for the solution to the riddle when he blurted it out: “Rembrandt wasn’t famous yet in the early 1630s, so there was no circle. I knew right away Christie’s had screwed up.”

From there, Six was a bloodhound on the trail. He learned that the painting’s provenance went back to Sir Richard Neave, an English merchant of the late 1700s who built a serious art collection, which included works by Thomas Gainsborough and John Constable; the painting had stayed in the same family for six generations. This fit: It made sense that a painting by a top-tier artist would have attracted a prominent collector.

Six was so excited that he jumped on his bike and cycled a short distance across central Amsterdam to the home of Ernst van de Wetering, universally renowned as a top authority on Rembrandt; still breathless, Six thrust a photocopy of the picture at him. As befits a person whose opinion is weighted with import, van de Wetering typically reacts with reserve on first seeing an image, but he was intrigued. “It looked like a Rembrandt, but it was completely new to me,” van de Wetering told me later. Six cycled back home and bought a plane ticket.

There were a few people in the Christie’s London showroom when he arrived, Six told me, so he looked at other paintings until they left, then made his way to the portrait, studied it and took pictures of it. “I was shocked, because it had a different appearance in person,” he said. “It had far more depth.”

Six was particularly drawn to the lace on the collar. Lace was a signifier of status throughout the 17th century, and Six believes Rembrandt had a signature way of depicting this variety, which is called bobbin lace. Other artists of the period painstakingly executed its intricacies in white paint on top of the jacket. Rembrandt did something like the opposite. He first painted the jacket, then over it the collar area in white, then used black paint to create the negative spaces in the collar. And where other painters were careful to create repeating patterns in the lacework, Rembrandt wove a

freestyle design. For viewers standing a few inches away from such a painting, the collar appears as a hieroglyphic jumble; step back a pace, and it coheres. Six believes this was one aspect of Rembrandt's genius. "He realized that a painted copy of a repetitive pattern, even if it followed the original, actually looked artificial."

After he left the Christie's showroom, Six went around the corner to an art-book shop, where he found "A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings," the authoritative guide to the entire oeuvre. He flipped through the works of the 1630s and stopped when he came to what he was looking for: Rembrandt's "Portrait of Philips Lucasz.," from 1635. The original was conveniently located just across town in the National Gallery, so he ran over there, and before long he was standing in front of it, gazing back and forth from the painting to the image on his camera, feeling his blood race as a hunch solidified into near certainty. "I knew that whoever painted *this*painted *that*," he said.

[Read about the potential collapse of Michelangelo's David.]

Jan Six is a tall, slim, almost apologetically dapper man, whose customary expression contains a hint of someone carrying a burden. The burden turns out to be his name, which is actually Jan Six XI. Dating back four centuries, his aristocratic family has named a firstborn son Jan in nearly every generation. The first Jan Six, a man of art, culture and politics, was a true representative of the Dutch Golden Age, the period in which an explosion of creativity in art, science and commerce vaulted the tiny nation to the forefront of European life and thought. That Jan Six was actually a friend of the great Rembrandt van Rijn. When he decided, sometime in the 1650s, to have his portrait painted, he asked Rembrandt to do the honors. The result is one of the master's most admired works, a wondrously brooding study of self-aware, middle-aged sophistication, done in the hallmark rough brush strokes of the later Rembrandt. The historian Simon Schama has called it "the greatest portrait of the 17th century."

The first Jan Six amassed a large collection of paintings, sculptures and drawings by a variety of artists. But Rembrandt is at the heart of the Six Collection. In addition to the Jan Six portrait, which currently holds an insurance valuation of more than $400 million, there is a full-scale Rembrandt oil painting of the first Jan Six's mother, Anna Wymer, along with five drawings and 50 original etchings by the artist.
Image

As the Six Collection passed down from one generation to the next, it grew to include works by Vermeer, Bruegel, Hals and Rubens, as well as the odd Titian and Tintoretto. Along the way, a pirate's hoard of lesser but still historically significant artifacts became attached to it: furniture, gems, medals, manuscripts, closetsful of silver, Venetian glassware, ivory-handled toothbrushes, a diamond ring given to a family member by Czar Alexander I. But the paintings were always the raison d'être of the collection, and over the years the Sixes showed a tendency to follow their progenitor's inclination. The collection now holds no fewer than 270 portraits of family members.

As the centuries rolled on and other great European family art holdings were broken up and museums became the principal repositories for such things, the Six Collection, which remains in the Six family home, grew in mystique. By tradition, each generation's Jan Six becomes the caretaker of the collection and the occupant of the house, for the last century a rambling, 56-room mansion on the Amstel River in the heart of Amsterdam. But Jan XI, the art dealer, is not that Jan, not yet anyway. His father, Jan X — or, as he prefers to be called, Baron J. Six van Hillegom — still reigns. The elder Six, who is 71, is known in cultural circles as both a deeply private man (he declined to be interviewed for this article) and a somewhat prickly one. Nearly everyone I spoke to used the word "difficult" to describe him.

I met the elder Six nine years ago, when I was researching a book about the history of Amsterdam and wanted to see inside the famous Six house. After a typical Dutch lunch of sandwiches and milk in a kitchen that seemed right out of a Vermeer painting — dark woodwork, tile floors, angled light — he took me through his home: a delightful warren of halls and old rooms stuffed with curios, some of them priceless. Though display rooms and living quarters were separate, the feeling of being simultaneously in a home and a museum was palpable: You turned from admiring a Frans Hals to note a splayed book and reading glasses on a side table, or a broom and dustpan in the corner. My overall impression from the visit was of something out of a Thomas Mann novel: faded grandeur and an air of antique stillness, overseen by a wizened and mildly vexed aristo.

The elder Six may be known for his contentiousness, but regarding his most public battle, a multiyear lawsuit against the Dutch government for failing to live up to an agreement to pay for maintenance of the house, some people say he had a point. "A left-wing politician thought it was ridiculous to give money to a family that's rich, and so he stopped the subsidy," said Frits Duparc, former director of the Mauritshuis museum in The Hague, who served as mediator in the dispute. "But the fact is, the family isn't so rich because the art was long ago put into a foundation." The foundation was created in part to keep the art together, and thus in the country. In the past the family had been forced to sell Vermeers and other national treasures in order to pay tax bills.

Eventually, in 2008, the lawsuit was settled and an agreement reached: A foundation owns the Six mansion, the family has a right to live in it in perpetuity and the state provides funds for its upkeep. In exchange, the Sixes are to provide limited public access to the collection.

Jan Six's obsession with Rembrandt (he calls it that) started with his childhood encounters with the master's portrait of his namesake in the "blue salon" in the Six family house. Six can talk about Rembrandt endlessly, absorbingly and with great feeling. "What sets Rembrandt apart is his ability to paint the person," he told me. "When I go through a museum and there's a Rembrandt, I'll pass it the way you do a person, looking out of the corner of my eye, thinking, Oh, who's that? like it might be somebody I know. It's a living human being." By contrast, he doesn't think much of the other titan of the Dutch Golden Age: "I know a lot of Americans love Vermeer. I

personally don't like him. It's a trick: optical stuff. I think if you put 'Girl With a Pearl Earring' next to any Rembrandt, you'll see the difference."

Among the many reasons for the centuries of popular enthrallment with Rembrandt — the tremendous volume, range and quality of the work he produced, the plethora of styles he experimented with, his own complex biography — maybe the most trenchant is the psychological insight he brought to bear on his subjects, the way his figures seem to engage the viewer, to pull you into the particular struggle of that moment in their lives.

This focus on the individual was a defining feature of the artist's era. The Dutch Golden Age marked a turn away from strictly religious subjects; suddenly people were interested in ordinary life and in themselves, and artists followed suit. Portrait painting became an industry. But Rembrandt went one better than his contemporaries. Many of them could paint what you looked like. What made Rembrandt so special to the citizens of Amsterdam, who lined up to commission him to paint their portraits, was that he seemed to be able to go beneath the surface, to get at who you were.

That empathy may stem not only from Rembrandt's genius but also from his own life. Early on, he became the most celebrated painter of the day, but he refused to follow shifting fashions and fell from favor. He overspent, going heavily into debt. He lost his wife not long after she gave birth and started a relationship with his baby's nursemaid, which he tried to extricate himself from by having the woman committed to an asylum. Then he went bankrupt. He seems to have lived his last years in a misery of his own making. If the Dutch Golden Age evinced a newly intimate focus on the individual, Rembrandt applied the dictum to himself ruthlessly. His self-portraits, especially the later ones, are pitilessly honest explorations of the psychic toll we inflict on ourselves.

The walls of Six's Amsterdam studio are always lined with 17th-century portraits: works he has bought and is researching or is having restored and preparing to resell. When I showed up last summer, the painting from the Christie's catalog, "Portrait of a Young Gentleman," was hanging in a central spot. Six, who talks in a soothing murmur and refers to himself as a "scholar-dealer," gave me a tour of it. "I love the glove and the cuff — very elegant. See the brush strokes? He started here and slowly moves to the right and makes a curve. He adds these broad strokes. Then he paints the cuff, and the bit that's in the light is painted in color because he understands that in light you don't have black lines, but in shadows you do. He cleverly uses the way light actually shines on material. Slowly it recedes into shadow."

When I was working on my book about the history of Amsterdam, Six invited me here and conducted a remarkable little demonstration. He turned off the lights and lit candles, and in an instant the paintings were transformed. They took on new energy; the golds and reds and flesh tones became warmer. The flicker of the flames seemed to breathe life into the two-dimensional figures. Six's eyes gleamed as he saw that I had registered the point: These paintings were made for candlelight.

Six was helping me to experience the world of 17th-century Amsterdammers in the most tangible way: the minute differences in ways of seeing and feeling that separate one historical epoch from another. But I came to realize that he was also giving me an insight into something else: his lifelong struggle with his family over what it expected of him as heir to the Six Collection. When he was a boy, the greatness of the Western art tradition may have greeted him every day as he marched to breakfast, but it didn't thrill him with a sense of destiny. Where previous heirs — who were avid collectors, though not art professionals — seem to have accepted the responsibility with equanimity, Six pushed it away. The Sixes are part of Dutch nobility, but as a teenager he "tried not to be an aristocrat," his close friend David van Ede told me. "He was a little bit embarrassed by it." Rather than have Rembrandts and Bruegels hanging in his bedroom, he went for posters: Bob Marley and Guns N' Roses. He hated high school, got a job as a cook in a restaurant and thought for a time that becoming a chef might be his route of rebellion. When his parents were away, he would host parties in the mansion. "We were there practically every weekend," van Ede said. "We didn't swing from the chandeliers, but we would smoke, drink Heinekens, go out to a hip-hop club, stop at Burger King, then maybe go back to Jan's place and sleep. Sometimes we set off the alarms."

Six knew what was expected of him but bristled. "Nobody wants to be pushed into a corner," he told me. "You hear all your life that everything you do is in preparation to follow in the Jan Six footsteps. But hey, I'm an individual."

He came around, however, at least partly, when he started to interact with the people who showed up at the front door, tickets in hand, to take tours of his home. It was these ordinary folk who made Six realize that art was his calling. "Sometimes a tour guide would be sick, and I would help out," he said. "At first I was scared. Then I saw how happy and interested the people were. And when they learned that I was Jan Six, and they looked from me to Rembrandt's portrait of the other Jan Six, I saw them getting excited, connecting the past and present. Some of the visitors knew a lot about art, and I listened to them." He began looking at the paintings in a new way. They went from being flat representations of dead people to aesthetic expressions serving as portals into history. In particular, that Rembrandt portrait of the first Jan Six took hold of him: "I realized that it matters to me that the eyes in that painting are genetically my eyes."

Six tried to free himself from the burden of his legacy by embracing the art that is the basis of it but engaging with it on his own terms. He studied art history in college, then was hired by Sotheby's in London as a junior specialist in old masters. He was good at the job and moved easily in the world of international wealth and culture. Over time, it seemed, a family gene kicked in. Geert Mak, a Dutch author who wrote a history of the Six family, told me that some of the earlier Jan Sixes had an extraordinarily acute visual sense, which guided them as they amassed their collection. "This Jan Six has it, too," he said. "It's an exceptional talent to see through a painting, to remember a gesture from another painting he saw years earlier, an unbelievable memory for small details."

As he grew in his profession, Six came to feel he had a right to express himself on the family collection. A series of clashes with his father ensued, many of them about providing greater public access, which has always been a difficulty. Currently, tours of

the collection, which are by appointment only, are booked into next year. The picture that the younger Six sketched was of an inward-looking father who is trying to preserve a legacy by keeping the world at bay, who comes to realize over time that he also has to do battle with a gregarious and extroverted son who feels that the way to preserve that legacy is precisely by sharing it with the wider world. The battles left the younger Six progressively more exasperated: “I would cycle home after and think, Jesus, Dad, I’m trying to help you.”

One of these disagreements centered on, of all things, picture frames. Some of the great paintings in the collection, including the “Portrait of Jan Six,” have ornamented gilded frames, which were put on them by 19th-century Sixes when showiness was in fashion. Jan the younger argued for returning them to their 17th-century look, which would have meant the smooth and sober black frames that he believed were the pictures’ natural habitat.

This was the other point of the candlelight demonstration Six gave me. “If you put a gold frame around a Rembrandt, whatever is in the painting goes five meters to the back, and whatever is gold becomes yellowish,” he said. “The painting has to compete with the noise of the frame. Take away the noise, and beauty will emerge.” His father, however, was adamant that the pictures in the collection should stay in the gold frames. The younger Six told me he believed his father feels his duty is to the collection, including the way his ancestors preserved it. “If you live in a house for decades and see it as the core of your existence, you practically live for the house,” he said. Whereas he himself feels an obligation to the art.

To avoid more confrontations, Six took a step back: “I decided I would rather have a father as a friend. So the house and the collection have nothing to do with me. Our relationship is best when there’s a distance.”

As recently as 1991, paintings by artists of the Dutch Golden Age, the Italian Renaissance and other major eras of European history dominated the international art market. But in a digital, now-oriented time, in which there is a steady shift in the global balance of power (last year China became the second-largest art market in the world, behind the United States), European old masters have come to seem … old. In 2018, 85 percent of the ARTnews list of 200 top collectors said they collected contemporary art in one form or another; only 6 percent said they collected old masters. And while the top names — Rembrandt, Titian, Raphael — still command top dollar, everything else has dropped in value. “If you buy a minor painting for $3,000, it will probably be worth $2,000 down the line,” said Otto Naumann, a prominent American art dealer now with Sotheby’s. “You see a similar decline at the $300,000 range. Seascapes, Flemish still lives: Many of these have diminished in value.”

Related to the decline in sales is the aging of the field. “There are hardly any younger collectors” who are interested in the old masters, the former Mauritshuis director Frits Duparc said. “Most of the major collectors are in their 70s and 80s.” There have been declines, too, in relevant university programs and faculty posts, and in curator positions at museums. Duparc said that in the Netherlands there is exactly one professor fully

devoted to the field of Golden Age Dutch art. Matthew Teitelbaum, the director of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, says that a new Center for Netherlandish Art that his institution is developing will aim to counter this trend. But he acknowledged the challenge: “Right now this is a narrowing field, where university programs are declining and teaching appointments are being left unfilled.” As for dealers devoted to old masters, Duparc noted that while a few decades ago there were dozens of independent dealers, now there are only a scattered few. Most of the trade has been taken up by the big auction houses, Sotheby’s and Christie’s.

Despite this inhospitable landscape, Jan Six decided in 2009 to set himself up as an independent dealer in Dutch old masters, with a particular specialty in portraits. He says he had become leery of the corporate mentality he found at Sotheby’s, which looked at the world’s artistic heritage as a high-end commodity. “Most dealers are merchants,” he said. “They could be car salesmen or traders on Wall Street. I don’t really think they’re in it for the aesthetic high.” He found an elegant studio/library/office space in Amsterdam, a few blocks from his parents and the family collection, and set up shop.

Six flourished as a dealer. He spent the next several years shuttling among New York, London, Paris and Amsterdam, buying and selling, developing trust and an ever-more-discerning eye. His name gave him ready access to the top collectors and the directors of the world’s major art museums. He became versed in the high-tech methods for analyzing paintings, which can yield details about canvas, wood and pigment that can offer insight into a work and its creator. He did well as a dealer — a GovertFlinck here, a Gerrit van Honthorst there — but he felt he was biding his time.

What mattered to him was Rembrandt. Six worked doggedly to make himself an expert. He began a pilgrimage to stand face to face with each of the 341 paintings by the master listed in the “Corpus,” spread from Omaha, Neb., to St. Petersburg, Russia (he has seen 80 percent of them so far), and he amassed an archive of tens of thousands of documents and images related to the artist. It’s not too much to say that he takes Rembrandt personally. When we first spoke about the portrait he discovered, he made it clear what finding it meant to him. “This has nothing to do with my family,” he asserted, which, as he well knew, was both narrowly true and utterly false. “I want you to understand that this discovery is not about my father or the Six Collection. It’s pure catharsis. For the first time in my life, it’s just me and Rembrandt.”

After studying the portrait of the young gentleman in the Christie’s London showroom, Six flew back to Amsterdam and took the photographs he had shot to Ernst van de Wetering, the Rembrandt scholar to whom he had shown the catalog image. Van de Wetering was further intrigued, but he wouldn’t say more at the time without seeing the thing itself. That was enough for Six: He was ready to bid. The auction estimate was listed at $19,000 to $25,000: peanuts if the painting was what he thought it was. But if anyone else suspected what he did, the price would shoot up. Rembrandts, of course, can sell in the tens or hundreds of millions. In 2015, the Rijksmuseum, the great repository of Dutch art and history and the home of Rembrandt’s “Night Watch,” in partnership with the Louvre, bought a pair of full-length, life-size portraits by

Rembrandt of a wedding couple, dated 1634, precisely within the period of Jan Six's find. (Each figure is wearing the telltale bobbin lace.) The museums paid $174 million for the pair.

Six called an investor he had worked with in the past (he won't say whom) and got a go-ahead. Six told me the investor was willing to go as high as four million pounds ($5 million), which would still be a bargain for a Rembrandt. In the end, Six's winning bid was 137,000 pounds ($173,000). The price was about right for a "circle of" painting.

Six had the painting cleaned, restored and scientifically analyzed. For this he went to the top team in the country for high-tech art analysis. Petria Noble, head of paintings conservation at the Rijksmuseum, told me that her lab did a macro X-ray fluorescence scan of the painting — a technology that penetrates layers of paint and allows for a sophisticated analysis of a work, and thus of the artist's process — and also studied paint samples. Because the Rijksmuseum had, with the Louvre, recently purchased the pair of Rembrandt wedding portraits, there was an opportunity to closely compare Six's young gentleman, especially with the portrait of the bridegroom, Marten Soolmans.

Those tests showed, as Six asserted in a 2018 book he wrote about the painting, that the two paintings "were made with exactly the same materials, follow the same buildup in paint layers, follow the same working method of painting from back to front and, most importantly, both have the unique black-on-white method that was used to paint the lace collars." In other words, he was saying, his painting was just as much a Rembrandt as the one that cost tens of millions of dollars.

Museums, however, try to avoid being used by dealers as marketing tools, and Noble was not willing to be so declarative. "We had to be very careful about coming out with a conclusion," she said. "There are a lot of similarities, and still a lot of questions that require more research."

Six next lined up prominent scholars to support his attribution of the painting to Rembrandt. It's worth noting that some were unwilling to do so — not because they definitively believed otherwise, but as part of a shift toward acknowledging the gray areas in art history. For such a painting, which seemingly came out of nowhere, there is no way to achieve absolute certainty about its provenance. "When Jan came to me with his painting, I had to admit I couldn't contest his arguments," said Gary Schwartz, an American Rembrandt biographer and an authority on 17th-century Dutch art. "And I told him I wouldn't express doubts about Rembrandt's authorship. But it doesn't make me happy" to be so definitive. He went on to elaborate the particular difficulties that Rembrandt poses for authenticators: the variety of styles he painted in, his many pupils, the likelihood that in his studio more than one person worked on a given painting. A painting that is determined to be, say, by "the studio of Rembrandt," rather than by Rembrandt himself, would be of lesser value. Schwartz is one of a number of art historians who, when it comes to questions of the authenticity of works by famous painters, would like people to focus less on the artist and the monetary worth of the painting than on the work itself. He uses the term "Rembrandtness" and argues for

assigning shades of likelihood that a painting is by the artist himself. Regarding the Rembrandtness of this particular portrait, he said, “The attribution to Rembrandt is the hypothesis to beat, but it may not be unbeatable.”

Museums try to respect “Rembrandtness.” The National Gallery of Art in London, for instance, labels “An Old Man in an Armchair” as “probably by Rembrandt,” and the Mauritshuis museum recently announced that it is mounting an exhaustive study of two of its supposed Rembrandts to try to determine the likelihood of their being by the master. “I think ‘Rembrandtness’ is a smart idea,” said Ronni Baer, senior curator of European paintings at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. “But people aren’t going to be content with it because there’s so much money involved in attribution.”

The most important opinion on whether or not the painting was by Rembrandt was that of van de Wetering. The Rembrandt scholar withheld judgment while the painting was being analyzed. “As the restoration was being done, I was more and more convinced,” van de Wetering told me. “I thought that Jan Six was right in his assessment.”

Eventually, however, he added an important caveat. He now believes Six’s painting was originally part of a larger work. One tipoff was the fact that the face is slightly blurred. Rembrandt does this in group portraits, van de Wetering told me, in order to guide the eye to the central figure in the composition. “The other figure must have been slightly to the foreground,” he said. It may have been a female figure, and the original painting was possibly a wedding portrait that was later cut apart. In a later interview with a Dutch newspaper, van de Wetering asserted that if it were, as he thought, “a fragment of a much larger work,” that would diminish its importance.

The day after Jan Six encountered the portrait of the young gentleman in the Christie’s catalog, back in 2016, he met a woman named Ronit Palache. He was coming off a difficult divorce; the two hit it off almost immediately. “One of the first things he told me was, ‘I think I’ve discovered a Rembrandt,’ ”Palache told me last July. “As we began dating, he talked about it all the time.”

Palache was an editor and publicist for a Dutch publishing house. She said that Six told her he was planning to write a scholarly treatise to accompany the unveiling, and that when she looked at his notes she found them “boring.” She started to hatch an idea. Here was the scion of a family that is famous in the Netherlands for its connection to great art, and to Rembrandt in particular. And now he had discovered a Rembrandt on his own. As a publicist, “I looked at this in a commercial way,” she said.

Her idea was to unveil the painting in the same way a blockbuster book would be introduced, with a full media blitz. Six resisted at first. “I said there’s not a big public for this,” he said. “The old masters are usually for senior citizens who have free time.” Palache pushed back, and eventually he followed her lead. “I was constantly convincing Jan of how big this story was going to be,” she said.

In May 2018, nearly a year and a half after Six first saw the picture in London, he appeared live on “Pauw,” one of the most popular talk shows in the Netherlands. After a brief introduction, the show’s host, together with Six, pulled a black cloth off the canvas to the whoops of the audience. The TV appearance was the centerpiece of the media campaign, which also included an exclusive front-page story in the nation’s top newspaper, NRC Handelsblad, and a slickly produced book, “Rembrandt’s Portrait of a Young Gentleman,” that Six wrote about the painting. Over the next few days, the news echoed around the world. The book became an instant best seller in Dutch, and English and French editions went to press.

Dutch people like to point out that they are an aggressively egalitarian and plain-spoken lot. There are several sayings in the language about the danger of hubris: The tallest tree takes the most wind; stick your head out too far and it will get chopped off. The old-masters world, too, tends to prefer discretion — if not modesty — to showiness. The flamboyance with which Six announced his find defied both cultures. Yet the gatekeepers of traditional art, far from turning up their noses at the showiness, were initially wowed by the extra attention the field was getting. Wim Pijbes, former director of the Rijksmuseum, characterized the TV unveiling to me at the time as “a very well launched enterprise, and quite amazing.”

As the wave of popular enthusiasm was washing over Six, I asked him why, if his departure from Sotheby’s had been motivated by a distaste for the commodification of art, he was now participating in it. He shrugged and gave a one-line mea culpa: “I’m a businessman!” But later he offered a more introspective response: “For years I’ve been struggling in my mind to prove that I know something about paintings in my own right. I’m happy that what they’re writing in all the articles so far, from America to China, is about me as a dealer, not as a Six.”

In September 2018, four months after Six made his televised splash and nearly two years after the Christie’s sale, a Dutch art dealer named Sander Bijl from Alkmaar, a city north of Amsterdam, spoke to a reporter from NRC Handelsblad and claimed that, in fact, he, too, had recognized the catalog image as most likely being a Rembrandt. Bijl went on to claim that he had approached Six about buying the painting together, that Six agreed and that the two men further committed to cap their joint bid just above 100,000 euros, which was as high as Bijl was able to go. When the painting sold for 153,000 euros, Bijl said, it never occurred to him that the winning bidder was Six. Bijl was accusing Six of entering an agreement with him, then separately putting in another, higher bid of his own through an intermediary in order to hem in a competitor who saw the true value of the work. As another old-masters dealer told me, “That’s not done in our business.”

Bijl’s newspaper interview claiming that Jan Six, the darling of the Dutch old-masters world, was a cheat reverberated around the international art community. Bijl later told me that he had no choice but to come forward to protect his own reputation — he felt that it reflected poorly on him among dealers and others in the field if they believed that he’d missed a Rembrandt. He was enraged that during Six’s televised unveiling of the portrait and in subsequent media appearances, Six described the process of finding,

researching and buying it as a strictly solo enterprise, in which he was aided only by the expertise of van de Wetering and the funds of his anonymous backer. “Jan Six was going around with his discovery that only he could find, saying, ‘Is everybody else in the business stupid, or am I that smart?’ He knew very well that we had both seen it.” Bijl forwarded me a chain of WhatsApp messages he had sent to Six before the Christie’s sale, which included snapshots of parts of the canvas, detailing his own study of it. They seemed to prove that Bijl had seen the painting in person before Six made it to the Christie’s showroom.

Six told me last September that he never agreed to buy the portrait with Bijl. He did seem to suggest, however, that he had led the other dealer on. “I was very scared that Sander would alert the auction house that they had something special,” he said. “And Christie’s would take the picture out of the sale, which has happened to me before. I said, ‘What do you want to do?’ ” Six claimed to me that by this he meant “What are you planning to do?” but that Bijl took it as an agreement that they would work together on the picture. Six told the newspaper De Volkskrant last October, “I gave Sander room to believe in his own story.”

The Dutch found the new development especially titillating because of the parallels between the two art dealers. They are about the same age. Bijl’s father, Martin Bijl, is one of the premier art restorers in the Netherlands, whose résumé of refurbishing paintings includes many Rembrandts. Like Six, Sander Bijl grew up surrounded by old Dutch art. But there was a difference in status between the two men. “I’m the kind of dealer who has a booth at all the art fairs,” Bijl told me. “Jan Six doesn’t bother himself with that. I’m little Sander Bijl from Alkmaar; he’s aristocratic Jan Six from Amsterdam.”

In the wake of Bijl’s accusation, Six revealed to me another piece of information that seemed to dwarf the spat between the art dealers. Earlier, I asked him about a rumor going around that he had discovered a second Rembrandt. He denied it. Now he said it was true. Six said he had found this other Rembrandt two years before he’d seen the portrait at Christie’s but had agreed not to make the find public until the end of 2019, when it would be a centerpiece of the reopening of the Lakenhal Museum in Leiden, the city of Rembrandt’s birth, in conjunction with the 350th anniversary of the artist’s death. But this accusation from Sander Bijl, Six told me, changed things. In order to explain what happened between himself and Bijl, he said, he needed to go public with the news that he had found a second Rembrandt. He did so on Sept. 14, making yet another theatrical unveiling on “Pauw.”

Six told me that he first noticed this painting, a biblical scene depicting Jesus surrounded by children and onlookers, in the online catalog of a German auction house in 2014. All those years of looking at Rembrandts seemed to pay off in a flash. What caught his eye was what appeared to be a self-portrait of a very young Rembrandt in one of the minor figures. The detail excited Six not only because it so closely resembled other self-portraits of the artist but also because it fit with Rembrandt’s early tendency to work his own likeness into his paintings. The painting had a preauction estimate of $20,000 to $27,000, but the dealer Otto Naumann had also spotted it as a probable Rembrandt and was determined to buy it. As a result, Six, together with his anonymous

investor, ended up paying $2 million. It is thought to have been painted very early in Rembrandt's career, possibly when he was only 19, and to be his first known work on canvas.

The painting was heavily painted over by a later artist — robes redone in different colors, a naked boy covered up. To try to return it to something like the state the master intended, Six decided to have the overpainting removed. Once again he consulted van de Wetering, who, he says, all but insisted that he have Martin Bijl do the extremely delicate restoration. "I didn't want to do it, but Ernst was quite adamant about it," he told me, seeming to imply that if he wanted the blessing of the Rembrandt scholar, he had to work with the father of Sander Bijl. Six said that he made a deal with Martin Bijl to restore the painting, and that it was while that painstaking work was being done that Six discovered the portrait in the Christie's catalog and showed it to van de Wetering.

Not long after, Sander Bijl, the son of the restorer, sent Six a WhatsApp message: "Jan, I understand that you've talked with Martin and Ernst about the portrait that's about to be auctioned." But Six had not talked to Martin Bijl about the portrait. He said it was clear to him from this message that van de Wetering had violated his confidence by informing Martin Bijl that Six was on the hunt for another Rembrandt, and that the father had told his son. He repeated this assertion on "Pauw" in September 2018, as well as the assertion that van de Wetering pushed him to use Martin Bijl. "Suddenly Sander was trying to get friendly with me," Six told me, and making overtures about the two of them buying the portrait together. Meanwhile, he said, Martin Bijl was demanding more money to complete the restoration of the first painting — not just an hourly fee, as per the original agreement, but a percentage of profits from the sale of the painting. "It was a form of blackmail," Six said.

I emailed Martin Bijl for his response to this charge. He did not reply, but his son did, saying that his father asked for more money after Six demanded that he speed up his restoration work, which would have required him to turn down other clients. He sent me a chain of WhatsApp messages between Six and the elder Bijl that suggested a cordial relationship.

Sander Bijl did not deny that he learned about Six's interest in the painting through his father, who in fact heard about it from van de Wetering, but he said that such interactions are normal and inevitable within the small world of Dutch old masters. But he says that by the time his father told him of Six's interest in the portrait, he had already realized that Christie's was selling a possible Rembrandt portrait as the work of a minor painter. He forwarded me an email he sent to Christie's in November 2016 requesting a high-resolution photo of the painting, which was dated days before Six himself told me he first saw it — indicating, in other words, that he had taken note of the picture on his own. He said that he and Six had done business together on occasion — he bought a couple of small works from Six early last year, he said — so it was normal for him to approach Six with the idea of buying the painting together.

When I talked to Sander Bijl by phone this past December, after his dispute with Six had been batted around in the Dutch media for a couple of months, he suggested that Six's

effort to erase Bijl's involvement in the painting's purchase came out of Six's struggle with his inner demons: "He has a problem with the burden of the Six name, and he feels he needs to prove himself. I have to pay for his personal family issues? No. He cheated me."

Along with headlines like "Rembrandt Discoverer Jan Six Accused of Deception" came another unpleasant surprise for Six. Van de Wetering, whom Six had spent his professional life in awe of, gave a blistering public response to Six's assertions that he had forced Six to use Martin Bijl and that he had violated a confidence. While just weeks before van de Wetering had told me that he and Six had "a great kinship," in the wake of Six's accusation he told NRC Handelsblad: "Six has shown his true nature. I now know that he can lie." He declared their friendship at an end. Nevertheless, in the same interview, van de Wetering gave a glowing assessment of Six's other discovery. The biblical painting, he said, was "a great find" that "shows a phase in the development of the young Rembrandt."

When Six and I met again in October, he was in a defiant mood. He has long dark hair that, when he is exasperated, tends to fall across his face like a curtain. He raked it back in place with one hand as he made his case. He insisted that Sander Bijl was just trying to cash in on Six's own success. "When Dan Brown wrote 'The Da Vinci Code,' he had all kinds of lawsuits," he said. "Frankly, I think I'm lucky I only have one guy coming after me." He waved away my suggestion that his fixation on Rembrandt had clouded his professional judgment. He wouldn't even credit the seemingly straightforward evidence that Bijl had spotted the portrait as a likely Rembrandt on his own. And he expressed bitterness that a plot by others, motivated, he said, by jealousy and greed, had marred what was to be his personal and professional breakthrough and obscured an unprecedented achievement: "In the history of mankind, nobody before has ever discovered two Rembrandts."

Despite its decline in the market and in university syllabuses, Dutch old-masters art continues to have great popular appeal. The success over the years of the book and film "Girl With a Pearl Earring" and Donna Tartt's novel "The Goldfinch" — which has a painting by the 17th-century Dutch artist Carel Fabritius at its center and is now being made into a movie — are mirrored in visitor attendance at museum exhibitions. Since the Rijksmuseum and the Mauritshuis reopened after renovations a few years ago, each institution has seen visitor numbers roughly double. "Within old masters, I think Dutch art is so much more approachable than, say, Italian religious art or overblown Baroque," said Ronni Baer, curator at the Museum of Fine Arts, by way of explaining its popularity. "Everyone can understand a still life or an interior."

If some in the Dutch old-masters world, who know how popular the art is among ordinary people and are hoping to reverse its decline in academia and the marketplace, cheered on Jan Six when he made his discoveries, it was surely because they saw him as an appealing young champion of the cause. He has the pedigree, of course. But beyond that, he so thoroughly grasps what makes this art special. By turning away from strictly religious subjects and highlighting the world around them — still lives, landscapes, pictures of one another — the painters of the time created works of art that are windows

into who we are. People who devote their lives to the field do so out of a sense of dedication and treat it like a cause. “We have to fight for the importance of Dutch art,” said Emilie Gordenker, director of the Mauritshuis, the home of both Vermeer’s “Girl With a Pearl Earring” and Fabritius’s “The Goldfinch.” “We have to make sure the stories of these paintings still matter.”

Some of the top people in the field — museum directors, curators, academics — expressed disappointment in Six after his debacle, though none wanted to go on the record discussing it. “This is a very sad thing, because people already suspect art dealers of being slippery,” one said. “I can tell you some people are talking about Jan Six like Icarus.”

One dealer said that Six had made a young man’s mistake in dealing with the controversy: “He should have acted immediately to settle the matter quietly.” Even if he felt he was in the right, the dealer suggested, the prudent move would have been to reach a settlement in the name of preserving your reputation. “This business is entirely based on trust,” the dealer went on. “People have to trust you — and your painting.” To underscore the point, the dealer told me that he himself had asked a prominent buyer whether the buyer wanted him to get a price on one of the two paintings Six had unearthed, but that the buyer had responded, “Not with that controversy around it.”

In the broader world, though, controversies fade. The last time I spoke with Jan Six, in February, he was in an altogether different mood. To commemorate the 350th anniversary of Rembrandt’s death this year, the Dutch broadcaster NPO asked him to record a five-part TV series in which Six wanders through streets where the painter lived, stops in front of the building in Leiden where he went to school and muses before various masterpieces. It’s Six doing what he does best: communicating his passion, this time to a very broad audience, which is new for him. “There are hundreds of thousands of people watching me on the telly and enjoying it,” he said. “Suddenly all kinds of people are contacting me. Some have an old painting they want me to look at. A woman just called me. She said she’s turning 75, and her twin sister is crazy about Rembrandt. She asked if there was some way I would stop in at their birthday lunch and talk about Rembrandt for 10 minutes. So sweet — of course I’ll go! This has given me a great boost.”

It has also given him some distance from “the bubble,” as he referred to the art elite, and allowed him to begin to move on from his thrilling and excruciating year. “It was epic and fantastic,” he said, “and then everything changed. I realized that being so obsessed with a painter is not necessarily a good thing. But of course I still am.”

If you happen to be strolling in central Amsterdam, there is one spot from which it is just possible to make eye contact with Jan Six — the original Jan Six, that is. His portrait is situated in the Six mansion in such a way that, with a little craning, it’s visible from the sidewalk in front. He’s in a room one flight up, looking down toward you. Jan XI likes to talk about Rembrandt’s way with gazes. This one, of his ancestor and namesake, seems caught in a swirl of melancholy, a knowing, weary consciousness of the frustrations and limitations of human life.

That was the epiphany that Jan Six XI had as a teenager, looking at the portrait of his ancestor, which set him off in search of his own identity, distinct from that of his forebears: that someone from three and a half centuries ago could, with paint on canvas, convey the human essence in a way that is utterly intelligible today. That therefore, perhaps, identity, with all its flaws and insecurities, its jets of insight and pools of empathy, as individual as it is, is at the same time universal.

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