

My grandma fled the Nazis. Now her art hangs in the Rijksmuseum

After discovering her secret archive Matthew Perlman was determined that her talent be globally recognised

I never thought that a call from my grandma Suzi asking me to help to move some of her paintings would change my life. It was January 2015. I was 20 at the time. She was 93. And when I say my grandma asked me, it wasn't really asking me, it was telling me. That was her way. Our brief conversation would lead to us becoming business partners... not your average co-founder duo.

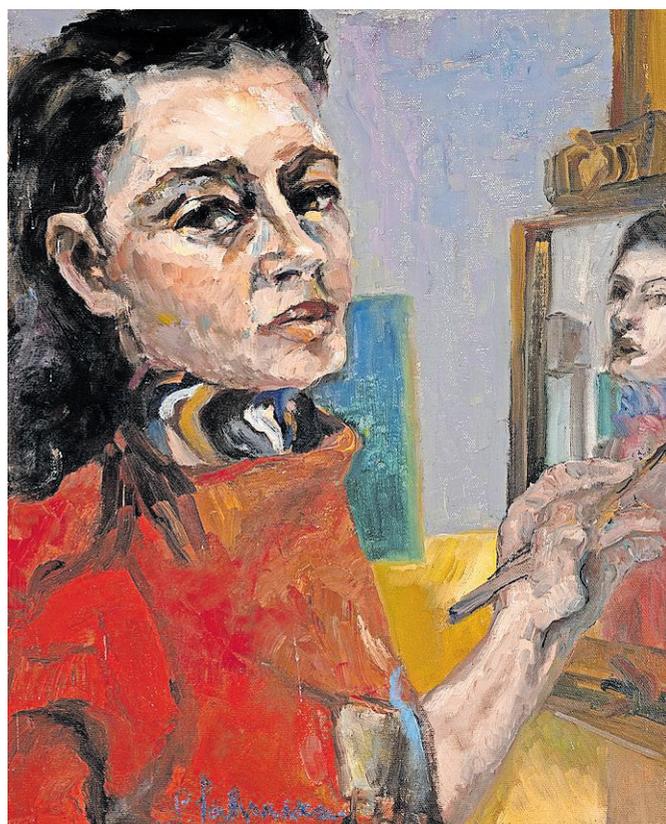
Soon I'd be spending months photographing, archiving and measuring every painting, etching or drawing she did. I'd log each work in a giant spreadsheet. When we went out she'd ask me to take photos of people because she wanted to paint them. We'd plan exhibitions and meet curators from major museums. In 2019 the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam added one of her paintings to its permanent collection. The nearby Stedelijk museum followed, and her first institutional solo show in over 50 years has just opened at the Singer Laren museum, outside the Dutch capital.

My grandma never spoke to me about being a self-taught artist while I was growing up. What I knew much more about were the events that shaped her early life. I knew about how she'd lost her father when she was 13 and had to leave school so she could help with the family's art and antiques shop. She described how this was the "real preparation for life".

I knew about her escape from the Netherlands in 1940, aged 17. She was born in Budapest but moved to Rotterdam in 1939, to marry Heinz, a Dutch grain trader, who lived there. They'd been married for six months before the French interior minister and a friend of Heinz, sent a telegram asking the couple to come to Paris under the false pretence that he needed to discuss a grain order. They arrived there with an overnight bag.

Days later, the Nazis invaded Holland. On the run, the couple then managed to board the last ship out of Europe, which was heading to a Dutch colony in the West Indies. The journey to Curaçao took four weeks. They started a new life — and my grandma started to paint. "I didn't know the patois language the locals spoke. I had to find a language that was more than words," she told me.

I loved hearing about grandma's life. She spoke with a distinct Hungarian



A self-portrait by Suzanne Perlman, above right. Below: Perlman with her grandson Matthew



“The spare bathroom was a makeshift storage facility. I clambered into the bath to retrieve a portrait

accent and had an unmistakable laugh. I still picture her wearing the red hat she rarely took off in her final years. I equate it with her quiet resilience.

I was often at her house, whether it was for tea and Jaffa Cakes or because I'd been summoned to fix her CCTV camera, which she bought to ensure no one stole her 2010 Honda Jazz, a vehicle I'd not considered a high-risk target.

Whenever I went round though, I was drawn to her art studio. There were easels scattered around the room; tubes of oil paints, stacks of art books, paintbrushes in old jam jars.

I assumed that when she asked me to help her move paintings, I'd be in her studio. But the spare bathroom was a makeshift storage facility. I clambered into the bath to retrieve a portrait. In the study there were paintings that had been sent from Curaçao

in their original wrapping paper. They hadn't been touched for 35 years. I knew I'd discovered something important. My grandma had the makings of a globally known artist. I had a youthful confidence that I could help her to become one.

I started asking my grandma questions: why did she paint? Did she go to art school? I recorded her responses on my phone. She told me about how she wanted to convey the social and economic concerns of people on the island. She told me about taking classes at the Art Students League in New York in 1955, when abstract expressionism was in full force. She returned throughout the Sixties and worked with the American modernist Sidney Gross. She later trained with the Austrian expressionist Oskar Kokoschka.



I decided to get to work. I called anyone I knew in the art world. Their response was: Sweet, you must really love your grandma. I kept going anyway. My grandma didn't see herself as an underappreciated artist. Her paintings had been exhibited since the Sixties and she'd been awarded the Officer of the Royal Order of Oranje Nassau, the Dutch equivalent of a knighthood, in recognition of her contributions to art. Her exhibition at the Boundary Gallery in London had been reviewed *The Times*. And in 2000 her painting depicting Auguste Rodin's sculpture was installed in the House of Lords. So I wasn't surprised that when, some years later, I told her the Rijksmuseum was adding her painting to their permanent collection, her response was "about time".

Every week I went to a different museum. I persuaded curators to come to my grandma's house for studio visits. I watched with admiration as she interacted with them, remaining completely herself. She didn't change for anybody.

It wasn't lost on me that one day I'd have to tell her story for her. But I didn't know enough. I started to read more art books, inspired by Van Gogh's sister-in-law who made him famous after he died.

I researched forthcoming art fairs and found out about one in Rotterdam, where my grandma had once lived. The art on show didn't feel relevant so I took a train to Amsterdam. At the visitor information centre I asked where I could learn about art from Curaçao. They suggested the Wereldmuseum but when I arrived, the floor devoted to the Dutch West Indies was shut. On the way out I asked the assistant in the gift shop if she could help. "Actually,"

she said, "a professor from the Erasmus University in Rotterdam is giving a talk about art from the former Dutch colonies." There I met an artist from Curaçao. The conversation was brief but what I'd been waiting for. She introduced me to two women from the Rijksmuseum. I called my grandma and put her on speakerphone so she could talk to them. "What an amazing woman. How old is she?" they asked after the call. We stayed in touch.

I'd been trying to make something happen for a few years when my dad suggested contacting the Dutch embassy in London. They put me in touch with the Dutch Centre. The result? A four-month solo exhibition there. My grandma was 95. I invited the two women I'd met in Amsterdam to the show. They came and a year later the Rijksmuseum added my grandma's painting to their permanent collection. They also connected me with the Stedelijk, which acquired two paintings in 2021. Two paintings then sold in a Sotheby's auction for 15 times more than the estimate.

My grandma died in August 2020. She was there to hand over the painting to the Rijksmuseum but missed out on seeing the many successes that followed. Her current solo exhibition in the Netherlands has been years in the making.

What I'm doing is not just about art, it's about refusing to let something — or someone — disappear. In her final years my grandma remained very astute and vital. But she mainly did sketches, because painting required too much emotional effort. Her last painting was a portrait of me. **Suzanne Perlman's exhibition at the Singer Laren museum in Amsterdam runs until June 28, singerlaren.nl** Instagram: @suzanneperlmanestate