

# Not in the pink

Foreign art is part of Britain's heritage - but it's expensive

The news that the trustees of the Heritage Lottery Fund have awarded the National Gallery £11.5m to acquire Raphael's extraordinarily beautiful small painting, *The Madonna of the Pinks*, is the cause of much jubilation to everyone who supported the appeal. At long last, it looks as if the British public, which has been able to enjoy and appreciate the picture among the glories of the National Gallery's collection for the last 11 years, will be able to continue to do so for ever. But the long battle to secure *The Madonna of the Pinks* and the 11 months between the announcement that it had been sold abroad and the day that the fund awarded its grant has taught us some useful lessons.

Among the most significant is the issue as to what constitutes our heritage and what level of support the Heritage Lottery Fund ought to give to the acquisition of art. The battle to save *The Madonna* has been a reminder of the centrality of the National Gallery to the nation's view of its cultural and artistic inheritance, and of how essential it is that it is able to grow - not just physically, through the improvement of its building, but artistically, through the development and enhancement of its collection.

It is worth reminding ourselves of the circumstances which led to the establishment of the National Heritage Memorial Fund in 1980. It arose at least in part out of an increasing sense of public dissatisfaction with the way in which, throughout the 1970s, important works of art had been exported to the US. This began in 1970 with the exceptionally high-profile loss of Velazquez's portrait of Juan de Pareja to the Metropolitan Museum of Art after a record sale for £2.3m.

A year later, the National Gallery was faced with a similar battle to save Titian's *Death of Actaeon*, which it had exhibited for 10 years before it was sold by Christie's on June 25 1971 to the then-fledgling J Paul Getty Museum in Malibu. It was only acquired by the National Gallery following an export stop, a public appeal for funds and a special exchequer grant.

The National Gallery's determination to acquire the *Death of Actaeon* gave rise to discussions as to whether or not it was right to concentrate resources on the acquisition of foreign, rather than British, works of art. Martin Davies, then gallery director, wrote in its annual report that "there are various reasons for opposing export from this country of superior works of art; significant association with our history is one, but absence of that in many cases does not significantly weaken opposition".

By the end of the 1970s, there was a view in the government that it was not desirable for national institutions to have to fight one-off battles to secure works of art from export and that the system which had operated until then of special exchequer grants should be replaced by a new system, constructed out of the land fund. This was established as a memorial to soldiers who lost their lives in the two world wars and had shamelessly not been used for the purposes for which it had been established. The National Heritage Memorial Fund was, therefore, constituted with cross-party support in part as a central purchase fund for the national museums.

In its early days, there was no doubt among the trustees of the new fund that works of art could be legitimately described as heritage. It was able to help with the acquisition of many great works of art throughout the 1980s. For example, in 1980 it helped the National Gallery acquire Altdorfer's *Christ Taking Leave of His Mother*. In 1982, it enabled the National Gallery to acquire David's portrait of Jacobus Blauw, the first work by David to enter a British public collection. In 1987, the National Gallery and the National Museum of Wales acquired Poussin's *The Finding of Moses*. The NHMS wrote in their annual report how "we are conscious that we need to spend increasingly large sums in order to keep great paintings which are of importance to the heritage in this country". There was no sense that the works had to come from British private collections. The only criterion was that they had to be seen effectively to enhance the holdings of a great British public collection.

In 1993, as a result of the success of the National Heritage Memorial Fund, it became one of the original distributors of the proceeds of the national lottery. In other words, the Heritage Lottery Fund was established under the auspices of the National Heritage Memorial Fund and, at first, was expected to operate under the same terms of reference. For a few years, the resources of the Heritage Lottery Fund made it possible for museums and galleries to acquire any great work of art which came on to the

market, including, at the National Gallery, Seurat's *The Channel of Gravelines*; Durer's *St Jerome*; and, most especially, Stubbs's *Whistlejacket*.

But, in some ways, the advent of the lottery has proved to be a worm in the bud for the National Heritage memorial Fund, because, once lottery funding was available, the Treasury was free to cut the level of core funding to the original fund. And the politics of the lottery have meant that decisions made by the trustees of the National Heritage Memorial Fund, who administer the Heritage Lottery Fund, have been progressively politicised, moving away from a free view as to what constitutes the heritage, including works of art, towards a much more local, insular and social construction of the heritage.

The argument as to what constitutes the heritage has been polarised by the debate surrounding Raphael's *Madonna*. Lisa Jardine took the liberal and plural view of the heritage, arguing in the *Guardian* that: "This pristine masterpiece is a precious fragment of our shared cultural memory - densely filled with meaning, resonating with the diversity of background and belief which are our European heritage." But Tristram Hunt argued in the *Observer* that: "The painting belongs instead to an elite, trans-European culture of the Grand Tour which has been influential to Britain's artistic development but should be supported by private rather than public funds." This view is inclined disastrously to narrow the definition of the heritage to exclude works of art, and to concentrate instead on a view of heritage concerned primarily with wetlands, steam engines and urban parks.

I am, in general, a huge admirer of the way the two funds operate and I have the best possible reasons to be grateful to their trustees. But, at the same time, I hope that they will not view the acquisition of Raphael's *Madonna* as a one-off, exceptional grant, but as a pledge that they recognise the importance of works of art to a broad and European conception of our national culture. I hope, too, that this is one of the issues that the Goodison committee, working under the chancellor, will look at. How are our great national, cultural institutions going to continue to perform the task for which they were established if purchase grants have been cut to zero, the National Heritage Memorial Fund has only £5m a year and the Heritage Lottery Fund spends less than 3% of its annual income on art?

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