RCEWA – *La Leçon de Piano*, Henri Matisse

Statement of the Expert Adviser to the Secretary of State that the painting meets Waverley criteria one, two and three.

Further Information

The ‘Applicant’s statement’ and the ‘Note of Case History’ are available on the Arts Council Website:

[www.artscouncil.org.uk/reviewing-committee-case-hearings](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/reviewing-committee-case-hearings)
La Leçon de Piano, by Henri Matisse (fig. 1)

This painting by Henri Matisse (1869–1954) is oil on canvas, dates from 1923 and measures 65 x 81cm

First Waverley Criteria – History

Is it so closely connected with our history and national life that its departure would be a misfortune?

There is a rich history of British engagement with Henri Matisse’s art. In 1912, Roger Fry’s Second Post-Impression Exhibition posited Matisse and Pablo Picasso as the representatives of the modern movement, establishing a canon that lasted throughout the twentieth century and which was reinforced by the joint exhibition of the two artists at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1945–46 (later shown in Glasgow and Manchester). However, although Picasso’s influence on British art has received considerable critical attention, Matisse’s influence remains under investigated.

The list of distinguished dealers and collectors through whose hands La Leçon de Piano passed in quick succession in the 1920s indicates the importance of the canvas at the time.

Before its acquisition by Royan Middleton (Aberdeen), the work was with the brothers Josse and Gaston Bernheim-Jeune, Paris - with whose gallery Matisse was under exclusive contract from 1909 to 1926, and French collector Marcel Kapferer. It was acquired by Middleton in 1927 through the recently formed Reid & Lefevre Gallery on the occasion of the first large scale exhibition of Matisse’s work in Britain. It remained in Middleton’s family until its recent sale at auction in February 2016.

A successful printer and publisher of art cards, who was also a competent amateur painter and a keen musician, Middleton belonged to an artistically inclined circle. In the early decades of the twentieth century, Scotland boasted a small but dedicated core of patrons of the avant-garde movement, which

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3 Kapferer was the French director of Royal Dutch Shell and a friend of Jos Hessel and Bernheim-Jeune. He amassed a formidable collection of works by artists including Vincent van Gogh and Edouard Vuillard. He chiefly purchased his Matisse paintings around 1924. Two of them are now in the Barnes Foundation. Jeune fille à la mauresque, robe verte was bought by Lillie P. Bliss which was auctioned by Christie’s in 2013. His sales were made mostly through English dealers.

4 The Scot Alexander Reid (1854 – 1928) and the Briton Ernst Lefevre (1869 – 1932) opened their gallery in April 1926. Both had strong networks of artists and dealers from time spent in Paris. La Leçon de Piano was one of the first Matisse acquired by Reid & Lefevre Gallery, which had opened only in April 1926.
included Mrs E.A. Workman, Sir Alexander Maitland Q.C. and Sir William Burrell, whose passion for the arts helped to define Scottish cities as forward-looking cultural centres. The country developed an enviable public collection housed between the Aberdeen Art Gallery as well as a number of outstanding private collections. Royan Middleton’s collection – though among the lesser known – was remarkable. In her study of early collectors of Matisse’s art, Margit Hahnloser-Ingold mentions that Middleton must have been one of the first and certainly one of the most ardent collectors of Matisse’s work in Britain: “He had an unfailing eye for quality and owned at least five Matisse paintings in addition to pieces by Bonnard, Vuillard, Cézanne, van Gogh, Modigliani and Utrillo.”

While Middleton continued to add to his impressive collection of impressionist and post-impressionist art collection up until the 1950s, he was also instrumental in bringing it to the attention of the public, lending works (including La Leçon de Piano) to several shows organised by Reid & Lefevre. Frequently exhibited in Britain since 1927, most recently, La Leçon de Piano was on long-term public display at the Aberdeen Art Gallery from 2011–2015. It is surely the best-known painting by Matisse in a UK private collection.

Second Waverley Criteria – Aesthetics
Is it of outstanding aesthetic importance?

In the autumn of 1917, when Matisse enjoyed material comfort and critical acclaim, he left Paris to live in Nice. By the end of the year he had settled in a modest hotel room and begun a series of paintings that capture the light and ambience of the French Riviera. The coastal town continued to enthral the artist, to the extent that he would eventually settle in Nice, making the 1920s an important stage of his overall creative development.

In relation to this moment, in which the artist benefited from a degree of professional assurance, Lawrence Gowing has written, "Matisse made his least obtrusive yet most intimately satisfactory discovery. The untroubled comfort of his own household was recognized as the very condition he had always sought in painting." First-hand observation now seemed to offer what he had previously

5 Mrs. E. A Workman is known to have started collecting Matisses in the early 1920s and owned at least five including Still Life with Apples on a Pink Tablecloth (1924) which now is part of the Chester Dale Collection at the National Gallery in Washington and Le Canapé rouge (1919) a work which is now at the Barnes Foundation. She was also the owner of Pablo Picasso’s Child with a Dove (1901). In the financial crash of 1929, she was forced to sell a number of paintings, many of which found their way in American collections.

6 Sir Alexander Maitland Q.C. was an active collector of Impressionist French art that he bequeathed to the National Gallery of Scotland between 1960 and 1965.

7 Sir William Burrell was a Scottish shipping merchant and philanthropist whose collection was shown in January 1925 at the Tate Gallery, London. He donated his collection to the city of Glasgow in 1944.

8 Among the five Matisse paintings Royan owned: Le Bouquet d’anemones (Vase of Anemones) (1918), now in the collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Antibes (1925) (Private Collection); Nu au fauteuil (1920) now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York and La Leçon de Piano (1923).

invented: a world of detachment, sensuousness and calm, played out in a reassuring domestic setting. As the subject matter of Matisse’s art became more intimate, so did his style, as first hand observation led to a degree of naturalism in his painting.

With its animated surface, *La Leçon de Piano* is a gem-like interior scene, boasting all of the key elements of the Nice period paintings. The composition centres around the figure of Henriette Darricarrère, who posed for Matisse from 1920 to 1927 and whom the artist retained for longer than any of his other Nice-period models. This work belongs to a small group of paintings of the same subject and stands out as the most sophisticated of their number. (The others are, respectively, *Pianist and Checker Players*, now in the collection of National Gallery in Washington, fig. 2; *Petite Pianiste, robe bleue*, part of the collection of the Musée Matisse, Nice, fig. 3; and *Pianiste et nature morte*, belonging to the Kunstmuseum, Bern, fig. 4). *La Leçon de Piano* features the vibrantly coloured and highly patterned fabrics that are now synonymous with Matisse’s interior scenes from the 1920s. Applying paint thinly and carefully, the artist created a bold and deliberate interplay of vertical and horizontal lines, seen in details that include the juxtaposition of a striped tunic against chequered upholstery. The piano on the left – which projects out of the pictorial space – makes for a particularly bold composition.

The shift of focus away from the human figure, onto the architecture of the painting itself, is a key theme of the Nice period. As Matisse once explained. "The entire arrangement of my picture is expressive: the place occupied by the figures, the empty spaces around them, the proportions, all of that has its share. Composition is the art of arranging in a decorative manner the diverse elements at the painters’ command to express his feelings." *La Leçon de Piano* is an eloquent example of theory in practice.

**Third Waverley Criteria – Scholarship**

**Is it of outstanding significance for the study of some particular branch of art, learning or history?**

As Jack Cowart has explained, Matisse’s decision to abandon explicit abstraction in the 1920s was seen by many as a departure from the progressive art world trends, which may account for why the Nice period has received less attention than other stages of Matisse’s development. However, works from this decade capture the painter’s creative struggle with remarkable clarity providing vital connections between the successive stages of the artist’s career. *La Leçon de Piano* is an exceptional painting from this transitional moment.

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12 Ibid.

This period is also poorly represented in British public collections. Despite the UK’s varied holdings of Matisse’s works, the best of these date from earlier or later moments. The retention of the present work in the UK would provide opportunities for exploration of this under explored, yet significant, aspect of Matisse’s output.

For the reasons outlined on page 1, with its particularly impressive provenance, *La Leçon de Piano* has also played an important part in the history of collecting in the UK. As a recent study by Madeleine Korn has shown, though most are no longer in this country, paintings by Matisse were acquired in far greater numbers by British collectors than had previously been acknowledged. The painting has featured in many exhibitions devoted to Matisse (please see the exhibition history which accompanies this statement), and so it has helped to shape Matisse’s critical reception over the decades.

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14 The paintings of Matisse’s Nice period that remain in British collections are from 1919 and 1920: *Nude on a Sofa* (1919), The Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, Cambridge; *Woman in Oriental Dress* (1919), Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum; *The Inattentive Reader* (La Liseuse distraite) (1919) Tate; *La séance de peinture* (The Painting Lesson or The Painting Session) (1919), National Galleries of Scotland, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art; The Bulgarian Blouse (1920), The Fitzwilliam Museum.