

**RCEWA – *The Nativity* by Baldassare Tommaso Peruzzi**

**Statement of the Expert Adviser to the Secretary of State that the painting meets Waverley criterion three.**

**Further Information**

The 'Note of Case History' is available on the Arts Council Website:

[www.artscouncil.org.uk/reviewing-committee-case-hearings](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/reviewing-committee-case-hearings)

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### 1. Brief Description of item(s)

Baldassare Peruzzi (1481–1536)

The Nativity, c. 1515

Oil on panel, 100.6 x 76.4 cm

Support: The panel is formed of a large single board with two further strips of wood on each side.

Paint and ground: Significant abrasion and old woodworm exit holes over much of the surface have been filled and retouched, with some discolouring especially noticeable at the edges and lower part of the panel. The unfinished left-hand edge is visible, with some small paint losses. Diagonal scratches emanate from the centre of the bottom edge. Age craquelure affects several areas of the painting, but this is secure.

Surface coating: discoloured and uneven varnish with some matt areas.

Frame: carved gilt frame in good condition.

### 2. Context

#### Provenance:

Casa Vai, Prato; The Sebright Collection, Beechwood, as Giovanni Francesco Penni; sold at Christie's, The Sebright Heirlooms, 2 July 1939, lot no. 117; sold at Christie's, 18 January 1946, lot no. 72, 45 guineas, to Scharf, by whom sold to: Philip Pouncey [1910–90]; private collection, Europe.

#### Exhibitions:

*Between Renaissance and Baroque: European Art 1520-1600*, exh. cat., Manchester City Art Gallery, 10 March–6 April 1965, cat. no. 185, p. 59

On loan to the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, 13 December 2006–29 January 2009

*From Raphael to Carracci: The Art of Papal Rome*, exh. cat., National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 29 May–7 September 2009, cat. no. 15, p. 114, ill. p. 115

*Il Rinascimento a Roma: Nel Segno di Michelangelo e Raffaello*, exh. cat., Museo Fondazione Roma - Palazzo Sciarra, Rome, 25 October 2011–17 March 2012, cat. no. 38, p. 280, ill. p. 174

#### Selected Literature:

J. Pope-Hennessy, 'A Painting by Baldassare Peruzzi', *The Burlington Magazine*, 88 (1946), pp. 237–41

F. Zeri, 'Intorno a Gerolamo Siciolante', *Bollettino d'Arte*, 36 (1951), p. 145

S. J. Freedberg, *Paintings of the High Renaissance in Rome and Florence*, 1961, vol. 1, pp. 150–51, vol. 2, pl. 212

P. Pouncey and J. A. Gere, *Italian Drawings in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum: Raphael and his Circle*, 1962, p. 135

C. L. Frommel, *Baldassare Peruzzi als Maler und Zeichner*, Vienna 1967, pp. 150–1

### 3. Waverley criteria

This painting, by one of the leading artist-architects of his generation, at the forefront of innovation in Rome in the 1510s, meets **Waverley criterion 3**, as it illustrates a key moment in the development of European painting, crucial to the study of art in the established canon.

#### DETAILED CASE

##### 1. Detailed description of item(s) if more than in Executive summary, and any comments.

This Nativity scene is an exceedingly rare surviving work on panel by Baldassare Peruzzi (1481–1536), a highly esteemed, versatile artist – architect, theatre designer, painter and draughtsman – who was one of the leading figures in art in Rome in the first decades of the sixteenth century. Much of Peruzzi’s painted work was in fresco and most is lost; very few moveable paintings by him survive. This is the only painting by him in a UK collection. This work exemplifies many of the innovations taking place in Roman painting during this period, most notably in its night-time setting, its all’antica inspirations and the frieze-like monumentality of its figures.

The panel was probably once the pendant to a panel of *The Coronation of the Virgin* (private collection, Norway), also previously in the Sebright collection; Frommel suggested that the two panels may once have been a diptych made for a small altar. These panels were separated when they left the Sebright collection in 1939.

The painting is closely related to Peruzzi’s treatment of the same subject in the semi-dome of the Ponzetti Chapel, dated c.1516; scholars agree that *The Nativity* should be dated around this time too, though the order of the two works is certainly still open to debate. At this period, Peruzzi had established himself in Rome as an inventive and versatile artist, esteemed by his contemporaries and attuned to the inspiration of ancient art and architecture as well as the innovations of his contemporaries, Raphael and Michelangelo.

Its nocturnal setting is most striking. Night-time scenes were a characteristic device of this decade, with Michelangelo’s *Judith and Holofernes* lunette (1512, Sistine Chapel) and Raphael’s *Liberation of Saint Peter* (1514, Stanza di Eliodoro) providing two major precedents in fresco. Yet Peruzzi’s use of dark tonalities for a work on this intimate scale was unusual, daring even. Its nocturnal setting pre-empted highly influential works such as *La Perla* (c. 1518, Museo del Prado), and its dramatic side lighting anticipates the lighting effects of artists such as Parmigianino and Rosso Fiorentino by about a decade. *The Nativity* thus exemplifies a moment of change in Roman painting, when night-time settings, monumentality and antique architecture made for arresting, yet intimate, paintings.

Formerly attributed to one of Raphael’s closest followers, Giovanni Francesco Penni (circa 1488–1528), it was the great connoisseur Philip Pouncey who first attributed this painting to Baldassare Peruzzi, when it was in his collection. First published by John Pope-Hennessy in 1946, the painting is

undoubtedly one of the most significant surviving paintings by Peruzzi. It places the artist at the forefront of innovation in Roman painting around the mid-1510s.

## 2. Detailed explanation of the outstanding significance of the item(s).

Rome in the second decade of the sixteenth century was the epicentre of one of the most significant periods of invention in the history of European art, which has in turn shaped the subsequent development of art and artistic traditions across Europe and beyond.

A painter, architect, draughtsman, theatre designer and student of ancient art, Peruzzi began his career in Siena, probably training with Pacchiarotto and assisting Pinturicchio. He moved to Rome in 1503, where he worked for elite, distinguished patrons, such as Cardinal Raffaele Riario, the Siennese banker Agostino Chigi, and at least two Popes, Julius II and Paul III. He is best known as an architect; he was appointed by Leo X to succeed Raphael as an architect to St Peter's in 1510, though his designs were not followed. Architectural works such as the Villa Farnesina (1506-10) were hugely important to the next generations of architects. Raphael and Bramante eclipse Peruzzi's reputation today, but he was a highly original artist, greatly esteemed by his contemporaries. It is notable that Peruzzi was buried next to Raphael, in the Pantheon.

*The Nativity* attests to Peruzzi's place within a close network of artists in Rome. The painting has echoes in Sebastiano del Piombo's *Adoration of the Shepherds* (c.1511, Fitzwilliam Museum). David Franklin associated the figures' monumentality with Raphael's tapestry cartoons, and connected its enigmatic luminosity with Sebastiano and even Giorgione. For John Pope-Hennessy, such lighting effects pre-empted the work of Garofalo. Certainly, the painting conveys Peruzzi's importance as a landscape painter, whose now lost frescoes inspired a new prominence of landscape settings among artists working in the Eternal City, such as Polidoro da Caravaggio.

This painting also sees Peruzzi utilising his formidable knowledge of ancient architecture and his skills as a designer and draughtsman. Peruzzi was much admired for his studies of antique buildings; *The Nativity's* ruined folly exemplifies his interest in such structures as theatrical, rhetorical devices. Vasari records how one of Peruzzi's drawings of the *Adoration of the Magi* (British Museum) was made for Count Battista Bentivoglio, who gave it to Girolamo da Treviso as a design for a painting, perhaps in the National Gallery today. *The Nativity* provides a rare insight into how Peruzzi himself employed his talents as a draughtsman and architect to his own paintings.

Very few paintings by Baldassare Peruzzi have survived. This is the only painting by him in the UK, though fine examples of his drawings can be found at the Royal Collections Trust, the Fitzwilliam Museum, the British Museum and the Ashmolean Museum among others. Later copies after works like his *Apollo and the Muses Dancing* (Pitti Palace, Florence), at Attingham Park and at the Camden Local Studies and Archives Centre, attest to the long interest in Peruzzi's work in this country.

*The Nativity's* true significance lies in its importance as a painting of the second decade of the sixteenth century in Rome. At present, this period is represented in the UK by monumental works, such as Raphael's Sistine Chapel cartoons (V&A on loan from Her Majesty The Queen); Sebastiano's great *Raising of Lazarus* (1517-19, National Gallery). Smaller-scale works are limited to paintings by Sebastiano, at the National Gallery and the Fitzwilliam, and by Raphael's pupils, such as Kingston Lacey's *Holy Family* (c. 1516-17). Later works by Giulio Romano, such as *The Holy Family with the*

*Infant Saint John the Baptist* (c. 1518-23, National Galleries of Scotland), lack the expansive, luminous nightscape and sense of mystery that Peruzzi conveys in his intimate panel.

In conclusion, Baldassare Peruzzi's *Nativity* is a rare surviving work that exemplifies his involvement in this most inventive of periods for painting in Rome. There are few pictures of this kind and of this moment in British collections, and indeed anywhere in the world. The export of this work would be lamentable for the full representation of Roman painting in the 1510s, a critical moment for the history of art.