

Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest, note of case hearing on 4 November 2020: Portrait of a Young Man by Piero del Pollaiuolo (Case 4, 2020-21)

Application

1. The Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest (RCEWA) met on 4 November 2020 to consider an application to export the painting *Portrait of a Young Man* by Piero del Pollaiuolo. The value shown on the export licence application was £5,000,000 which represented an estimated value. The expert adviser had objected to the export of the painting under the third Waverley criterion on the grounds that its departure from the UK would be a misfortune because (iii) it was of outstanding significance for the study of the development of Florentine portraiture, and portraiture in the European canon.

2. All of the regular eight RCEWA members were present and were joined by three independent assessors, acting as temporary members of the Reviewing Committee.

3. The applicant was consulted about the digital process and confirmed they were content to proceed in this manner. The applicant confirmed that the value did not include VAT and that VAT would not be payable in the event of a UK sale. The applicant also confirmed that the owner understood the circumstances under which an export licence might be refused and that, if the decision on the licence was deferred, the owner would allow the painting to be displayed for fundraising.

Expert's submission

4. The expert adviser had provided a written submission stating that this life-size portrait of a youth was a rare surviving work by Piero del Pollaiuolo, who, together with his brother Antonio, was at the forefront of innovations in Florentine portraiture in the third quarter of the fifteenth century, when Florence was one of the three greatest artistic centres in Europe. It combined the serene naturalism, animation and attention to illusionistic detail that characterised Piero's work.

5. Dated to around 1470, it is a relatively early work of Piero's artistic maturity, painted as he was establishing himself as an assured, sought-after painter of prestigious civic commissions and high-profile portraits of the Florentine elite. The near frontal posture of this portrait was striking. Full-face portraits had previously been reserved for images of Christ. It exemplified the fluidity and inventiveness of portraiture circa 1470, when painted portraits engaged with older typologies, such as profile portraits, and newer ones, such as the three-quarter-length poses used in portraits by Netherlandish, Flemish and French artists that were circulating in Florence at the time. Piero's subtle

experimentation makes this portrait an arresting encounter with its youthful sitter.

6. *Portrait of a Young Man* was a rare surviving work that exemplified an important but often overlooked moment in the development of Florentine portraiture, painted by one of the leading artists of this generation. This painting pre-empted the advances of artists working slightly later in the century. There are few pictures of this kind and of this moment in British collections. The export of this work would be lamentable for the full representation of Florentine 15th-century portraits, at a critical moment for the history of European portraiture.

7. When questioned about whether the costume of the sitter could provide any further information regarding the dating or identity of the sitter, the expert replied that the style of dress was too generic to provide any specific evidence. However, comparison with other documented works by Piero del Pollaiuolo (the Altarpiece for the Cardinal of Portugal, and the *Mercanzia Virtues*), and connections to the Medici joust of 1469, did for the expert conclusively place this work in the late 1460s. The expert further stated that the style of dress in the 15th century did not change greatly throughout the decades, and although studied extensively, it was difficult to pinpoint a specific time based on the costume.

Applicant's submission

8. The applicant had stated in a written submission that they did not consider that the painting met any of the three Waverley criteria. Regarding the first Waverley criterion, the applicant stated that the painting was not closely connected with our history or national life. Its whereabouts were unknown before it was sold at auction in London in 1942 (as 'Florentine School') from the collection of Gerald Maunsell Gamul Wilshere. Although it subsequently formed part of the distinguished collection of Sir Thomas Merton, it appeared to have been exhibited only once during that time, at the Royal Academy in 1960. For the last 35 years it had remained largely unseen, in a private collection.

9. Regarding the second Waverley criterion, the applicant stated that the painting was an attractive and rare work but it was not, in their view, of such outstanding aesthetic importance that its departure would be a misfortune. Executed in the late 1460s/early 1470s, it was one of a relatively small number of Quattrocento portraits of this type that had survived. Its attribution to Piero del Pollaiuolo has met with general support but it was not a documented work. Neither was the sitter known. The format of the portrait with the young man seen almost full face, gazing at the viewer, created a strong image but it was not the type of portrait for which Piero Pollaiuolo (or his brother Antonio) were most celebrated. Whilst the painting's overall state of conservation was good for a work of this age, it had suffered some losses which have been addressed by recent restoration.

10. Regarding the third Waverley criterion, whilst there has been some debate over the last 80 years over the attribution of the work the consensus today was

that it was by Piero del Pollaiuolo, and it does not seem, in the applicant's view, to be of outstanding significance in the study of art of this period.

11. When questioned about additional provenance, the applicant replied that they had provided all known provenance to the Committee. The applicant confirmed that research was undertaken, but that no additional history of ownership had been uncovered.

Discussion by the Committee

12. The expert adviser and applicant retired and the Committee discussed the case. It was agreed that this was a charming painting, produced in an era when new forms of portraiture were being explored. It was rare to see the sitter looking directly at the viewer during this time, and, consequently, the painting may hold some significance in the history of painted portraiture moving away from the profile format. However, they felt that, as a whole, the painting was not as fine as other known work by Piero del Pollaiuolo. They observed that it was notoriously difficult to accurately date paintings from this era, and that this type of portraiture was developing across the mid-15th century. In this context, they were not convinced that the dating was robust enough to make the pose of the sitter significant.

13. The Committee discussed the condition of the painting, as it had suffered several losses. They agreed that given its age and rarity, it was in relatively good condition, however, nearly half of the face, which was the focal point of the work, had received significant repainting. While the restoration had been executed beautifully, the Committee agreed that it had to a certain extent compromised the original quality of the work.

14. The Committee considered further research that could be undertaken concerning the painting's provenance and history, and the potential to learn the identity of the sitter for instance from what appeared to be the *impresa* on the sitter's collar. However, it was felt there was not a compelling enough argument that there was substantially more to learn from the painting. The Committee concluded that, while it was an interesting picture which displayed some very innovative elements for the late 15th century, it was not of outstanding significance and did not meet any of the three Waverley criteria.

Waverley Criteria

15. The Committee voted on whether the painting met the Waverley criteria. Of the 11 members, no members voted that it met the first Waverley criterion. No members voted that it met the second Waverley criterion. Five members voted that it met the third Waverley criterion. The painting was therefore not found to meet any of the Waverley criteria.

Communication of findings

16. The expert adviser and the applicant returned. The Chairman notified them

of the Committee's decision on its recommendation to the Secretary of State.