Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest, note of case hearing on 10 October 2019: A bronze figure of Apollo by François Girardon (Case 11, 2019-20)

Application

1. The Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest (RCEWA) met on 10 October 2019 to consider an application to export a bronze figure of Apollo by François Girardon. The value shown on the export licence application was £1,200,000 an agreed sale price. The expert adviser had objected to the export of the sculpture under the second and third Waverley criteria on the grounds that its departure from the UK would be a misfortune because (ii) it was of outstanding aesthetic importance and (iii) it was of outstanding significance for the study of the development of European bronze technology and French bronzes of this period within their broader context.

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

3. The applicant confirmed that the value did not include VAT and that VAT would 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 sculpture to be displayed for fundraising.

Expert’s submission

4. The expert adviser had provided a written submission stating that the sculpture depicted the semi-clad sun god Apollo, who stood in contrapposto on an integral base with several identifying attributes. Crowned by the laurel that alluded to his pursuit of Daphne, he held a lyre to represent music, supported on a pedestal with a tripod as a reference to Apollo’s oracle at Delphi. He raised a lighted torch - here intact, while that of the second extant version in the Philadelphia Museum of Art lacks the full flame. The supple body of the god was enveloped in luxurious drapery, perhaps alluding to the robe woven of gold and purple mentioned by the seventeenth-century Venetian iconographer Vincenzo Cartari. This excellent manifestation of Girardon’s lyrical classicism epitomised the taste of the French ‘Sun-King’ Louis XIV in both style and subject matter.

5. The sculpture was based on an elegant, original composition by the sculptor who defined the grand style of French baroque. Despite some areas of repair and uneven patination, it compared to some of the best French bronzes of the period in both its composition and quality, being of outstanding aesthetic importance. Its exceptional finish had been noted by leading
scholars in the field, with Françoise de la Moureyre describing it as a ‘bronze of remarkable quality of finish and chasing’.

6. Based on a terracotta model of c.1675 by Girardon, illustrated in the so-called Galerie de Girardon, and recorded in his 1713 and 1715 inventories, it was known in only two extant bronze casts. An exceptional and rare statuette, it was potentially made under the sculptor’s personal supervision, perhaps for King Louis XIV (1643-1715). Technical investigation of this and the Philadelphia bronze is likely to answer a number of currently open questions and, as recent studies into French bronzes have highlighted, thereby afford a deeper understanding of the development of European bronze technology. The bronze was therefore of outstanding significance for the study of French bronzes of this period within their broader context.

Applicant’s submission

7. The applicant had stated in a written submission that they did not consider that the sculpture met the first and third Waverley criteria, but that it probably met the second criterion.

Discussion by the Committee

8. The expert adviser and applicant retired and the Committee discussed the case. The Committee found the sculpture to be an extraordinarily beautiful, sophisticated object and an exceptional example of Girardon’s work. Associated with the heavy Baroque style prevalent at the Court of Louis XIV, Girardon had been unfairly overlooked. The Committee noted the unmistakably royal iconography and subtle detail, including the baroque drapery, the lyre placed on angle, the offsetting of the figure and the overlapping of the stand on the base. They agreed it was a superb classicised figure to which Girardon clearly devoted a great deal of attention, exhibiting exceptional quality of the casting and the finish. He must have valued the sculpture himself, including it in the famous Galerie de Girardon.

9. They discussed the lack of early provenance, noting that it does not appear in any sale catalogues. It was felt it was not unusual to be unsure of the owner of a French bronze immediately following its manufacture. There was agreement that there was scope for further research into this question. The sculpture was stylistically similar to bronzes produced around 1700, potentially making this a production towards the end of Girardon’s life. Although it was impossible to date metal securely, further technical analysis might shed more light on both the manufacture and dating in comparison with known works by Girardon. The Committee further noted that the political and cultural context of the sculpture was very significant as there were extremely interesting cultural connections between Britain and France in the 18th century. They agreed that this was an outstanding example of Baroque sculpture, and that much could be learned about the history of art and sculpture through further research.
Waverley Criteria

10. The Committee voted on whether the sculpture met the Waverley criteria. Of the Nine members, all voted that it met the second Waverley criterion. All members voted that it met the third Waverley criterion. The sculpture was therefore found to meet the second and third Waverley criteria as it was both outstandingly beautiful and of outstanding significance for the study of the history of French bronzes, François Girardon and his working practices.

Matching offer

11. The Committee recommended the sum of £1,200,000 (plus VAT) as a fair matching price.

Deferral period

12. The Committee agreed to recommend to the Secretary of State that the decision on the export licence should be deferred for an initial period of three months. If, within that period, Arts Council England received notification of a serious intention to raise funds with a view to making an offer to purchase the sculpture, the Committee recommended that there should be a further deferral period of four months.

Communication of findings

13. The expert adviser and the applicant returned. The Chairman notified them of the Committee’s decision on its recommendations to the Secretary of State. The applicant subsequently confirmed that the owner would accept a matching offer at the price recommended by the Committee if the decision on the licence was deferred by the Secretary of State.

14. The expert adviser agreed to act as champion if a decision on the licence was deferred by the Secretary of State.