

Export bar placed on unique 18th century work by Joseph Wright of Derby

- Temporary export bar placed on the painting in a bid to find a UK buyer
- Arts Minister said it is of “paramount importance” to keep Joseph Wright of Derby’s works in the UK

Arts Minister Helen Whately has placed an export bar on Joseph Wright of Derby’s ‘Two Boys with a Bladder’.

The work, completed between 1768 and 1770, is valued at £3,500,000 plus VAT and is at risk of being lost abroad unless a UK buyer can be found.

Joseph Wright of Derby (1734 – 1797) was an English painter and one of the most important artists of the 18th century. He is best known for his paintings of candle-lit subjects and scientific and industrial subjects and was a frequent contributor to the exhibitions of the Society of Artists and the Royal Academy. His works are reflective of a period when the nature of childhood and education were being debated.

Wright’s paintings demonstrate his masterful treatment of light effects and the work at risk of export features two boys blowing a bladder by candlelight – bladders were a common toy for children, either inflated like a balloon or filled with dried peas and shaken like a rattle. In art, bladders were often used to represent the fleeting nature of life and wealth to the fragility and transience of human life and wealth.

In the context of this work, the fact that the subjects are children adds an element of innocence versus experience, while the luminosity of the candlelight may refer to the illumination of knowledge. Representations of children blowing bladders were unique to Wright’s work and, at present, there are no examples of his autograph bladder paintings in UK public collections.

Arts Minister Helen Whately said:

As one of the most important artists of the 18th century, it is of paramount importance that we keep the works of Joseph Wright of Derby in the UK.

This painting offers us a chance to learn more about his way of working and I hope that a buyer can be found to save this masterpiece so it can be studied and put on public display.

The Minister’s decision follows the advice of the Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest (RCEWA). The committee noted that the work represented an early example of elements of

European art making their way into British art. They also noted the sophistication and importance of Wright's work.

Committee Member Peter Barber said:

A lively debate on education and the nature of childhood raged in Western Europe throughout the 1760s. Its ambiguities are exemplified in this striking and exquisitely executed painting of two boys playing, apparently innocently.

In a painting now in Kenwood House London, which may have been intended a pendant, Wright depicted two girls playing. I do hope the opportunity is taken to keep the boys in Britain!

The painting may have entailed an innovative use of metallic leaf used beneath the bladder to enhance the lustre of the surface. This, an unusual and short-lived technique, was unique to Wright's works, making this painting potentially the only work in the UK where this process has been observed.

The RCEWA made its recommendation on the grounds of the paintings outstanding significance for the study of Joseph Wright of Derby and his working practice.

The decision on the export licence applications for the painting will be deferred until 16 January 2020. This may be extended until 16 May 2020 if a serious intention to raise funds to purchase it is made at the recommended price of £3,500,000 plus VAT.

ENDS

Notes to editors

1. Organisations or individuals interested in purchasing the oil painting should contact the RCEWA on 0845 300 6200.
2. Details of the painting are as follows: Two Boys with a Bladder by Joseph Wright of Derby (1734 – 1797), oil paint on canvas, 927 x 730 mm, probably 1768-70
3. Provenance: Possibly Brownlow Cecil, 9th Earl of Exeter (1725-1793); Possibly Christie's, 24 January 1772, lot.82; Possibly George Greville, 2nd Earl of Warwick (1746-1816), acquired at the above sale; Acquired by a UK private collector by the mid-nineteenth century; And by descent to 2019
4. The Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest is an independent body, serviced by The Arts Council, which advises the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport on whether a cultural object, intended for export, is of national importance under specified criteria.
5. The Arts Council champions, develops and invests in artistic and cultural experiences that enrich people's lives. It supports a range of

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