

Press release: Plans to strengthen protections for Britain's most valuable treasures at risk of export

New protections to prevent some of the nation's greatest treasures from being lost to overseas buyers have been outlined by the Government today.

The proposals, set out in a new public consultation, would introduce a formal, legally binding agreement with private sellers, instead of the current 'gentleman's agreement', and give museums and buyers in the UK first refusal on acquisitions.

It would mark the first significant change to the system in over 65 years, and reaffirms the Government's commitment to the protection of our national treasures, owners' rights, world-class museums, and the UK's reputation as a successful international art market.

Michael Ellis, Minister for Arts, Heritage and Tourism, said:

Over the past 65 years our export bar system has saved hundreds of our most valuable cultural objects for the benefit of the nation. However with many exceptional items increasing dramatically in value in recent years, it is right that we strengthen this process.

These plans would protect museums that fundraise in good faith and help to keep national treasures in the UK where they can be seen and enjoyed by the public.

The export deferral process introduces a pause in the export of national treasures overseas to give UK museums and buyers the chance to raise funds and keep them in the country.

Items saved for the nation through the current system includes a gold ring owned by Jane Austen, which was acquired by Jane Austen's House Museum and a steel dagger and scabbard owned by TE Lawrence that shaped the story of Lawrence of Arabia, which was acquired by The National Army Museum. Also saved was a sapphire and diamond coronet designed by Prince Albert in the year of his wedding to Queen Victoria, and worn by her following his death, that was acquired for £5 million for the Victoria and Albert Museum in August 2017.

Under the current rules, if a UK institution puts in a matching offer on an item subject to an export deferral, it is down to the seller to honour that commitment. The Government wants to strengthen this by introducing a mechanism to ensure that owners are legally bound to honour their commitment of accepting a matching offer from a UK buyer, and thereby remove the risk of reneging on the sale.

Over the last ten years, 40% of items at risk of export – worth a total of £97 million – were saved for the nation by UK museums and galleries.

However the remaining 60% of items at risk of export between 2007/08 and 2016/17 were sold overseas, at a cumulative value of £578.5 million.

The consultation follows an examination of how the export deferral process could be strengthened.

Notes to Editor

The [public consultation](#), 'Strengthening the Process for Retaining National Treasures' is now open. It will close at 00.01 on 24 February 2019.

Until 1939, the UK had no legal controls on the export of works of art, books, manuscripts and other antiques. The outbreak of the Second World War made it necessary to impose controls on exports generally in order to conserve national resources.

Items that are being sold abroad are assessed at the point of application for an export licence by the Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest, which establishes whether it meets the 'Waverley criteria' to be regarded as a national treasure.

These are:

- Is it closely connected with our history and national life?
- Is it of outstanding aesthetic importance?
- Is it of outstanding significance for the study of some particular branch of art, learning or history?

The export control process has always sought to strike a balance, as fairly as possible, between the various interests concerned in any application for an export licence.