

BLOUIN ARTINFO

From Guido Reni to Carracci: Scholar Bequeaths 57 Baroque Masterpieces to UK Museums

by BLOUIN ARTINFO UK
Published: February 19, 2013

The donation of late Sir Denis Mahon's impressive collection of Baroque paintings has been finalized, the Art Fund announced this morning.

57 pictures by the likes of Guido Reni, Ludovico Carracci, and Pietro de Cortana have now entered the permanent collections of six major UK galleries. Twenty five pieces have gone to London's National Gallery, twelve to Oxford's Ashmolean, eight to Edinburgh's Scottish National Gallery, six to Cambridge's Fitzwilliam Museum, five to Birmingham's Museums and Art Gallery, and one to Leeds's Temple Newsham House. "Sir Denis was associated with the National Gallery for nearly eighty years, beginning with his appointment as an attaché to the curatorial department under Kenneth Clark and culminating in the great celebratory exhibition of his collection here in the 1990s – 'Discovering the Italian Baroque'," said National Gallery director Sir Nicholas Penny.



Copyright Guardian News & Media Ltd 2011, photograph Martin Godwin
Sir Denis Mahon, photographed in the National Gallery, London

"As a hyperactive trustee of the gallery and exacting friend of many curators he did much to urge us to acquire great Baroque paintings. We also acquired some from him at the end of his life and he bequeathed a masterpiece by Guercino to us. Now in addition we have received many more. He is one of our greatest benefactors and we will always honour his memory."

Mahon, who died in 2011, was one of Britain's most prominent collectors and art historians. He played a key role in the reappraisal of Italian Baroque, and supported the reattribution of two paintings to Caravaggio.

He was also an outspoken champion of museums, campaigning for free admission and against the selling of works from public collections. The 57 bequeathed pieces had been in long-term loans in their respective institutions on the express condition that they would respect these terms.

An extra 50 works associated with Guercino have been left to the Ashmolean, and £1m went to the Art Fund, the charity which oversaw the gift and of which Mahon had been a member since 1926. "His vision as an art collector was extraordinary," said Art Fund director's Stephen Deuchar, "as was his determination that his collection should ultimately be on public display."



The lawsuit claims the defendants are in violation of the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act, a federal law that allows extended penalties for ongoing criminal organizations. Charles D. Schmerler, a partner at Fulbright & Jaworski L.L.P. and a lawyer for Hammer and Knoedler, told ARTINFO in a statement: "The Hilti complaint rehashes the same baseless claims contained in the prior lawsuits. Given the attention this matter has received, it is not unexpected to see copycat suits filed. We plan to aggressively litigate this case and expect to see Knoedler and Mr. Hammer fully vindicated."

"These are serious claims," William Charron, a partner at Pryor Cashman LLP representing the Hilti Trust, said in an e-mail. "We understand that the defendants have described similar lawsuits in the past as 'copycat' actions. We think it is precisely the point that our client is not alone in bringing these kinds of claims."

In a statement, former Knoedler director Ann Freedman said, "These paintings were exhibited in museums around the world and heralded as masterworks. This particular Rothko was featured at the Beyeler Foundation in 2002. The personal vendettas and professional jealousy behind the attacks on the works and on my reputation should be obvious."

Though the twists and turns of the Knoedler affair have been covered closely by the press, it looks like some involved are hoping to keep the particulars under wraps moving forward. The Hilti trust's suit comes just over a week after collector Michael Howard, who is suing Knoedler over an allegedly fake de Kooning painting he purchased from the gallery, entered into a confidentiality agreement with many of the same defendants, according to public court records. Knoedler Gallery abruptly closed its doors last December, but Ann Freedman continues to operate her own gallery on the Upper East Side.