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Art dealer and Fake or Fortune? presenter Philip Mould rediscovers Charles Dickens miniature

Dealer and Fake or Fortune? presenter Philip Mould has rediscovered a portrait miniature of Charles Dickens which will now go on public display.



Portrait of Charles Dickens (1812-70) by Margaret Gillies (1803-87). Image courtesy of Philip Mould & Company.



- Laura Chesters
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Mould reports that the miniature had been lost for 174 years and was recently found in South Africa.

It was painted in late 1843, when Dickens was 31, by Margaret Gillies (1803–87) during the same weeks Dickens was writing *A Christmas Carol*. It was last seen in public in 1844 when exhibited at the Royal Academy of Arts in London.

Mould said: “This portrait adds greatly to our perception of the charismatic young blade that Dickens was at the time and is so different to the avuncular, bearded man we know from photographs. Unlike other literary portraits of the period, that can be formulaic, the subject fixes you with an arresting gaze, boring into you with the same eyes that recorded a wealth of material about his life and times.”

Found in a tray of trinkets

The portrait was found at a general auction in Pietermaritzburg in the South African province of Kwazulu-Natal in a tray of miscellaneous trinkets. The owner paid just £27 for the lot. He sold its frame and due to the poor state of the painting he was going to throw the picture away until he cleaned it and realised it could be important. After researching the image online the owner contacted Philip Mould & Company for advice.

Emma Rutherford, portrait miniature specialist and consultant for Philip Mould & Company, said: “To have a portrait of Dickens at this specific time – when his career was on a knife-edge – makes it all the more compelling. His future was uncertain – he was overdrawn, with a growing family and living beyond his means. Gillies seems to capture both vulnerability and confidence.”

Mould has produced a podcast on the topic which will be broadcast tonight.

It is not known how the portrait came to be in South Africa, but research undertaken by Philip Mould & Company strongly suggests that it arrived via one of two sons of George Henry Lewes (partner to George Eliot), both of whom emigrated there in the 1860s. Gillies and Dickens were close to the Lewes family and Gillies’ adopted daughter was married to another of Lewes’ sons.



A detail for the portrait of Charles Dickens (1812-70) by Margaret Gillies (1803-87). Image courtesy of Philip Mould & Company.

The intention is that the portrait becomes part of the permanent collection of the Charles Dickens Museum at 48 Doughty Street in London - the only house in which Dickens lived in the capital that survives. The museum will begin fundraising to try to buy the portrait.

Dr Cindy Sughrue, director of the Charles Dickens Museum, said: "This discovery would have been remarkable in any event, but it is even more so because the portrait itself is exquisite. The skill of the artist is evident in the fineness of every brushstroke, in each strand of hair and the sparkling eyes that look right into yours."

The miniature will be on view to the public at Philip Mould & Company's gallery on Pall Mall until January 25, 2019.