

Reviewing Committee for the Export of Works of Art

Confirmation (1637) by Nicolas Poussin

Included:

Statement from the Expert Adviser

Note of case hearing

A press release was issued by the Secretary of State on 10 June 2022:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/nicolas-poussin-painting-worth-19-million-at-risk-of-leaving-uk>

RCEWA – Confirmation by Nicholas Poussin

Statement of the Expert Adviser to the Secretary of State that the painting meets Waverley criteria one, two and three.

Please note that images and appendices referenced are not reproduced.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Brief Description of item(s)

Nicolas Poussin (Les Andelys 1594–1665 Rome)

Confirmation, about 1637–40

Oil on canvas, 95.5 x 121 cm

The painting is in good condition. There is a compound tear just left of centre, through and above the kneeling child in red, with old retouchings visible. Some of the blues have sunk, notably in the woman to the left. Although the painting has been relined, passages of quite thick impasto remain intact, for example in the yellows and the white turban.

2. Context

Provenance:

Commissioned as part of a series of seven sacraments in Rome by Cassiano dal Pozzo (1588–1657); by inheritance to Cosimo Antonio dal Pozzo (d. 1739), grandson of Cassiano's younger brother, Carlo Antonio (d. 1689), and then to Cosimo's daughter, Maria Laura Boccapaduli (d. 1771);

by inheritance to the Boccapaduli family, Rome, who sold the series to Sir Robert Walpole (1676–1745) before its export from Italy was denied by the Pope;

sold in 1785 by James Byres (1733–1813), Rome, on behalf of the Boccapaduli family to Charles Manners, 4th Duke of Rutland (1754–1787), Belvoir Castle, Grantham, Leicestershire;

thence by descent to the present owner.

Exhibitions:

London 1787, Royal Academy (no catalogue); London 1904, Royal Academy, *Exhibition of Works by the Old Masters and deceased Masters of the British School*, no. 84; Paris 1960, Musée du Louvre, *Exposition Nicolas Poussin*, no. 61; Bologna 1962, Palazzo dell'Archiginnasio, *L'ideale classico del Seicento in Italia e la pittura di paesaggio*, no. 69; Edinburgh 1981, National Gallery of Scotland, *Poussin, Sacraments and Bacchanals*, no. 35; Paris 1994–5, Galeries nationales du Grand Palais, *Nicolas Poussin 1594–1665*, no. 63; London 1995, The Royal Academy, *Nicolas Poussin 1594–1665*, no. 43; Paris 2015, Musée du Louvre, *Poussin et Dieu*, no. 24.

Confirmation was one of four Sacraments on long-term loan to the National Gallery between 2002 and 2010. Having been lent to the Dulwich Picture Gallery in 2011 and the Fitzwilliam Museum in 2013, it returned to Dulwich on long-term loan in 2016, where it remains.

Selected Literature:

G. P. Bellori, *Le vite de' pittori, scultori et architetti moderni* (Rome 1672), pp. 416 and 418; A. Blunt, *The Paintings of Nicolas Poussin: A Critical Catalogue* (London 1967), vol. I, pp. 189–90; J. Thuillier, *L'Opera completa di Poussin* (Milan 1974), no. 110, p. 99; D. Wild, *Nicolas Poussin* (Zurich 1980), vol.

I, p. 91, vol. II, no. 87, p. 84; C. Wright, Poussin: *Paintings: A Catalogue Raisonné* (London 1985), no. 108, p. 154; A. Mérot, *Nicolas Poussin* (London 1990), no. 107, p. 271; D. Sparti, *Le collezioni dal Pozzo: Storia di una famiglia e del suo museo nella Roma seicentesca*, (Modena 1992), p. 211; T. Green, *Nicolas Poussin paints the Seven Sacraments twice* (Watchet 2000), pp. 39–41, 94–116); R. Verdi, *Poussin as a Painter: From Classicism to Abstraction* (London 2019), pp. 59–68; P. Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin, 1594–1665: Catalogue raisonné des peintures* (Paris 2023, forthcoming).

3. Waverley Criteria

Confirmation has been in Britain for almost 240 years. It has, on several occasions, hung on the walls of some of the UK's most prestigious museums. As the most compositionally complex and innovative of Poussin's first series of *The Seven Sacraments*, it has exceptional aesthetic importance, both in itself and for the canon of Western art more broadly. In addition to noting this painting's long British provenance and its deep ties to this country, every major Poussin publication of the last sixty years has noted the significance of *The Seven Sacraments* and the pivotal role they play as a turning point in Poussin's career, at the birth of the French classical tradition which stretches from Poussin in the seventeenth century through to Cézanne and Picasso at the dawn of the twentieth century. As such, the painting meets **Waverley criteria one, two and three**.

DETAILED CASE

1. Detailed description of item(s) if more than in Executive Summary, and any comments.

Nicolas Poussin is arguably the single most important French painter until Manet and the Impressionists in the nineteenth century. A native of Normandy, he undertook some artistic training in Paris but fixed his sights on Italy. He reached Rome (on his third attempt) in 1624, and bar one unwilling return to Paris as painter to King Louis XIII in 1640–41, he remained in the Eternal City for the rest of his life. He eschewed the large altarpieces and religious commissions that drew so many of his contemporaries to Rome, preferring instead to produce smaller history paintings, religious scenes and landscapes for a select handful of collectors and connoisseurs.

In the second half of the 1630s, Poussin painted seven scenes depicting the Sacraments for his friend and patron, the Roman antiquarian Cassiano dal Pozzo (1588–1657). The series comprises *Baptism*, *Ordination*, *Confirmation*, *Penance*, *Eucharist*, *Marriage* and *Extreme Unction*. *Penance* was destroyed by fire in 1816. *Baptism* was acquired by the National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. in 1939; *Ordination* by the Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth in 2011; and *Extreme Unction* by The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge in 2013. The remaining three works (*Confirmation*, *Eucharist* and *Marriage*) remain in the collection of the Duke of Rutland. The series – ‘almost unprecedented in painting’¹ – marked a pivotal moment for Poussin: it not only signalled a definitive departure towards the more sombre religious and historical subjects that characterised the later part of his career, but also secured his reputation in Rome and beyond. The series was so successful that a second suite of Sacraments was commissioned from Poussin in the late 1640s by the French collector Paul Fréart de Chantelou (1609–1694).²

In this picture, we see the rite of confirmation as performed by the early church. On the right, a seated priest anoints the head of a young boy. Further back, a second priest binds the head of another confirmand. In the foreground, distinct groups wait to partake in the ceremony: a child in

red kneels beside his mother, hands pressed together; another, nervously biting his thumbnail, is encouraged by a maternal gesture. Were it not for the flash of white at the extreme right, we might miss the altar altogether (it features far more prominently in the only surviving drawing for this painting at Windsor³). A Paschal candle burning on the altar tells us that it is Easter Eve, when the early Church administered the rite of confirmation. The architecture, with its distinctive fluted columns is, as Anthony Blunt noted, based on the church of Sant'Atanasio dei Greci which stood opposite Poussin's house in Rome.

2. Detailed explanation of the outstanding significance of the item(s).

Waverley 1

The importance of the arrival of these paintings in England cannot be overstated. Sir Joshua Reynolds, founding President of the Royal Academy, wrote in September 1786 that 'Rome...is now much poorer, as England is richer than it was, by this acquisition.'⁴ This nationalistic sentiment has persisted. Two hundred years later, the great Poussin expert Pierre Rosenberg wrote of the paintings' 'acquisition by England in 1785', as if it were indeed the nation and not an individual who acquired *The Seven Sacraments*. The only time that all the surviving pictures from both series have been reunited was in Edinburgh in 1981, a testament to the strong history of collecting Poussin in this country and to what Rosenberg has called 'the passion [...] of the English for Poussin.'⁵

Indeed, outside of France, Britain has the strongest holdings of Poussin's work in the world. Some 33 of his paintings are in British public collections. From the moment of its completion, *Confirmation* and the other *Sacraments* were deemed to be hugely significant. In Dal Pozzo's palace, the room in which they were hung was named after them. The first British collector to try and acquire the Dal Pozzo *Sacraments* was Sir Robert Walpole (1676–1745) sometime before 1745, but, recognising their importance, the Pope blocked their departure from Rome. It was only due to a ruse that the series was eventually sold to the Duke of Rutland in the mid-1780s, when the Scottish dealer James Byres (1733–1817) arranged for a copyist to replace each of the pictures one by one, thus fooling the authorities and allowing the series to be shipped to England.

Waverley 2

The first series of *The Seven Sacraments* is widely regarded as Poussin's most important commission; within it, *Confirmation* is recognised as the most ambitious and successful canvas.⁶ Compared to the simplified, frieze-like deployment of figures in others of the series (*Ordination*, for example), *Confirmation's* composition, woven together by glance and gesture, is arguably the most sophisticated. Poussin has taken great care over its setting: indentations along the lines of the architecture and floor are visible with the naked eye, and the whole composition must have been executed using Poussin's *grande machine* (a large box with side apertures to control the fall of light, within which he used wax figurines to choreograph his compositions). Several of the Chantelou *Sacraments* significantly rework or simply reinvent the Dal Pozzo compositions: *Confirmation* is repeated in reverse in the second series suggesting that Poussin, too, esteemed this picture highly. While many art historians have praised the unity and gravity of Poussin's second series, they have also noted that it does not have the 'freshness and ingenuity' of the first.⁷

Waverley 3

There are no direct precedents for Poussin's decision to depict the Sacraments in painting. The commission speaks to Poussin's extraordinary formal inventiveness, and to the intellectual circle around Dal Pozzo and its fascination with the history of the early Church. It has often been noted that one of the very few comparable series – Giuseppe Maria Crespi's *Seven Sacraments* of about 1712, today in the Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden – depicts its scenes in a contemporary setting, not, as Poussin does, within an historical context. While certain of Poussin's *Sacraments* do have pictorial precedents, the subject of confirmation is hardly ever depicted in Western art, a fact that makes the rhythms and sophistication of this composition all the rarer.

The importance of this first series of *Sacraments* was underlined in 2011 by the RCEWA, which stopped *Ordination* under all three Waverley criteria, and in 2013 by the Fitzwilliam Museum's acquisition of *Extreme Unction*. Although the Dal Pozzo series has already been split, it would be extremely unfortunate to lose what is arguably the cycle's strongest picture and, along with it, the hope of reuniting some of the paintings in a British public collection. *Confirmation's* export marks a tipping point. In the words of Sir Joshua Reynolds, 'The Poussins are a real national object.'⁸

¹ Richard Verdi, in London 1995, p. 221.

² The second 'Chantelou' series of Sacraments is part of the Sutherland loan to the National Galleries of Scotland.

³ Royal Collection inv. no. RCIN 911896: <https://www.rct.uk/collection/911896/the-sacrament-of-confirmation>

⁴ Joshua Reynolds to the Duke of Rutland, 7 September 1786.

⁵ Rosenberg in Paris 1994–95, p. 240

⁶ This view has been advanced across the centuries, by proponents as different as Jonathan Richardson (1722) and Professor Richard Verdi (1995ⁱⁱ).

⁷ Rosenberg in Paris 1994–95, p. 312.

⁸ Joshua Reynolds to the Duke of Rutland, 26 September 1785.

Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest, note of case hearing on 13 April 2022: *Confirmation* (1637) by Nicolas Poussin (Case 14, 2021-22)

Application

1. The Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest (RCEWA) met on 13 April 2022 to consider an application to export the painting *Confirmation* (1637) by Nicolas Poussin. The value shown on the export licence application was £19,000,000 which represented an agreed sale price. The expert adviser had objected to the export of the painting under the first, second and third Waverley criteria on the grounds that its departure from the UK would be a misfortune because (i) it was so closely connected with our history and national life (ii) it was of outstanding aesthetic importance and (iii) it was of outstanding significance for the study of Nicolas Poussin.
2. Seven of the regular eight RCEWA members were present and were joined by three independent assessors, acting as temporary members of the Reviewing Committee. The Chairman explained that the binding offers mechanism was applicable for this case.
3. The applicant was consulted about the hybrid virtual/in person process and confirmed they were content to proceed in this manner. The applicant confirmed that the value did not include VAT and that VAT would not 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.

Expert's submission

4. The expert adviser had provided a written submission stating that *Confirmation* had been in Britain for almost 240 years. It had, on several occasions, hung on the walls of some of the UK's most prestigious museums. As the most compositionally complex and innovative of Poussin's first series of *The Seven Sacraments*, it had exceptional aesthetic importance, both in itself and for the canon of Western art more broadly. In addition to noting this painting's long British provenance and its deep ties to this country, every major Poussin publication of the last sixty years had noted the significance of *The Seven Sacraments* and the pivotal role they played as a turning point in Poussin's career, at the birth of the French classical tradition which stretched from Poussin in the 17th century through to Cézanne and Picasso at the dawn of the 20th century.
5. The importance of the arrival of these paintings in England could not be overstated. Sir Joshua Reynolds, founding President of the Royal Academy, wrote in September 1786 that 'Rome...is now much poorer, as England is richer than it was, by this acquisition.' Indeed, outside France, Britain has the

strongest holdings of Poussin's work in the world. From the moment of its completion, *Confirmation* and the other *Sacraments* were deemed to be hugely significant. In Cassiano dal Pozzo's palace, the room in which they were hung was named after them. The first British collector to try and acquire the Dal Pozzo *Sacraments* was Sir Robert Walpole sometime before 1745, but, recognising their importance, the Pope blocked their departure from Rome. It was only due to a ruse that the series was eventually sold to the Duke of Rutland in the mid-1780s.

6. The first series of *The Seven Sacraments* was widely regarded as Poussin's most important commission; within it, *Confirmation* was recognised as the most ambitious and successful canvas. *Confirmation*'s composition, woven together by glance and gesture, was arguably the most sophisticated. Poussin had taken great care over its setting: indentations along the lines of the architecture and floor are visible with the naked eye, and the whole composition must have been executed using Poussin's 'grande machine' (a large box with side apertures to control the fall of light, within which he used wax figurines to choreograph his compositions).

7. There were no direct precedents for Poussin's decision to depict the *Sacraments* in painting. The commission spoke to Poussin's extraordinary formal inventiveness, and to the intellectual circle around Dal Pozzo and its fascination with the history of the early Church. While certain of Poussin's *Sacraments* did have pictorial precedents, the subject of confirmation was unprecedented in Western art, a fact that made the rhythms and sophistication of this composition all the more remarkable. The importance of the series to Poussin was reinforced by the fact that he later painted a second series from 1644 (on loan to the National Galleries of Scotland).

Applicant's submission

8. The applicant had stated in a written submission that they did not disagree that the painting qualified under the second and third Waverley criteria.

Discussion by the Committee

9. The expert adviser and applicant retired and the Committee discussed the case. They agreed that this was an extraordinary painting with a fascinating British history, and that its importance could not be overstated. Poussin was a seminal European artist, and this painting epitomised his technique of visual expression, intense emotion and harmony of design based on abstract form. In addition, they noted that the subject was unprecedented, and that the profound story was carefully articulated in a masterful way, making this painting the most interesting and beautiful of the *Seven Sacraments* series.

10. The Committee further discussed the extraordinary impact this painting had on Western art in general and on British art in particular. It was a cornerstone of Poussin's oeuvre and its arrival in Britain was of great importance, especially as it was rare for such a historic picture to be displayed at the Royal Academy.

They recognised that the painting held outstanding scholarly potential in terms of its enduring influence on French and British art and culture in comparison with Poussin's later painting of the subject. They further agreed that there was a great deal more to learn from the physical characteristics of the painting itself, and about the patronage of the 4th Duke of Rutland.

Waverley Criteria

11. The Committee voted on whether the painting met the Waverley criteria. Of the 10 members, all voted that it met the first Waverley criterion. All members voted that it met the second Waverley criterion. All members voted that it met the third Waverley criterion. The painting was therefore found to meet the first, second and third Waverley criteria for its outstanding significance to the study of Nicolas Poussin's work and its influence on British art and culture.

Matching offer

12. The Committee recommended the sum of £19,000,000 as a fair matching price.

Deferral period

13. 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 seven months. (As the painting was conditionally exempted from capital taxation and the requested three months' notice of an intention to sell it had not been given to the Arts Council, the Committee decided to recommend an extension of the first deferral period by an additional three months beyond what would normally be sought).

14. At the end of the first deferral period, if the Arts Council received notification of a serious intention to raise funds with a view to making an offer to purchase the painting, the owner will have a consideration period of 15 Business Days to consider any offer(s). The Committee recommended that there should be a further deferral period of six months that would commence following the signing of an Option Agreement.

Communication of findings

15. The expert adviser and the applicant returned. The Chairman notified them of the Committee's decision on its recommendations to the Secretary of State.

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

Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest: Note of outcome: *Confirmation* by Nicolas Poussin (Case 14, 2021-22)

At the end of the initial deferral period, no offer to purchase the painting had been made and we were not aware of any serious intention to raise funds. An export licence was therefore issued.