

Why Sir John angered the art world

By Will Ellsworth-Jones
and James Fox

EFFORTS are being made to bring back to Britain an old master which slipped out of the country—legally—and has since been sold in New York for the equivalent of more than £90,000.

The work concerned, from the late Renaissance period, is *The Vision of St Francis*, painted on copper by the Italian artist Annibale Carracci.

What has caused particular uproar in some parts of the art world is that it was sold by a man who previously held a key post in the battle to preserve the nation's cultural heritage—Sir John Pope - Hennessy, former director of the British Museum.

In addition, the director of the National Gallery told Sir John earlier that, if the painting were ever put on the market, he hoped British galleries would be given the opportunity to acquire it.

Sir John, 63, resigned unexpectedly from the British Museum last year and went to the US, where he is now consultative chairman, Department of

European Paintings, at the Metropolitan Museum, New York. When he left England, he applied for an export licence for his fine collection of paintings.

Michael Levey, director of the National Gallery, the expert called in by the Department of Trade, advised that there was no reason under the established criteria why the collection should not be granted an export licence.

But he wrote to Sir John say-

ing that he had granted the export licence with reluctance in the case of one painting—*The Vision of St Francis*. Sir John says he replied that all his seventeenth century paintings and certain others had been left to the Ashmolean at Oxford but he might well want to sell one picture, the *Carracci* that Levey was reluctant to see leave the country.

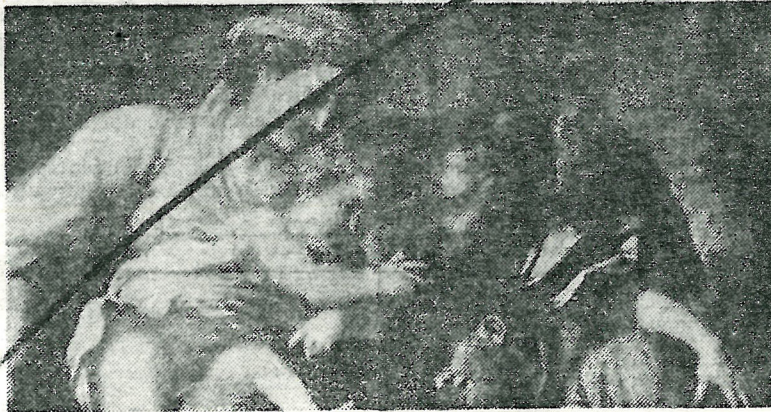
However, Sir John added that

he would ensure British galleries had the best chance of acquiring it by selling it to a British dealer. In fact, he sold it to a representative of Colnaghi's fine art dealers in New York.

Colnaghi's soon found an American gallery which wanted the painting and offered it to them. But, after hearing that the National Gallery was interested, the firm is now trying to extricate itself from the American deal and sell the painting to the National instead.

Having disposed of what is possibly the star of his collection, Sir John has assured *The Sunday Times* that his other paintings will eventually come back to this country according to the terms of his will.

The director of the Ashmolean, David Piper, says: "We have no claim, either legal or moral, on anything belonging to Sir John Pope - Hennessy." Nevertheless, within the closed and gossipy art world, there are others who think differently and already an anonymous broadsheet has been circulated attacking the sale.



Detail from the £90,000 Carracci painting on copper

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