

# SLEEPING BEAUTY

Could you tell an original artwork from a good reproduction? Philip Mould has made tracking down the forgotten masterpieces languishing in big houses and auction rooms his life's work. **Deborah Harris** meets the man behind some of British art's biggest discoveries.

The stakes may be high, but the rewards can be higher in the 'sleeper' business, as Philip Mould, specialist dealer in early British Art, likes to call it. Mould has a network of dealers scouring private collections and auction houses all over the world in search of undiscovered or 'sleeping' masterpieces. The picture may be lost or its existence may never have been known; either way an important discovery is exciting and fruitful.

It's certainly a gambler's market, and Mould enjoys the thrill of the chase. 'Nothing brings oxygen to the brain better than financial risk,' he says. But buying a painting for a bargain basement price, because the seller failed to identify it correctly, isn't a game for the foolhardy. For Mould, the odds are in his favour, with only one in 20 pictures failing the litmus test. 'You make the decision to buy hundreds and hundreds of times, so you develop a strong survivalist judgement,' he explains. 'These odds come from years of experience, a finely honed intuitive scent and the ability to read the attributes of painters and paintings. In the same way a cook gets good at tasting food, similarly you get to know not only the aspects of a painting that comprise the authorship – in other words the signature strokes of a particular painter – you learn to read condition, which is crucial. You also recognise what is a commercial image.'

## Provenance

With the purchase made, the next stage is authentication, and finding the provenance, or history of a painting is a big part of this. Mark Weiss, a leading authority on early British portraiture and Old Masters elaborates. 'We have just discovered an exciting royal provenance for a painting by Sir Anthony van Dyck of *St Sebastian bound for Martyrdom*. The painting is documented as hanging at the famous palatial monastery of the Spanish royal family. This is an incredible discovery and materially adds to the painting's stature. It is currently priced at £3.5 million.'

With the provenance of a picture established, it then needs to be rehabilitated, a more complicated process than one might imagine, as Mould testifies. 'Pictures have frequently accumulated layers of



*St Sebastian bound for Martyrdom*, currently priced at £3.5 million.

grime, though you do get very good at judging how things are going to look when they're cleaned,' he explains. 'And believe it or not, pictures also often have later paint on them, because when they were cleaned and restored in the past, people just threw on more paint, which is something you are painfully aware of when you're thinking of purchasing the picture.'

## Restoration

The discovery by Mould of a new work by George Romney is a good example. Sold as a 'copy' of Romney's celebrated portrait, *Lady Warwick and her Two Children*, in the Frick Collection, New York, it incredibly turned out to be an original Romney. 'The painting was obscured by large sections of

## PHILIP MOULD



Philip Mould OBE is one of the country's foremost authorities on British art, and is widely consulted by galleries, private collectors and the media. He is

regarded as the leading specialist in British portraiture, including Tudor and Jacobean, 17th and 18th century, and even contemporary commissions.

He is also well known for his numerous discoveries in the area of early British art. He is an expert valuer for the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Government's Acceptance in Lieu scheme, and since 1998 has been official art advisor to the House of Commons and House of Lords.

**'THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY SAW AN EXODUS OF ENGLISH ART, AS AMERICAN 'NEW MONEY' LIKED TO DEFINE THEMSELVES IN ENGLISH TERMS.'**

over-paint, notably at the bottom right, where a garden feature and plants had been crudely added in, probably in the early 20th century,' says Mould. 'The Newhouse Gallery in New York, who handled the picture in the 1930s, frequently "altered" English 18th century portraits to make them more appealing to contemporary American taste!' The early twentieth century saw an exodus of English art, from Tudor times through to the 18th and 19th centuries, as American 'new money' liked to define themselves in English terms.

I asked Mould how he feels during the restoration period. 'It's an arduous, pain-staking process sometimes,' he says, 'where, as more

becomes revealed, emotions alternate between elation and depression. A damaged area might be revealed, and you think, 'oh no, the whole lot is damaged', so you're relieved when it's only localised.'

### The Holbein controversy

Authenticating a picture usually takes between one and six months, but sometimes it takes a little longer – 30 years, for instance. A Renaissance picture bought by dealer Christopher Gibbs for £2,800 in 1974, as the work of an unknown artist, is one such instance. Gibbs, a prominent figure in the 'swinging sixties' and antiques and art dealer and friend to the rich and famous, set about proving it as a Hans Holbein (1497–1543). He enlisted a group of experts, with Sir Roy Strong leading the investigation. With the evidence in place, it was due to be sold off at Sotheby's last July (estimated at £2–3 million), but renowned Holbein expert, Susan Foister, refuted its authenticity and the painting remained unsold.

**'AUTHENTICATING A PICTURE USUALLY TAKES BETWEEN ONE AND SIX MONTHS, BUT SOMETIMES IT TAKES A LITTLE LONGER – 30 YEARS FOR INSTANCE.'**

Weiss took the opportunity, and handed Gibbs the challenge of addressing and resolving the issues that blighted the painting. But what were these issues?

'There was the question of condition, which we resolved,' he explains. 'We completely re-presented the painting. We stripped right down and re-restored it – and took away extensions, which confused the construction of the painting – and correctly framed it. We then tackled the question of attribution. Foister maintained her position, but we mounted an unequivocal case to support ours. The painting was then presented to the vetting committee and Maastricht [the European Fine Art Fair is considered the most prestigious fair in the world for non-contemporary art] – where it was the centrepiece of my stand – and they had the chance to see the painting in its new state and look at all the evidence. The painting was accepted with full attribution at Maastricht, which was a huge triumph.' Weiss is handling the painting on behalf of Gibbs and it is estimated to sell for £5 million or \$10 million.

Hans Holbein, *Sir Thomas Wyatt the Younger* (c. 1540–42)



## NEW BLOOD

Buying classical art is complicated enough, but investing in an emerging artist can often be a stab in the dark. Deborah Harris gets some advice from top collectors Kay Saatchi and Flora Fairburn.

Photo credit: Dave Benett/Getty Images



Kay Saatchi

With 20 years' experience in the art business, the latest exhibition organised by Kay Saatchi, *Anticipation*, offered up 24 examples of young British talent. The generosity of David Roberts, who offered his new space, *One One One Gallery*, at no cost, meant artists received 100% of the money from the sales. The show included Tatsuya Kimata's sculptures, paintings by Emma Puntis and Boo Ritson, and Jodie Carey's chandeliers.

### Get out there

What advice would Kay Saatchi give to an aspiring art collector? 'The most important thing is that they just go and see as many things as they can, so they train their eye,' she says. 'The David Risley Gallery is a great place to start. *White Cube* represents more established contemporary artists, like Damien Hirst, but whichever gallery you visit, talk to the dealer.'

Shows like *Anticipation*, organised by independent curators, are another good option, while the brave-at-heart should head for degree shows, or young art fairs, like *Zoo* and *PULSE*, where the art is less expensive and,

### A profitable deal

Art is a lucrative business, something amply demonstrated by Mould's discovery of *The Lost Tudor Prince*. 'From the profit of that sale I bought my house in Kensington,' he says. It turned out to be the only known life portrait of Arthur, Prince of Wales (1486–1502), the short-lived heir of his father King Henry VII. But how could Mould be sure it was the only picture? 'I searched the world making sure there wasn't, in some archive, or some basement, or some upstairs room in an old house, another portrait of the first heir to the Tudor throne,' he recounts. 'Believe it or not, even though he was being groomed to be king, there was no other image of him.'

With all these wonderful examples of early British art coming through the door I wondered if there was ever an instance he found it hard to let a picture go? 'One occasionally has to wrench a picture out of one's life. The thing about being an art dealer is that you only have a finite amount of wall space. If you want to keep on buying, you have to sell.' ■

### MARK WEISS



Mark Weiss has been an art dealer for 35 years. He started working in 1972 with his parents at their art gallery in Colchester, Essex. His keen interest in portraiture gave him the confidence to open *The Weiss Gallery* in Albemarle Street, in 1986, now based in Jermyn Street. A leading authority on early British portraiture and Old Master paintings, Mark's clientele include museums and private collectors from around the world. Mark's sister, Debra, has recently joined the family business, bringing to it her specialist knowledge of conservation and restoration.