

Disposal of Eight Oil Paintings from the collections of Saffron Walden Museum

1 Summary

- 1.1 Saffron Walden Museum Society Ltd and the Museum Management Working group are asked to consider and approve the deaccessioning and appropriate means of disposal for eight oil paintings, according to the Museum's Acquisition & Disposal Policy. The pictures have insufficient relevance to the collections or artistic merit to justify retention, especially as all are in poor condition and would be relatively costly to conserve for little gain.

2 Background

- 2.1 Oil paintings have been acquired randomly throughout the Museum's history, mostly in the nineteenth century, by donation or occasionally by purchase. While some have specific local associations (views, people or local artists) there is also a small number of miscellaneous paintings which have been acquired by chance rather than through any focused policy. The Museum has never seriously tried create a 'fine art' picture collection, nor has it had the resources or gallery space to do so. Apart from some portraits on display in the Museum, and a few paintings on loan, most of the oil paintings have remained in store and are unlikely to be displayed in the foreseeable future. Many of the paintings have little or no information on provenance, and when the collection was catalogued on computer some years ago, temporary accession numbers had to be allocated to those which had no traceable number in the Accession registers (numbers such as 31,284 etc)
- 2.2 In 2006 two events provided an opportunity to reappraise the oil painting collection. First, inclusion of the Museum's oil painting collection in the Public Catalogue Foundation's volume for Essex led to examination and research of paintings and a digital photographic record being made and published. Secondly, an independent expert was commissioned to undertake a valuation of the oil paintings for insurance purposes, and also to check the identity and description of the paintings. This exercise confirmed that there were no 'hidden masterpieces' or pictures of special interest, and the Curator and staff consequently felt that they could now recommend the disposal of certain oil paintings with confidence.

3 The Paintings for Deaccession and Disposal

- 3.1 The oil paintings recommended for disposal are:

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| 1921.15 | Ulysses and Polyphemus, anon copy after JMW Turner | Framed |
| 1921.17 | Flight into Egypt, copy by Banell after Claude-Lorraine | Framed |
| 1921.20 | St Peter Repenting, Spanish school after Jusepe Ribera | Framed |
| 31271 | Portrait of a woman in black dress. Mid 19 th century | Unframed |
| 31284 | Skyscape with windmill | Unframed |
| 31285 | Landscape with trees | Unframed |
| 31286 | Landscape with horsemen | Unframed |
| 31293 | Portrait of a St Bernard dog, after Landseer | Unframed |

- 3.2 Full descriptions with notes on condition and insurance value are enclosed on a separate sheet. The first three paintings were part of a group of seven pictures (accession numbers 1921.15 – 21) given to the Museum in 1921 by Lewis Fry 'in memory of the late Francis Gibson' but otherwise have no known local connection. It has not been possible to find any information on the provenance of the other five paintings, but they have evidently been in the Museum for a good

many years, were not purchased with grant-aid and therefore the presumption is that the Museum has title and may dispose of them.

4 Reasons for Deaccession and Disposal

- 4.1 The recommendation to dispose is based on two of the reasons given in section 4.4 of the Acquisition & Disposal Policy
- a Items that are too badly damaged or deteriorated to be of further use for the purposes of the collections, or where the condition of the items would require more conservation work than their significance and usefulness merits.
 - b Disposal of duplicate or unprovenanced items that have no discernible role or relevance within the collection, or could fulfil a much greater role if deaccessioned and transferred to another use or institution.

5 Insurance valuations and conservation costs

- 5.1 The insurance valuations (2006) have been added to the table for information but it should be noted that insurance values are generally higher than any likely sale price and that for the three framed pictures, the value reflects the frames as much as the painting itself. In view of the very poor condition of the pictures and frames, it is probable that the cost of conserving them and returning them to displayable condition would outweigh any notional sale value, and costs of transport, fees etc would also have to be met.

6 Method of disposal

- 6.1 Once the decision to deaccession the paintings (i.e. remove them from the collection) has been taken, the Museum should initially advertise their disposal in the *Museums Journal*, and offer them as an unconditional gift to any accredited museum or art gallery which may wish to acquire them. Two months from the date of publication of the notice will be allowed for response.
- 6.2 In the event that no museum or gallery wishes to acquire the paintings – which seems likely – an alternative means of disposal would be to offer the pictures by unconditional gift to recognised art conservation institutions for trainee picture and frame conservators to practice on. Research by the Conservation Officer has established that there are likely to be institutions willing to acquire pictures for this purpose (e.g. Hamilton Kerr Institute).
- 6.3 In theory sale could be considered, subject to clearance with appropriate professional bodies and to all proceeds being applied to the Museum Society's Acquisition & Display Fund for future enhancement of the collections.
- 6.4 A full record of each painting and its disposal will be kept in the Museum and the accession register annotated accordingly.

7 Recommendations

- a The eight paintings listed above are to be deaccessioned and disposed of.
- b Preference will be for disposal by unconditional gift to another museum or gallery, accredited institutions receiving priority, or if unwanted by any museum or gallery, to conservation institutions to assist training of painting and frame conservators.
- c Any paintings which cannot be disposed of by the above means to be destroyed and disposed of, unless a local dealer can be found who would be prepared to take them for a payment to the Acquisition & Display Fund.