

The flight of the Beits

The Alfred Beit Foundation's proposed sale of nine paintings that were supposed to be 'for the enjoyment of the Irish people' caused outrage.

Rosita Boland

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On Saturday, March 20th, 1976, this newspaper reported that Russborough House, the Co Wicklow home of Sir Alfred Beit and Lady Beit, was to open to the public as a centre for fine art. "Sir Alfred's collection of over 100 paintings by world masters, believed to be one of the most valuable collections of its kind in the world, will become part of a charitable trust to be known as the Alfred Beit Foundation."

The report also said that the trust "will consist of seven or eight people prominent in the arts and cultural life of the nation" in addition to the Beits, English philanthropists whose family had made a fortune from diamond mining. According to Fred Sutton & Co, the Beits' solicitors, the paintings would in effect "be on loan to the State from the trustees and Russborough House itself would be a gift to the State".

On July 7th, 1985, Sir Alfred and his wife, Clementine, interviewed for a BBC documentary series called *The Great Collectors*, were both clear about their wishes for their collection. It should remain intact, said Sir Alfred. "I think that's a very important point," said Lady Beit. "We really don't want to sell anything."

Listen: a 1985 BBC interview with the Beits on keeping their collection intact and in Ireland





The Irish Times
Russborough interview



SOUNDCLOUD

2:36

On April 30th this year it emerged that two works by the old master Peter Paul Rubens, plus seven other paintings, all previously described as being on loan to the State, were now with Christie's, awaiting auction. Those nine paintings are now being shown in New York, London and Hong Kong. Their collective value has been estimated, conservatively, at €11 million.

Russborough House's own website says: "In 1976, the Beits created the Alfred Beit Foundation to preserve Russborough and its art collection for the future enjoyment of the Irish people."

Yesterday *The Irish Times* broke the news that the Alfred Beit Foundation had, on March 16th, 2015, approved an export licence for a third Rubens painting, *Portrait of a Monk*. *The Irish Times* saw a copy of the licence, which lists the third Rubens in addition to the nine other paintings already with Christie's.

By noon on Friday the foundation had announced the withdrawal of the painting from sale. "Further to media reports . . . the ABF had decided not to sell this work and it will return to Ireland."

Export licences for all 10 paintings, including the withdrawn Rubens, were granted by the National Gallery of Ireland. Sean Rainbird, the gallery's director, is also a trustee of the foundation. The auction of the nine works will take place over three days: a pair of John Atkinson Grimshaw paintings will be offered on Tuesday June 16th, a drawing by François Boucher will be offered on July 7th, and the remaining six, including the two Rubens, will be offered on July 9th.

Immediate controversy

The news that nine of the paintings were already outside the country, which Christie's told *The Irish Times* at the request of the trustees, immediately provoked controversy.

John Mulcahy, editor of the *Irish Arts Review*, wrote in an editorial for the summer edition of the magazine: "What is particularly hard to understand is why the trustees failed to explore all other possibilities and strategies before acting so secretly in dispersing the collection against the benefactor's wishes . . . The trustees have wrapped themselves in a cocoon instead of seeking help from the Irish people and the their government."

By yesterday more than 3,500 people had signed an irishartsreview.com petition calling for a halt to the sale.

In an opinion piece for this newspaper on June 1st, Judith Woodworth, the chairwoman of the Alfred Beit Foundation (and a former governor of the Irish Times Trust), wrote that "the works are being sold to facilitate the establishment of an endowment fund, which is necessary to safeguard the long-term future" of Russborough House.

It is not the first time the trustees have sold works from Russborough. In December 2006 Christie's auctioned a number of bronzes for €3.8 million. This was just a year after the death of Lady Beit. (Her husband had died in 1994.) And in November 2013 Sotheby's auctioned a collection of Beit Chinese porcelain, raising €1.2 million.

The foundation said the items were being sold because they "were surplus to the main collection" and had been "held in storage for many years". The foundation's chief executive, Eric Blatchford, said that he was "absolutely thrilled" and that, in a now familiar phrase, the money "would go a long way in conserving and preserving Russborough for future generations".

The Irish Times has learned that, around the time Blatchford made that remark, the trustees started discussing disposing of the paintings that are now with Christie's.

Judith Woodworth's fellow trustees are Consuelo O'Connor of An Taisce, who is also deputy chairwoman, Eamonn Ceannt of University College Dublin, Sean Rainbird, Carmel O'Sullivan of Trinity College Dublin, Klaus Unger, Malcolm Alexander, Adrian Masterson and David Horkan of the Royal Dublin Society.

Some were nominated by their organisations, but not all those organisations approve of the foundation's decision to sell these paintings. The trust had included the former *Irish Times* journalist Robert O'Byrne, representing the Irish Georgian Society, but he has since stepped down, a move confirmed by Donough Cahill, the society's executive director.

The Irish Georgian Society learned of the proposed sale via the *Irish Times* report of April 30th rather than from O'Byrne, its nominee on the foundation, who did not tell the society about the pending sale. Likewise, Consuelo O'Connor did not tell An Taisce.

Why had O'Byrne not shared his information with the Irish Georgian Society? Donough Cahill says that the Beit board "had resolved not to share the information about the sale outside the confines of the board, or to discuss the matter with anyone else . . . Following the announcement, we discussed the matter with Robert, and it was decided that it was the best thing for him to step back from the Alfred Beit Foundation, to ensure that there was consistency with the position that the Irish Georgian Society was taking."

In a letter to *The Irish Times* the society called the proposed sale deplorable. O'Byrne declined to comment for this article.

At least one Beit trustee did not support the sale. In a letter to *The Irish Times* Carmel O'Sullivan, an associate professor of education at Trinity, wrote, "I have consistently maintained the position that the sale of the paintings is not acceptable."

The paintings' sale was discussed at almost every meeting of the Beit foundation board since the Sotheby's porcelain auction. The Alfred Beit Foundation invited Christie's and Sotheby's to Ireland, to see paintings at Russborough House and others that had been in storage. Both identified works they estimated they could sell for at least €10 million. The job went to Christie's.

Private sale

Last year the foundation published a definitive history of its home. It was called *Russborough: A Great Irish House, Its Families and Collections*, by William Laffan and Kevin V Mulligan. At one point the book describes two works by the 18th-century French painter Jacques de Lajoue: "On either side of the doors to the entrance hall hang a pair of interior views by Jacques de Lajoue, dating from 1734 and showing the library and laboratory of M. Bonnier de la Mosson."

After Christie's visited Russborough the foundation heard that it had a buyer for one of these two paintings, which was still on public view. According to documents about a board meeting seen by *The Irish Times*, "Mr Rainbird suggested that the offer for one of the paintings represented a potential windfall that should be looked at very seriously by the Alfred Beit Foundation."

De Lajoue's painting, *The Cabinet of Physical Sciences*, was granted an export licence earlier this year. It was sold privately for more than €500,000. Best international practice is for pairs of paintings to be kept together.

In an email to *The Irish Times* about this unpublicised sale, Rainbird says that paintings were "not a pair", apparently contradicting the description in Russborough's official history. He referred all other questions Eric Blatchford, the Russborough chief executive.

Judith Woodworth, the foundation's chairwoman, wrote in her article about the Christie's paintings for *The Irish Times* that "selling this small and very carefully selected group of paintings is an absolute necessity". But the foundation has also privately sold the de Lajoue and, without informing the public, approved an export licence for the third Rubens, before withdrawing it from sale following a news report.

The Irish Times has tried unsuccessfully a number of times this week to speak to Woodworth about all these sales.

Consuelo O'Connor, her deputy, has said that she cannot talk to *The Irish Times*, as the board agreed that "the chair would answer queries from the press, and so would Sean Rainbird".

The Irish Times has asked the foundation why the decision to sell the paintings was not announced before they left the country and whether there have been other unpublicised sales of art that the foundation holds in trust. All the foundation will say is that this information is confidential.

In a statement on Thursday Judith Woodworth reiterated that the foundation needs to sell the paintings to establish an endowment. "The perilous financial situation still remains and the sale has to go ahead. The foundation sees no alternative but to dispose of the paintings in order to preserve the long-term future of the house."

One sale has been cancelled. It remains to be seen whether the auctions go ahead.

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