

Drawings, watercolours and lithographs by John Gould worth over £1.2 million at risk of leaving UK

- Bar is to allow time for a UK gallery or institution to acquire the work
- One of Britain's most significant ornithologists, work by John Gould helped form Charles Darwin's theory of evolution

Gould's Original Drawings, Vol I and II are at risk of leaving the country unless a UK buyer can be found to save the work for the nation. One of Britain's most significant ornithologists of the 19th Century, John Gould's work played a role in Charles Darwin's theory of evolution and is referenced in Darwin's book, On the Origin of Species.

Valued at £1,287,500 (inclusive of VAT), the two albums contain 129 process drawings and watercolours by Gould and four unpublished lithographic proofs by Gould, his wife Elizabeth Gould and the pre-eminent artist Henry Constantine Richter.

Gould's process drawings are vital for understanding how the lithographic plates were created and the sketches reveal the workings behind not only Gould's most significant publication The Birds of Australia, but also the second volumes of some of Gould's other published works.

These important drawings also demonstrate Victorian attempts to catalogue and define different flora and fauna across the world.

Culture Minister Caroline Dinenage said:

These exquisite drawings provide an important insight into the work of one of our most significant ornithologists, helping us to better understand 19th century study of natural history.

I sincerely hope that these beautiful works can be saved for the nation so they may continue to inform our knowledge and understanding of John Gould's brilliant work.

The Minister's decision follows the advice of the Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest (RCEWA). The committee agreed these works were the product of one of the most significant natural history artists of the Victorian age. Appointed the first curator and preserver of the Zoological Society of London, Gould stood pre-eminent in his field with an international reputation as the most prominent British and Australian ornithologist.

Committee Member Peter Barber said:

There is much still to be discovered, bibliographically but particularly from the standpoint of the history of science, about these often beautiful but above all honest drawings, by one of this country's greatest ever ornithologists and his talented wife. The drawings sometimes differ in important details from the artistic lithographs derived from them, but they are perhaps most significant as being amongst the earliest accurate western depictions of non-European birds, some now extinct. They should be retained in this country so that they can be researched not only from an artistic and bibliographical perspective but above all in the context of Gould's correspondence and the specimens, also gathered by John Gould, held by British institutions.

The RCEWA made its recommendation on the grounds that their departure from the UK would be a misfortune because they were of outstanding significance for the study of the history and study of natural history art.

The decision on the export licence application for the drawings will be deferred until 24th September 2021. This may be extended until 24th January 2022 if a serious intention to raise funds to purchase it is made at the recommended price of £1,287,500 (inclusive of VAT).

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Notes to editors

1. Organisations or individuals interested in purchasing the drawings should contact the RCEWA on 0845 300 6200.
2. Details of the drawings are as follows: Two albums containing 129 drawings and watercolours and four unpublished lithographic proofs by John Gould (1804-1881), Elizabeth Gould (1804-1841) and Henry Constantine Richter (c.1821-1902) 2 largo folios. 19th century green morocco gilt with marbled boards, 572 x 407 mm. [early to mid-eighteenth century]. Pencil and coloured chalks, watercolour on paper. Good to fair condition, bindings slightly abraded. Both volumes have plates with light to more obtrusive foxing, one loose sheet in volume 1 and some sheets detaching from lower edge in volume 2
3. Provenance: Acquired by the 13th Earl of Derby Knowsley, in various parcels from John Gould's clerk, Edwin Charles Prince, c. 1843, and thence by descent.
4. The Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest is an independent body, serviced by The Arts Council, which advises the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport on whether a cultural object, intended for export, is of national importance under specified criteria.
5. The Arts Council champions, develops and invests in artistic and cultural experiences that enrich people's lives. It supports a range of activities across the arts, museums and libraries – from theatre to digital art, reading to dance, music to literature, and crafts to collections. www.artscouncil.org.uk.