

Exceptional 18th century portrait of Prince William at risk of leaving UK

- The export bar is to allow time for a UK gallery or institution to acquire the piece
- An exceptional example of royal propaganda, the portrait shows royal desire to appear “ordinary” during the American Revolutionary War

Valued at £314,880, Portrait of Prince William by Benjamin West is at risk of leaving the country unless a UK buyer can be found.

This rare portrait of the young Prince William, the third son of George III, who was destined to become the ‘sailor king’ William IV, shows him wearing his midshipman’s uniform on the quarterdeck of the Prince George during the American Revolutionary War.

American painter, Benjamin West, who created the portrait, was appointed historical painter to George III from 1772, and this is among the most original of his works.

Commissioned by his father, the Portrait of Prince William is one of the very few accurately to depict an eighteenth-century midshipman. It also shows how the royal family used portraiture during the American Revolutionary War as propaganda, aiming to present the Prince as an ordinary midshipman, working his way up the ranks without “parade” or “marks of distinction”. The aim was to reinforce King George’s simple, moralistic public image and show the royal family living a respectable family life.

Arts Minister Lord Parkinson of Whitley Bay said:

This rare painting from the late eighteenth century gives us an insight into how the Hanoverian Royal Family wanted to be seen: as humble figures working their way up the naval ranks in the same way as anyone else.

I hope this fascinating portrait, which teaches us about our royal and naval history, is saved for the nation so it can be appreciated for generations to come.

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 that this painting is not only significant for its connection to royal propaganda during the American war, but also for its relation to the cult of sensibility during the 1780s.

Committee Member Professor Mark Hallett said:

This is a highly original and visually striking portrait of a royal prince by one of the leading painters working in Georgian Britain. Showing the future King William IV standing alone on the deck of a warship, dressed in his midshipman's uniform, looking steadfastly out to sea and resting his hand on a sword, the portrait highlights both his youth and bravery. The work's significance lies not only in its exceptional quality and interest as a painting; the portrait also provided the basis for a widely disseminated engraving that served to promote the modest, heroic virtues of the prince and his family at a time of profound national crisis. For all these reasons, this is a painting of great historical and art-historical importance.

The Committee made its recommendation on the grounds that the portrait's departure from the UK would be a misfortune because it is so closely connected with our history and national life and it is of outstanding significance for the study of naval portraiture in Britain.

The decision on the export licence application for the painting will be deferred until 16 March 2022. At the end of the first deferral period owners will have a consideration period of 15 Business Days to consider any offer(s) to purchase the painting at the recommended price of £314,880 (Inclusive of VAT). The second deferral period will commence following the signing of an Option Agreement and will last for three months.

Offers from public bodies for less than the recommended price through the private treaty sale arrangements, where appropriate, may also be considered. Such purchases frequently offer substantial financial benefit to a public institution wishing to acquire the item.

ENDS

Notes to editors:

1. Organisations or individuals interested in purchasing the painting should contact the RCEWA on 0845 300 6200.
2. Details of the painting are as follows: Benjamin West, P.R.A. (1738-1820) Portrait of Prince William, later King William IV of Great Britain (1765-1837), when a midshipman, in naval uniform, standing on the deck of HMS Prince George, 1781 Oil on canvas, 53.5 x 43.2 cm
Condition Report The canvas is lined and there is good adhesion between the canvas and the lining material. The paint layer is stable and secure and in very good original condition. There is a small repaired loss to the mast, to the right of the sitter's hat in the decking and in the sky, left, between the ships. Fine details are well preserved, including the more vulnerable details such as the rigging. The vigorous handling of the paint through the white clothing of the sitter is intact, with the impasted highlights of his buttons very slightly compromised. Removal of a degraded and discoloured varnish would significantly improve the tonal and chromatic values of the image. The painting presents well. Frame: a period carved gilt wood frame with some minor

wear

3. Provenance: Commissioned by the sitter's father, King George III and given by him to his son's commanding office, Admiral Robert Digby (1732-1815); By descent to his nephew, Admiral Sir Henry Digby (1770-1842); By descent to his son, Edward Digby, 9th Baron Digby (1809-1889); 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. [Arts Council England](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk) is the national development agency for creativity and culture. They invest public money from Government and The National Lottery to help support the sector and to deliver this vision. www.artscouncil.org.uk