

Press release: The Destruction of Pharaoh's Host, by John Martin, at risk of leaving the UK

Arts Minister Michael Ellis has placed a temporary export bar on The Destruction of Pharaoh's Host, by the British artist John Martin (1789-1854), to provide an opportunity to keep it in the country.

The watercolour is at risk of being exported from the UK unless a buyer can be found to match the asking price of £1,509,102.

The drawing illustrates the Biblical story (Exodus 14) of Moses releasing the waters of the Red Sea, after they had miraculously parted to allow the fleeing Israelites to cross, thereby drowning the pursuing Egyptian army.

Employing a panoramic composition to magnificent effect, Martin plays with the scale of the figures and the scenery to maximise the epic nature of the drama. The emotional force of this scene of deliverance and retribution is heightened by a blood red sunset below a sweeping black sky.

Although Martin is best known for his spectacular oil paintings and mezzotints (a tonal print technique that was ideally suited to capturing his bold use of light and shade for dramatic effect) illustrating John Milton's Paradise Lost and the Bible, he also created a series of framed 'exhibition watercolours', which in scale and visual impact were intended to compete for attention and patronage with oil paintings.

Martin's mezzotints of Biblical subjects, such as The Destruction of Pharaoh's Host published in 1833, were hugely popular and influential with admirers including Charles Dickens and the Bronte sisters who grew up with them on the walls of their father's parsonage.

Martin's large-scale watercolour treatment of the same subject from three years later was intended to capitalise on his popular success, and The Destruction of Pharaoh's Host demonstrates his bold use of the medium in the eye-catching brightness of the colours, with the tonal range expanded through extensive use of black pigment, bodycolour, and gum arabic.

Martin's artistic reputation did not endure – despite the influence he played in shaping the epic scale and grandeur of Biblical and historical epics in films by directors like Cecil B. DeMille – as his standing suffered from the disapproval of the art critic John Ruskin and the artist's focus later in his life shifted to planning ambitious engineering schemes to deliver clean water and an efficient sewage system to London.

The subsequent and enduring shift in taste away from the use of watercolour for grandiose narrative subjects, allied to a longstanding critical downplaying of the significance of the medium to British art, meant that

Martin's stature as a watercolourist was long overlooked, until interest in his work began to revive in the early 1950s.

Martin's importance is now more widely recognised and celebrated, and the ambition, boldness and grandeur of *The Destruction of Pharaoh's Host* exemplifies his unique contribution to British watercolour history.

Arts Minister Michael Ellis said:

This incredibly dramatic picture captures the imaginative and apocalyptic subjects for which Martin is best known.

I hope it can remain in the UK, where it can be admired and studied for many years to come.

The decision to defer the export licence follows a recommendation by the [Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest \(RCEWA\)](#), administered by The Arts Council.

RCEWA member Lowell Libson said:

Working in watercolour played a significant part in Martin's art throughout his career although he is now best remembered for his exhibition works in oil. *The Destruction of Pharaoh's Host* not only demonstrates Martin's mastery of the medium but underlines how he employed it to achieve emotional and dramatic effects of a subtlety which were impossible in his larger scale oil paintings. *The Destruction of Pharaoh's Host* numbers amongst the greatest of Martin's watercolours.

The RCEWA made its recommendation on the grounds of the picture's outstanding significance in the reassessment of John Martin – the most popular artist of his day, dismissed by the art establishment and ignored for almost a century – whose influence on the development of epic, visionary landscape painting, both in Britain and in America, is now widely acknowledged.

The decision on the export licence application for the picture will be deferred until 21 May. This may be extended until 21 September if a serious intention to raise funds to purchase it is made at the recommended price of £1,509,102.

Organisations or individuals interested in purchasing the picture should contact the RCEWA on 0845 300 6200.

An image of the picture can be downloaded via our [flickr site](#).

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Notes to editors

1. Details of the picture are as follows:
Watercolour by John Martin (1789-1854), The Destruction of Pharaoh's Host, signed and dated: 'J. Martin/1836' (lower right). Pencil and watercolour with gum arabic heightened with body colour and with scratching out; 23 x 33 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (584 x 857 mm).
2. Provenance: (Probably) J.E. Jesse, by 1876; with Agnew's, London; with Leger & Son, London, by September 1954, sold in or after 1958 to George Goyder; Sotheby's, London, 11 July 1991, lot 192, where purchased by private owner (sold for world auction record price for watercolour by this artist £107,800); Christie's, London, 3 July 2012, lot 139 (est. £300,000-500,000, sold for £758,050, also world auction record).
3. 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.
4. 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.