

# **Dermot Nally Papers**

**UCDA P254/98**



ANOTHER FIRST: An exclusive picture of Murillo's *The Meeting of Jacob and Rachel*, in the process of restoration at the National Gallery in Merrion Square, Dublin

'Donating the picture to us was a very public-spirited gesture by a person who wishes to remain anonymous. We respect that wish,' says National Gallery director, Raymond Keaveney

## Finding the way to a Murillo



First there was the authentication of Caravaggio's *The Taking of Christ*, then the discovery of a 'lost' Murillo. Mark Smith reports on a triumphant year for the National Gallery

IT'S BEEN a busy 12 months in Merrion Square. No sooner had Caravaggio's *The Taking of Christ* finally been verified as the genuine article and featured on the highlight of an exhibition of the artist's work, than the news broke of another, equally significant find: the missing fifth painting in Murillo's Jacob cycle.

The *Meeting of Jacob and Rachel*, all eight by ten dramatic feet of it, is now being restored and will be exhibited to the public in February. The anonymous benefactor was totally unaware it was a Murillo. It takes an expert's eye to spot a valuable work of art, as the National Gallery's dual coup has proved.

In August 1990, three years before the Murillo discovery, a senior restorer at the gallery, Sergio Benedetti, was called to the House of the Jesuit Fathers in Lower Leeson Street to inspect a number of paintings. One stood out immediately. Benedetti, an

authority on Italian art, recognised *The Taking of Christ* from historical descriptions and the numerous versions painted by 17th century contemporaries of Caravaggio. But this picture, he suspected, was the original.

That morning, leaving the house excited by what I thought I had seen, he remembers, "I could hardly have imagined that just three years later I'd see my beliefs realised with an exhibition."

Three years of exhaustive research into a painting's origins may seem long enough to you and me, but in the art authentication business it is, in Benedetti's words, "a modest period of time."

This year, it was finally made official: the National Gallery had a genuine Caravaggio on its hands — "arguably the finest one to be unearthed in decades," says director Raymond Keaveney. "It's a major work by an artist at the height of his powers." *The Taking of Christ* has drawn

the public in their thousands, attendance figures since the Caravaggio exhibition began are up 80 per cent on the same period last year.

Michelangelo Caravaggio was born Michelangelo Merisi in 1571, but became better known by the name of his family's place of origin. At the age of 21, the young painter moved to Rome to seek his fortune; after a couple of years on the breadline, he was taken under the wing of the eminent Cardinal Francesco Maria Del Monte.

Thanks to the influence of his patron and his own aggressive talent, commissions soon began to flood Caravaggio's way. By the beginning of the 17th century, he had become one of Italy's most sought-after artists. *The Taking of Christ*, commissioned in 1602 by Cardinal Protector of Ireland Girolamo Mattei's brother Ciriaco, typifies the artist's style: vivid, accessible and painted with an almost photographic

realism. He was by now commanding substantial sums for his pictures.

Outside the studio, Caravaggio was, by all accounts, a pretty unbearable human being. A braggart and a bully, by no means enamoured of hard work, he would fulfill a commission as quickly as possible, then, according to

one contemporary, "swagger about for a month or two with his sword at his side and with a servant following him, from one ball-court to the next, ever ready to engage in a fight or argument, with the result that it is most awkward to get along with him."

A notorious street-fighter much given to womanising (despite rumours that he was homosexual), his name appeared with regularity in Roman court records of that time.

In 1606, Caravaggio killed a man in a brawl and was banished from Rome. The next four years saw him wandering from coast to coast in unhappy exile, hoping for a papal pardon. He died of a fever in Tuscany in 1610, unforgotten, at the age of just 39.

The Sevilian artist Murillo, separated from Caravaggio by half a century and a thousand miles, had a somewhat stronger work ethic, helped by a comparatively low-profile lifestyle.

At his creative peak in the mid-to-late 16th century, his prolific output was aided by his free use of studio assistants — to the extent that it

is often difficult to quantify how much of Murillo himself went into a painting bearing his signature.

However, the Jacob cycle of five pictures, painted between 1660 and 1665, are thought to be as pure Murillo as it's possible to find. Until recently, though, only four had been

known. All that changed last month, when Raymond Keaveney revealed that a painting donated anonymously to the National Gallery had been identified as the missing link in the chain.

The massive *Meeting of Jacob and Rachel* depicts Rachel encountering Jacob while guiding a flock of sheep through a classic Spanish landscape of gnarled trees, scudding clouds and castles. The look that passes between the two says it all. The benefactor knew it was a fine painting, but had no idea who it was by.

"Donating the picture to us was a very public-spirited gesture by a person who wishes to remain anonymous," says Keaveney. "We respect that wish." Is he convinced it's genuine?

"Until the issue of Murillo and his assistants is thrashed out, we're saying that this is the result of a collaboration between the artist and his workshop. But it isn't a student painting. There's a strong element of Murillo in it."

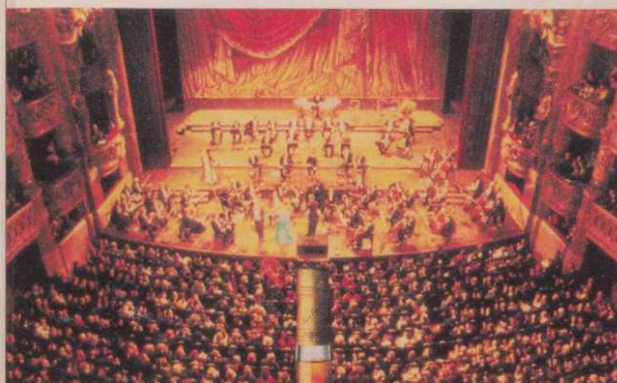
The painting is thought to have been in Ireland since the 1820s. Of the four others in the cycle, two are in the USA and two in St Petersburg.

It is, says Keaveney, hard to put a price on either the Caravaggio or the Murillo, but he's in the fortunate position of not hav-

ing to. "We can concentrate on the cultural, not the financial, value of the pictures."

As the process of cleaning and restoring *The Meeting of Jacob and Rachel* gets underway in preparation for exhibition at the National Gallery in February, Raymond Keaveney and his staff must have at the back of their minds the preoccupation shared by curators of art the world over: just how many more priceless paintings are gathering dust in the cupboards and attics of the blissfully unaware?

Great legends last for ever



CARAVAGGIO'S *The Taking of Christ*, 'arguably the finest one to be unearthed in decades,' says Raymond Keaveney



COGNAC  
**Bisquit**

LA LEGENDE DU COGNAC DEPUIS 1819



