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French brush off royal artist's Renoir plea



Nicky Philipps is convinced that a boating scene was painted by Renoir JAY WILLIAMS

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A royal portrait painter is furious that a French art institute has refused to authenticate a painting that other experts say is a genuine Renoir.

Nicky Philipps, who has painted the Queen and whose depiction of Princes William and Harry hangs in the National Portrait Gallery, believes that a painting bought by her family is being denied a fair hearing because of a rivalry between two Parisian publishers.

Boats on the Seine at Argenteuil, which hangs at Picton Castle, the family seat in Pembrokeshire, was the subject of an investigation by the BBC documentary *Fake or Fortune*. Investigators found evidence that corroborates the family's story that the scene was painted by Pierre-Auguste Renoir and given to Claude Monet. If the painting were accepted as genuine it would be worth up to £300,000.

Ms Philipps and fellow trustees of Picton Castle cannot sell the painting as a Renoir at auction without the endorsement of the Wildenstein Institute, an art history research centre that publishes lists of artists' works, known as *catalogues raisonnés*.

Ms Philipps claims that the Wildenstein's decision is "absolutely ridiculous" and is motivated by a wish to belittle Bernheim-Jeune, a rival which has published a *catalogue raisonné* for Renoir that includes the painting.

The Wildenstein Institute does not usually comment on its reasons for excluding paintings, but it told last night's show that it rejected the work because it was unsigned, of poor quality and because there was no written evidence that Monet received it from Renoir.

Ms Philipps said that Wildenstein was disregarding three compelling pieces of evidence. Research confirmed that Lord Milford, Ms Philipps's great grandfather, bought the painting after a visit to Monet's daughter-in-law Blanche in Giverny, where Monet painted the *Water Lilies* series. Blanche told Lord Milford that the painting was a Renoir, and agreed to sell him the work through Bernheim-Jeune and Arthur Tooth, a London dealer. Paperwork from both dealers show they attributed the work to Renoir.

Scientific analysis showed that pigments in the painting matched those used by Renoir in the 1870s, and a scan revealed an art supplier's stamp used only between 1871 and 1879.

Researchers also found a Monet sketch of the same scene, suggesting that the work was one of numerous documented examples of Renoir and Monet painting together. Anthea Callen, the emeritus professor of art at Australian National University and an authority on the Impressionists, said she was convinced the painting was a Renoir. Asked why the Wildenstein might reject it, she said: "Rivalry. I think that's what it comes down to."

Ms Philipps said she found the Wildenstein's decision "incredibly irritating". "All the evidence is there. All the science, the canvas stamp, and these people can turn around and say, just because they have a rivalry with Bernheim-Jeune, 'No, we don't think this is genuine.' They're making themselves look very foolish. We don't have a letter saying: 'Dear Claude, here's a picture from our time together', because they were friends. He just handed it over."

She said the lack of a signature should not be an obstacle. "The Wildenstein say it's very weak. Of course it's bloody weak. It's just a sketch. The only conclusion that anybody can come to is that it's a Renoir and these people don't want it. I'm furious."

She said that she took consolation that there would be no pressure to sell the painting to fund repairs to Picton Castle, which is owned by a trust and open to visitors. "I know it's a Renoir and it's a link to my great grandfather. And I'm rather excited about making fools out of these people. On the other hand, these big houses need money."

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I know of a genuine Augustus John rough sketch which has a fake signature (the pencilled 'n' carries a tail) added in order to 'authenticate' the unfinished drawing. No artist ever signed an unfinished work.

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