Art sales and attributions: the 1852 National Gallery acquisition of *The Tribute Money* by Titian

Barbara Pezzini

The evidence presented in this paper aims to complicate one of the core assumptions of cause and effect in art history: that poor quality and uncertain autography of a work of art cause poor critical reception and a poor sale. In fact, the opposite also occurs: a poor sale may contribute to the critical demise of a work of certain autography and, arguably, quality. To demonstrate this, the paper examines how the commercial circumstances around the 1852 acquisition of Titian’s *The Tribute Money* by the National Gallery [Fig. 1] had a definite impact on its subsequent, and factious, attribution history. *The Tribute Money* was a controversial purchase that flared up the already heated public debate around the National Gallery’s administration and it contributed to the implementation of the 1853 Parliamentary inquiry, a ‘Select Committee’ that eventually brought to the reconstitution of the museum and the appointment of its former Keeper and Trustee, Charles Lock Eastlake (1793-1865), as its first director.¹ Francis Haskell already

I wish to thank Susanna Avery-Quash, Lukas Fuchsgruber, Alycen Mitchell and Marie Tavinor who have read earlier drafts of this text and provided many insightful suggestions. Special thanks to Francesco Ventrella, the peer reviewer for the Journal of Art Historiography, who has generously provided many perceptive comments on this text.
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Stressed how, in mid-nineteenth century London, personal and political questions played ‘a greater part in affecting taste and attribution than most scholars or connoisseurs would willingly admit’. Stemming from Haskell’s analysis, this paper engages with an additional layer of the social history of connoisseurship: its relationship with commerce.

Although The Tribute Money is an Italian painting, executed for a Spanish patron and then transferred to France, its sale, acquisition, attribution and re-attribution are part of a very British nexus of art commerce, criticism and museum history. The story of the acquisition of The Tribute Money has been told, either within the complicated institutional history of the National Gallery, or, from an object-based angle, it has been summarised each time that a new catalogue of its Italian works has been published by this museum. It has been recently dealt with in a particularly detailed manner by Nicholas Penny. This paper considers new sources such as sales catalogues, newspaper articles and parliamentary reports, together with National Gallery documents and correspondence, to reconstruct this complicated tale, beginning from the less-explored viewpoint of the relations of the National Gallery with the London art trade, to explore how it intersects with the critical reception of Titian in the nineteenth century.

The agent: William Woodburn

The Tribute Money was purchased through an agent, William Woodburn (1778-1860 ca.), who belonged to a family of dealers. His father, John Woodburn (c.1750-1823) dealt art, and so did his brothers Samuel (1784-1853), Henry and Allen, who were also known as framers, publishers and restorers. Samuel is the best known of the

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three: he had business premises in St Martin’s Lane and a long, somehow controversial, relationship with the National Gallery, especially in the unsuccessful negotiations to acquire the Lawrence collection of Old Master drawings. William, instead, has so far remained relatively unexplored in the scholarly literature. A friend of the Royal Academician painter David Wilkie, in the autumn of 1840 Woodburn accompanied him on a visit to Europe and the Middle East, with the stated purpose to study works of art. In Allan Cunningham’s life of Wilkie, Woodburn was described as ‘a gentleman of leisure and [...] taste in the very art in which Wilkie himself excelled’. This definition of Woodburn as gentleman of leisure is unsurprising, as often a business interest in the art trade was concealed, either by the dealers themselves or by their biographers. Wilkie too was active as an art dealer, having travelled through Spain seeking for works by Velázquez for British purchasers in 1828. 

The American painter Miner Kilbourne Kellogg (1814-1899), whose studio in Florence Woodburn visited in 1843, described William as an ‘expert for the National Gallery in London’. In fact, in the mid-1840s William, with Allen and Samuel, gave advice to the National Gallery on the purchase of the collection of Napoleon’s nephew, Cardinal Joseph Fesch (1763-1839), in Rome. No works from this

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6 Simon Turner, ‘William Woodburn’, Print Quarterly 20 (June 2003), 131–144; See also the numerous references on the Lawrence drawings case in the National Gallery Archive (hereafter cited as NGA), mainly NG5/23/1, NG5/26/6 and NG6/1/50.

7 ‘They first made their way to Holland; visited the Galleries of Rotterdam and Amsterdam, and then turned their steps to Munich, resolved to penetrate to Constantinople, by following the course of the Danube, and from thence, if war and plague permitted, to waft themselves to Syria, and conclude their tour by dropping down into Egypt, with memory and sketch-book full of Jerusalem, its holy hills, and memorable valleys’, Allan Cunningham, The Life of Sir David Wilkie, vol 3, London: John Murray, 1843, 3, 14, 47, 98 and 285–289.


11 The negotiations regarding the Fesch collection sale lasted almost exactly one year and are recorded in a series of letters in the NGA: 11 May 1844, NG5/56/12; NG3943; 20 May 1844, NG5/57/3, NG3943; 18 October 1844, NG5/58/6, NG3943; 17 February 1845, NG5/59/2,
collection were purchased by the National Gallery on that occasion, but in April-May 1851 Woodburn was employed by the gallery again – this time as adviser in the proposed purchase of the Manfrin Collection, one of the most celebrated private galleries in Venice, which held the painting now known as The Tempest by Giorgione (Venice, Gallerie dell’Accademia). The Manfrin Collection, in great part formed by Girolamo Manfrin (1742-1802) in the 18th century, was then available for sale after the death of Giulia-Giovanna Manfrin-Platts (d. 1848/9), a descendant of Girolamo.

William Woodburn, who was then offered £200 for his services to investigate the possibility of acquiring works from this collection, worked in conjunction with the National Gallery Keeper Thomas Uwins, and was instructed by the Trustees to proceed thoroughly and with extreme caution in his negotiations with the Manfrin descendants. The National Gallery Trustees were at the same time risk-averse and price-sensitive and wanted to make sure that only the best pictures from the Manfrin collection went to the National Gallery and at the lowest of prices. Woodburn was explicitly asked by the Trustees to inquire if the collection could be split, and requested to report back on prices of the works in the collection and their authenticity. These enquiries were to be made on strictly personal ground ‘without possibly entering into negotiations’.

Woodburn was thus asked to perform the arduous task to inspect the collection, negotiate its split, and, de facto, haggle on price without actually appearing to do so. Therefore, talks between Woodburn, the Manfrin heirs and the National Gallery proceeded for many weeks. Finally Woodburn provided the Trustees with a lengthy report in which he valued the collection and recommended its purchase. Nevertheless, the Trustees did not follow his advice and in June 1851 resolved ‘not to be in the position to make a recommendation to enter in negotiation for the purchase of such collection’. Woodburn was not paid for his services for months. Eventually, at the beginning of April 1852, the Trustees voted to recompense him with a reduced fee of £150 instead of the promised £200 for

NG3943; 28 February 1845, NG5/59/3, NG3943; 18 March 1845, NG5/59/6, NG3943; 24 March 1845, NG5/59/7, NG3943. 15 May 1845, NG5/60/5; NG3943. See also Robertson, 88–90.

12 5 May 1851, Letter to Messrs Uwins and Woodburn respecting their mission to Venice to inspect the Manfrin collection, NGA, NG5/86/9.


14 Letter of 5 May 1851 in which is stated Woodburn said that he will be paid £200 plus expenses, NGA NG6/2/4.

15 Letters of 7 May 1851, NGA, G5/86/10 and 5 May 1851 NG5/86/9. Woodburn must report on: 1) authenticity of the pictures, 2) conditions, 3) proportion of the whole collection desirable, 4) detailed valuation of the collection and 5) learn the history of the principal pictures, the collection being one of recent formation.

16 NGA, Board Minutes vol 2, 131–132.
reporting on the Manfrin collection. They also specified that the diminished fee included an additional task. Woodburn, in fact, was to travel to France (this time without Uwins) to effect ‘an inspection and report […] to the Trustees of Marshal Soult’s collection and other pictures of importance on sale at Paris during his stay in that city.’

The auction: the Soult Collection Sale

The sale to which the trustees referred was the forthcoming auction of the collection of Marshal Nicolas-Jean-de-Dieu Soult (1769-1851) [Fig. 2], Duke of Dalmatia, a French general and statesman who, while being employed as Napoleon’s military governor in Andalusia during the Peninsular War of 1807-1814, had amassed a large collection of mainly Spanish paintings, within which Bartolomé Esteban Murillo’s Immaculate Conception (Madrid, Prado) [Fig. 3] was the most celebrated. The collection, even if notoriously difficult to visit, had been well known in Paris, its

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17 6 April 1852, Letter to the Lords Commissioners of H.M. Treasury, regarding the gratuities for Mr Uwins and Mr Woodburn for reporting on the Manfrin collection in Venice and Marshal Soult’s collection in Paris, NGA, NG6/2/54.

18 The same sum was given to Thomas Uwins just for services in connection with the report on the Manfrin collection. ‘Resolved that the Trustees consider the sum of £150 a reasonable compensation to Mr. William Wodburn for his services on the above-mentioned occasion, such recompense to include an inspection and report by him to the Trustees of Marshal Soult’s collection, and of any other picture of importance on sale in Paris during his stay in that city’ NGA, Board Minutes, 5 April 1852, vol 2, 154–155.

19 For Soult’s military career, see Peter Hayman, Soult: Napoleon’s Maligned Marshal, London 1990. The Soult collection is reconstructed by Ignacio Cano Rivero, ‘Seville’s artistic heritage

Paris, commanded by the colonel and major, two battalions of Republican Guards and Gendarmerie Mobile, two companies of Engineers, a battery of Artillery, two squadrons of mounted Republican Guards and a squadron of Lancers’ rendered ‘military honours to the memory of the First Marshal of the Empire’. Flags, catafalques, roses and a huge crowd: the newspapers recounted the funeral of Soult with vivid tones of admiration. The ceremony displayed a magnificent spectacle of triumphal choreography of the newly established second French Empire of Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, who had recently gained power as prince-president by coup d’état on 5 December 1851, and was to be crowned Napoleon III the year after.

At the death of Soult’s wife, Jeanne Louise Elisabeth Berg (1771-1852), the family collection was then marketed to the public in the same vein of pomp and hyperbole as Soult’s death rites had been. The auction was to be held ‘dans l’ancienne Galerie Lebrun’, 8 Rue de Sentier, in Paris in May 19, 21 and 22, four months after Soult’s funeral. The art collection, like Soult’s life and death, was presented as a magnificent endeavour. Arguably, it was. It included a total of 155 paintings that, according to the catalogue, counted 15 works by Murillo ‘qui tous sont des morceaux capitaux’, 18 by Zurbarán, 4 by Ribera, 7 by Alonso Cano and 2 by Herrera el Viejo. It also comprised works by Sanchez Coello, Ribalta, Herrera and there were also some by Italian artists, notably by Titian and Sebastiano del Piombo. The catalogue stated the European importance of the collection, which was described as having a reputation more akin to a museum than a private gallery, and stressed the importance of the sale, described, almost in purple prose terms, as a unique and exciting event.

The high expectations of the sellers, and their hopes to reach an international public of buyers, were also confirmed by the fact that catalogues of the sale (as publicised in the catalogues themselves) were available to buy in thirty-one European cities, such as London, Paris, Rome, Amsterdam, Berlin, Bern and St.


23 The sale was authorized after the death of Madame Soult in March 1852. Penny, 262.


25 ‘Avant-Propos’, Catalogue Soult, IV.
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Petersburg [Fig. 4]. The public followed the hype, and the press followed the public, in what was felt to be a ‘society’ event: even before the sale newspapers reported crowds attending the three-days sale preview on May 16-18, the popularity of which was also increased by Presidential attendance: both Louis-Napoléon and his cousin Napoleon (Fitz-Jerome) Bonaparte had visited the show at length.\(^{26}\)

William Woodburn promptly travelled to Paris to inspect the works as instructed, staying at the Hotel Canterbury in Rue de la Paix.\(^ {27}\) On 23 April 1852 he reported back on the aesthetic and commercial value, as asked by Trustees, of the works by Murillo. The *Immaculate Conception* [Fig. 3] (Madrid, Prado) was originally Woodburn’s favourite but, after inspecting the work, he found it spoiled by excessive cleaning and valued it at £2,000.\(^ {28}\) The *Nativity of the Virgin* (Paris, Louvre) was ‘admirably managed’ and valued at £500, whereas *The Angel Delivering Saint Peter* (St Petersburg, Hermitage) was thought to be a ‘fine’ work, and valued at £2,000.\(^ {29}\) Woodburn’s preferred picture of the Spanish school, however, was a painting by Francisco Herrera el Viejo that represented ‘an assemblage of Saints

\(^{26}\) ‘France’, *The Times* (18 May 1852).
\(^{27}\) Letter, 23 April 1854, NGA NG5/90/2.
\(^{28}\) All references to paintings by Woodburn in the letter of 23 April 1854, NGA NG5/90/2.
\(^{29}\) Murillo (Barthélemy Esteban), Conception de la Vierge, *Catalogue Soult*, cat 57, 18.
Murillo (Barthélemy Esteban), Naissance de la Vierge, *Catalogue Soult*, cat 58, 18–19;
Murillo (Barthélemy Esteban), Saint Pierre Aux Liens, *Catalogue Soult*, cat 64, 22.
with the Holy Ghost descending’, a work ‘painted with powerful effect’ and that he estimated to be worth £1,200. This painting can be with certainty identified with *Saint Basil Dictating His Rule* (Paris, Louvre). Woodburn also recommended paintings by Zurbarán (£1,500), Morales (£600) and Sebastiano del Piombo (£1,500). But the work Woodburn felt was really superior to all others, and which he preferred out ‘of the whole collection’ was *The Tribute Money*, ‘a splendid effort by Titian’, ‘powerfully executed with surprising vigour and brilliant colouring’. Woodburn sketched an outline of *The Tribute Money* and sent it to the trustees with his report [Fig. 5].

![Figure 5 William Woodburn, after Titian, The Tribute Money, 1852. Pencil on paper. London: National Gallery Archive.](image)

This work was a rare rendition of a Biblical episode from Matthew’s Gospel, in which a group of Pharisees asked Jesus if Jews were due to pay taxes to the Roman Emperor. Jesus asked them to show him a coin and, pointing to Caesar’s name and inscription on it, said: ‘Render to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and give to God what is God’s’. This iconography, which Titian depicted in the exact moment when Christ uttered the final sentence of the Biblical story, had already been painted by Titian around 1516 for the Studiolo of Alfonso I Este in Ferrara, in a work much admired by Vasari and others (Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister). The Soult version, although not as celebrated as its earlier counterpart, had an illustrious

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30 Herrera Le Vieux (François), *Saint Basile dictant sa doctrine*, *Catalogue Soult*, cat 14, 6.  
32 Letter, 23 April 1854, NGA NG5/90/2.  
33 Matthew, 22:19.
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pedigree: it had left Titian’s study in October 1568 to be sent to Philip II in Madrid, and a letter by Titian confirmed its authenticity. The Tribute Money then remained in situ in the sacristy of the Escorial monastery until the Peninsular War, and was much admired there, being praised in the guide by Fray José de Sigüenza.34 After The Tribute Money joined the Soult collection its fame reached England, having been described by Abraham Hume in his 1828 biography of Titian.35 In his 1835 description Thoré had also listed it as one of the ‘magnifiques peintures Italiennes’ of the Soult collection.36 And similar praise waslavished on this work in the 1852 auction catalogue, where The Tribute Money was defined as a work of the best period of this painter, with life-like and animated skin tones; fresh, beautiful and harmonious colours; expressive figures and great ability in representing draperies: all characteristics of a true masterpiece by Titian.37 If doubts were at all expressed on this painting, they were mild and about its crowded and ineffectual composition: its authenticity was never doubted.38 Woodburn valued this work, which was signed and in good condition, at the highest price of all — £2,400, even higher than the celebrated Murillo.

But Woodburn’s job did not end with the evaluation of the Soult sale. As his official task was to inspect other sales in Paris, in a later letter he mentioned another possible source from which to draw National Gallery purchases. This was the collection of the recently deceased French politician Jean-Pierre Collot (1774-1852), a former friend of Napoleon, banker and patron of the arts, whose paintings were going to be auctioned on May 25 and 26 at the Hotel des Ventes in 42 Rue des Jeuneurs.39 The Collot collection was a lower-key affair compared to the prestigious Soult sale; nevertheless, it included 41 (mainly Italian) paintings and Woodburn gave the Trustees many cues for purchases, among which he particularly endorsed a Saint Catherine with Virgin, Christ Child, Infant Saint John and other Saints, by Palma il Vecchio (in the catalogue attributed to Giorgione) (present location unknown).

34 Quoted by Penny, 264.
36 ‘Le denier de César by Titien’. Thoré, 62.
37 ‘Pouvoir signaler ce tableau comme étant du meilleur temps du maître, n’est-ce pas d’un seul mot dire qu’on y retrouve ces carnations vraies et animées, ces belles teintes si fraîches et si harmonieuses, ces figures si expressives et ce grand goût de draperies qui distinguent les chefs-d’œuvre du Titien. Et une preuve que ce prince des coloristes fut lui-même satisfait de son ouvrage, c’est qu’il y a inscrit son nom, qu’il réservait, comme on le sait, à ses œuvres de prédilection. On lit sur une pierre : TITIANVS. F.’ Catalogue Soult, 43.
38 For instance, the reviewer for La Revue Contemporaine (1852), 468 had mixed praise for the work: ‘Le Denier de César est un Titien signé; il est de la meilleure touche du maître, mais non de son meilleur dessin’ (The Tribute Money by Titian is a signed work. It has the best touch of the master, but not his best composition).
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which he valued £1,000.\(^{40}\) Woodburn’s suggestions ranged from different geographical schools and comprised varying prices, but he always focused on what he felt worthy of the national collection. In the surviving correspondence, Woodburn does not give any clues about the exact criteria that he applied to arrive at these valuations, but from his comments we can evince that they were based on an assessment of the condition of the paintings, their provenance, perceived ‘quality’ (pictorial as well as compositional), and a current appraisal of the market. Nevertheless, it was a difficult moment to predict what prices works of art would fetch, as the old masters market did not yet possess that wide, stable base of buyers that it would develop at the end of the century, and prices were extremely volatile.

In the early 19th century in England even undisputed works by Titian had changed hands for varying sums.\(^{41}\) Fashion, as always, had a great impact on price. Earlier works by Titian were currently en vogue and were purchased for very high prices. For instance, his *Bacchus and Ariadne* (a work of 1520–1523) was bought by the National Gallery in 1826 from fashionable goldsmith and jeweller Thomas Hamlet for a then staggering £5,000; whereas his later paintings fared much worse or did not appear on the market at all.\(^{42}\) Besides, in the 1840s, no comparably significant work by Titian had been sold, the recorded auctions in that decade being a string of low prices and uncertain attributions.\(^{43}\)

The critical reception of Titian was not unconditional either. Philippa Simpson has noted how ‘accusations of gaudy colouring and faulty drawing were [...] familiar tropes in descriptions of Titian’s painting’.\(^{44}\) For these reasons, works such as the *Rape of Europa* (Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum) had a mixed reputation.\(^{45}\) Their openly sexual allure was also seen as a defect. Ruskin had condemned the sensuality of Titian’s *Penitent Magdalen* (Florence, Pitti Palace) describing it as ‘disgusting’.\(^{46}\) Hence, Woodburn’s valuation of £2,400 for *The Tribute Money* - less than half of the *Bacchus and Ariadne* sold over 25 years before - reflected this transitional moment in the painter’s critical and commercial trajectory. It would

\(^{40}\) Saint Catherine (Giorgione), *Catalogue Collot*, Paris, 1852, no. 9, 14–15. In a letter of 24 May 1852, Woodburn suggests to buy other works at the Collot sale: Andrea Solario, *Virgin with Child*, that he estimates at £600 (cat. 16); Salvador Rosa, *Landscape of Latona*, £500 (cat. 17); Rembrandt, *Portrait of Nicolas Tulp* £500 (cat. 33); NGA, NG5/92. None of these suggestions were accepted by the trustees.


be only at the turn of the 20th century that the whole oeuvre by Titian would gain a more homogeneous critical praise and prices of his work reach new heights.

After a few weeks, and further communications with Woodburn and the Treasury to seek funds for purchases, on the eve of the sale, on 17 May 1852, a final decision from the Trustees was eventually delivered to Woodburn. Of the eleven purchases proposed, the Trustees decided to act upon only three of them. From the Soult sale the Trustees selected the Murillo Immaculate Conception (a choice contrary to Woodburn’s advice) and The Tribute Money by Titian, whereas the only desideratum from the Collot sale was the Saint Catherine by Palma. Woodburn was to be officially employed by the gallery to act on these acquisitions. His allocated budget was: £3,000 for The Tribute Money, £1,500 for the Saint Catherine and £5,500 for the Immaculate Conception.\(^{47}\) The total expenditure authorised accrued to £10,000, a large amount of money at the time, and the exact sum which was later going to be established by the Treasury as the Gallery’s annual purchase grant after the 1855 reconstitution.\(^ {48}\) The amount of correspondence entered upon, its content and the size of the sum available for purchases in Paris demonstrate that the National Gallery considered Woodburn’s role and trip of great importance. Nevertheless, the reduced fee paid to him, £150, which equated to only 1.5% of the planned expense, and the fact that his advice was not entirely followed, demonstrates that this was not a collaborative relationship. The authority, both financial and cultural, rested firmly in the hands of the National Gallery Trustees. Woodburn merely rendered them a service, and his experience and expertise were neither highly valued nor fully relied upon. The extent of this lack of trust in Woodburn’s judgment will become more apparent as the events unfolded in the following months.

On 19 May 1852 the sale commenced. The collection preview had already attracted great attention. As The Times described, ‘it would really seem as if the curiosity of the public could never be satiated. The crowd that thronged the rooms in the three days of public view was so great that rendered moving in it a work of labour, and in the last day of all a complete block-up took place more than once during the view’.\(^ {49}\) The newspaper also recorded how choreographed the proceedings were: at exactly four o’clock in the afternoon, the usual order of the auction was to be interrupted to allow ‘certain of the most celebrated masterpieces’ to be sold.\(^ {50}\) Moreover, the beginning of the sale, originally scheduled for 1 pm, was delayed at the last minute to 2 pm, after a ‘notice was posted up about Paris’ in the morning.\(^ {51}\) The doors finally opened at 1.30pm and ‘in five minutes […] the three rooms in which the pictures had been exposed were crowded to inconvenience’.\(^ {52}\) The police had to intervene to manage the rush of attendees, who included ‘many

\(^{47}\) Board Minutes 10 May 1852, vol 2, 163–164, NGA.


\(^{49}\) ‘The Soult Gallery’, The Times (22 May 1852). Hereafter cited as Soult Times.

\(^{50}\) Soult Times.

\(^{51}\) Soult Times.

\(^{52}\) Soult Times.
agents from the principal cities of Europe’ – such as Otto Mündler who acted as purchaser for ‘Le Roi de Prusse’, the royal museums in Berlin.\(^{53}\) The social dynamics of art auctions have been famously explored by anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, who defined them ‘tournaments of values’, in which participants, often of rank, compete for the social status that the goods on sale confer.\(^{54}\) At the Soult sale, cultural authority was contested together with social and political status, and Woodburn had to battle not only with formidable aristocrat collectors such as the Duke of Galliera (Raffaele de Ferrari), the Marquess of Hertford (Richard Seymour-Conway), and buyers for the royal houses of Spain and Russia, but also with agents from the Louvre, the Berlin museums and other public galleries.

The high profile of the works for sale, together with the hype by the press and the aggressive marketing tactics by the sellers, resulted in a stiff competition by the buyers, and many of Woodburn’s valuations were significantly lower than the prices for which the pictures eventually sold. The *Immaculate Conception* by Murillo was the most striking case. Valued at £4,000 by Woodburn, it was the subject of a bidding war between the agents for the Marquess of Hertford, Queen Isabel II of Spain and the Czar Nicholas I of Russia, who led the price initially up to 400,000 Francs (£16,000). This figure already amply surpassed the budget of the National Gallery, and at this point Woodburn left the salesroom.\(^{55}\) The bidding, however, continued and at 580,000 Francs (£23,200) the Spanish agent, who was until then determined to gain the picture, gave up. A final bid of 586,000 Francs (£23,400) by an unknown ‘gentleman seated in front of the auctioneer’ eventually secured the picture.\(^{56}\) The enormous price, a record at the time for a public auction, was greeted by cheers by the audience but ‘this applause became absolute enthusiasm when it was ascertained that the purchaser was M. [Emilien de] Nieuwerkerke, the director of the National museums’.\(^{57}\) And when the auctioneer, Bonnefons de Lavialle, announced officially that the painting was going to be part of the Louvre’s collection the excitement redoubled.\(^{58}\)

The purchase of the *Immaculate Conception* was more than the acquisition of a work of art; it was a symbolic affirmation of prestige, status and economical power by the French state. France had claimed these works during its political occupation of Spain during the Peninsular War and even at times of free trade was able to hold on to them. As Helen Rees Leahy has pointed out, ‘the framing of the work of art as an object for sale is always permeated by the cultural, social and material networks in which it exists and circulates’,\(^{59}\) and the *Immaculate Conception* was simultaneously an economic commodity, an art historical masterpiece, an

\(^{53}\) *Soult Times*.


\(^{55}\) Letter, 20 May 1852, NGA, NG5/91/5.

\(^{56}\) *Soult Times*.

\(^{57}\) *Soult Times*.

\(^{58}\) *Soult Times*.

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aristocratic heirloom, a prized museum exhibit and a cipher of France’s continuing cultural, political and economic supremacy.\(^{60}\)

The circumstances through which the National Gallery fetched the Titian at the Soult sale, however, were very different. After the first day the novelty wore off, the crowds started to diminish and the last day was the quietest of all. *The Tribute Money* was the final important lot of the sale.\(^{61}\) It was described by *The Times* as containing ‘only three figures’, a comment that carried a hint of disappointment at a time when Academic painters priced their work by figure and a crowded composition was more highly regarded as a display of skill.\(^{62}\) The reviewer, however, praised the colour of the work, judging it ‘above all remarkable, and which renders it worthy to bear the inscription ‘Titianus F’ which is seen on it.’\(^{63}\) Compared to the thrill of the previous days, the bidding was reported in subdued tones and the sale of the painting was resolved in a few lines: ‘it was put up at 15,000f [£600] and rose rapidly to 50,000f [£2,000]. A pause ensued at that point, but the bidding were then resumed up to 62,000f [£2,400] when it was knocked down to Mr. Redburn [in error for Woodburn], his principal opponent having been Mr. Townend [sic].’\(^{64}\)

Even if this was the highest price recently paid for a work by Titian, it was hardly a match for the excitement created by the Murillo sale and the symbolic values contested within it. Successive announcements in the press that this work was purchased for the National Gallery were remarkably understated.\(^{65}\) Nevertheless, Woodburn was delighted to have been able to acquire the work he thought the best of all, well within the National Gallery’s agreed budget, and knocked-down for almost exactly his original estimate of £2,400.

The Callot sale had also been equally successful. The *Saint Catherine* had been withdrawn from the sale as it failed to reach its reserve price but Woodburn had been able to convince the auctioneer to agree to a private sale of this work. Thanks to his skilled negotiation Woodburn had acquired the *Saint Catherine* for £168, one fifth less than his original estimate of £1,000.\(^{66}\) Satisfied with this purchase, and with over £7,000 left to spend, on 3 June he suggested to the National Gallery trustees the purchase of Herrera’s *Saint Basil Dictating His Rule*, which had also been withdrawn at the Soult sale as it had failed to reach a reserve, but now was available


\(^{61}\) It was lot number 132, before the Dutch and Flemish pictures, that did not sell for more than 2,050 francs.


\(^{63}\) ‘The Soult Gallery’, *The Times* (24 May 1852).

\(^{64}\) ‘The Soult Gallery’, *The Times* (24 May 1852).


\(^{66}\) Letter, 27 May 1852, NGA, NG5/92/4
privately for about 20,000 Francs (circa £800). Woodburn also added a sketch of the work (probably traced from a print) to entice the Trustees [Fig. 6]. His advice, however, was not followed and this last suggestion was not even granted a reply.  

Woodburn’s choices for the National Gallery were not to prove successful. After being inspected by the Trustees the painting of Saint Catherine by Palma (the present whereabouts of which are unknown) was not considered of quality ‘as such to make it an advisable addition to the National Collection’ and was ‘transferred’ to the Chairman of the Trustees Lord Lansdowne, who paid back to the gallery the full price of the work, £168, in July 1852. After this unique circumstance in the history of the museum, where a work purchased was bought-in by one of the trustees, William Woodburn was not asked again to act for the National Gallery.

The attribution: The Tribute Money controversy

It is possible that the Trustees did not reply to Woodburn’s letter also because, as early as 8 June 1852, a heated controversy regarding the purchase of the Titian had begun. If the sale of this work was uneventful, its subsequent acquisition history was turbulent. As the most expensive work bought by the National Gallery in recent years, The Tribute Money was used as ammunition in a battle that had been waged since the mid-1840 against the National Gallery administration, fronted by the Liberal politician and collector William Coningham and the artist-dealer John Morris Moore against the National Gallery administration. Coningham and Moore, together with the famous art critic John Ruskin, were among the loudest, but by no

67 In 1858 Saint Basil Dictating His Rule was purchased for the Louvre, and the attribution to Herrera still stands unquestioned.

68 Board Minutes, vol 2, 182–183; Confirmation of this from the Treasury in a letter of 31 July 1852 NGS/93/5.
means the only, voices who condemned the National Gallery policies. The debate veered around these contentious points: the conservation of works of art, their attributions, and modalities of their acquisition – the latter focusing particularly on prices paid and on the relationship of the National Gallery with the art trade. The dispute had gained momentum nearly a decade before, following the 1844 acquisition by the then Keeper Charles Eastlake of *A Man with a Skull*, a portrait which was bought as by Hans Holbein, but soon considered ‘spurious’; namely, of doubtful autography, and which is now tentatively attributed to Michiel Coxcie.

The sums paid for National Gallery purchases were also criticised, especially by Moore, who believed that the Gallery bought works for ‘enormous prices’, while better and cheaper paintings were refused or neglected. Suspicions also lingered towards the auction market, which was perceived as a site of uncertainty and deceit. As Ruskin rhetorically had asked, why could not the National Gallery buy at the source from Italy, rather than spending government money ‘like pebbles’ in the salesroom?

The same three main arguments - attribution, price and relationship with the trade - were also levied against the Titian purchase. The modalities of the acquisition were criticised first. As soon as June 1852, Francis Charteris enquired in the House of Commons if it was true that *The Tribute Money* had been offered for sale to the National Gallery for £1,200 a few months before.

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69 Moore was especially on the warpath against the National Gallery. Verax, ‘The National Gallery’, *The Times* (19 November 1846), reprinted in: Verax, *The Abuses of the National Gallery*, London, 1847, 9–12; Further polemics followed when Moore purchased a painting of *Apollo and Marsyas* that he attributed to Raphael (now ascribed to Perugino, Paris, Louvre) and in 1851 he offered it, in vain, for sale to the National Gallery. After the German art historian Johann David Passavant denied the attribution to Raphael, and thus its possibility to be acquired by the National Gallery, Moore further increased his belligerent attitude towards the gallery. Haskell, ‘Martyr’, 154–174. Also Robertson, 92–93. Coningham criticised NG purchases and acquisition policy, for instance in 1850 he stated that Murillo’s *Holy Family* had been bought earlier in the year by a private individual for £1,800 then purchased from Messrs. Yates for the Nation in 1837 for £6,300. W. Coningham, ‘To the Editor of Times’, *The Times* (7 January 1850). In 1853 Coningham defined *Saint Francis in Meditation* by Zurbarán (NG230), bought from King Louis Philippe’s Spanish Gallery sale (lot 50, £265), a ‘bad picture’. Coningham compared it negatively with lot. 142 of that sale, bought by an agent of the King of Prussia for only £165. W. Coningham, ‘The New Purchase For The National Gallery’, *The Times* (10 May 1853). See also Francis Haskell, ‘William Coningham and his collection of Old Masters’, *The Burlington Magazine* 133 (October 1991), 676–681.

70 This purchase is described in detail by Robertson, 85–88.

71 Verax, 9–12.


73 ‘House Of Commons’, *The Times* (7 June 1852); ‘House of Commons Report’, *The Observer* (13 June 1852), ‘House of Commons, Tuesday, June 8’, *The Times* (9 June 1852); ‘House of Commons’, *The Economist* (12 June 1852). In the 1853 report of the select committee, Morris Moore testified that the work was sent to London ‘by the executors of Marshal Soult and consigned to Mr. Nieuwenhuys, at whose house it was seen by some of the Trustees’.
Minister William Ewart Gladstone (1809-1898), then Chancellor of the Exchequer, gave an eloquent answer, which at the same time clarified the workings of the market and defended the *modus operandi* of the National Gallery. Gladstone explained that before a large sale works could be offered speculatively to principal collectors at a price that may turn out to be lower than the sum eventually knocked-down at auction, but he stated that it was best to focus on what had indeed happened, rather than on how events may have been. Gladstone firmly believed the nation had purchased a very valuable picture by Titian at a moderate price.

Gladstone’s pragmatic approach attempted to smooth over the controversies that can be read between the lines of his speech. For instance, his reference to the picture as ‘undoubtedly by Titian’ is significant as doubts on the attribution to Titian had, in fact, started to emerge.

Gladstone’s pacifying intervention, however, did not stop the doubts, and the outcries on the purchases, restorations and management of the National Gallery continued. Heated personal comments on the Titian contributed to stir the controversies: in May 1853 Coningham from the pages of *The Times* called this work a ‘pasticcio’, a hotchpot, of an earlier version of Titian of the same subject in the Dresden gallery. Finally in May 1853 the government appointed a Select Committee to discuss the management of the National Gallery, especially its administration, conservation and purchases. Then, 49 witnesses (Eastlake, Moore and Coningham among them) were consulted in the course of 21 sessions from 18 April until 3 August 1853. *The Tribute Money* was highly debated in the course of the Select Committee and, although Woodburn was officially praised by Eastlake as ‘one of the best connoisseurs in this country’, his opinion on the work ultimately was not upheld. Coningham reiterated that the work was a ‘pasticcio’, and Moore affirmed that, although ‘possessing considerable merit for colour’ it was ‘falsely attributed’.

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Testimony of M. Moore, 22 July 1853, *1853 Report*, 679. Nieuwenhuys had been earlier interviewed by the Select Committee but was only asked his opinion regarding conservation techniques. See the testimony of J.C. Nieuwenhuys, 3 May 1853, *1853 Report*, 88–97.

Gladstone, a collector himself, had orchestrated the National Gallery acquisition of the Krüger collection in 1854, see Whitehead, 149; Marcia Pointon, ‘W.E. Gladstone as an Art Patron and Collector’, *Victorian Studies*, 19 (September 1975), 73–98.


House of Commons Debate, *Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates*, vol 124, 8 March 1853, cc1307–18. For full minutes of this committee see *1853 Report*.

Proceedings of the committee are listed in *1853 Report*, xix–xxv.

Testimony of Sir C. Eastlake, P.R.A., 17 June 1853, *1853 Report*, 434–435. It was also asked by the Colonel Mure ‘Then it must be considered as an error of judgement on the part of Mr. William Woodburn, and that there was no fault on the part of the Trustees except in attaching so much importance to the judgement of Mr. William Woodburn?’ To which Eastlake replied: ‘That is a very indulgent judgement to pass upon the Trustees’, *1853 Report*, 435.
ascribed’ to Titian and ‘a work of Titian’s school’. Henry Wellesley, a distinguished collector and connoisseur of drawings, also doubted this work and stated that if the gallery was led by a single director rather than a board of trustees, a director would have stopped this purchase. Trustee William Russell half-heartedly defended the purchase, stating that it was a genuine work of Titian but also affirming that he was ‘somehow disappointed’ by it when the picture arrived in the country and that he did not ‘advocate this as a fine work of Titian’. It was becoming apparent that the acquisition of *The Tribute Money* was a weapon used by some to criticise the actions of Eastlake as former Trustee of the Gallery. Coningham was especially vociferous on this respect. In a House of Commons debate in 1857, he stated:

[In 1850] Sir C. Eastlake became President of the Royal Academy, and, unfortunately for himself, ex officio Trustee of the National Gallery. In that capacity he was responsible for another series of purchases, which, to a great extent, were distinguished by the same errors as those he made when keeper. He might allude, among others, to the purchase of “The Tribute Money” by Titian, from the collection of Marshal Soult, which was undoubtedly a spurious work, and recognized as such by some of the most competent judges in Europe, and for this Sir Charles had the folly to pay the enormous sum of £2,613 3s. 2d.

The whole purchase was described in some quarters as a complete fiasco. The artist and art writer William Dyce levied further criticism in his 1853 pamphlet, *The National Gallery, its formation and management*, where he denounced as conflict of interest the use of local art dealers as agents by the gallery. While Dyce agreed that the National Gallery should employ the advice of specialists - especially to ensure the authenticity of the works of art bought - he pointed out that the ‘expert judges’ so far consulted, William Woodburn and Henry Farrar, were dealers from whose stock the gallery was an active purchaser. Dyce thus warned against the potential for collusion and dishonesty.

According to the National Gallery critics, *The Tribute Money* had been acquired in the wrong manner, for the wrong price and, in addition, it was not by Titian anyway. But, were there perhaps other reasons behind the ignited controversies around this painting? Certainly, Coningham, Moore and Dyce had their own personal axes to grind against the National Gallery, as each had a hidden agenda composed of lucrative consideration and/or social aspirations. Coningham’s

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81 ‘Do you think it is a Titian?’ ‘I had rather not be asked that question; even if it be a Titian I do not think a single director would have recommended its purchase for our gallery’; Testimony by H. Wellesley, 21 July 1853, *1853 Report*, 665.
85 Dyce, 44–45.
position was particularly ambivalent: he had previously donated works to the
collection, but also harboured resentment because the gallery had not purchased
anything at the 1849 sale of his own collection. Moreover, as Haskell suggests,
Coningham had hoped in an official National Gallery appointment.  

Equally, Moore had wished to supply paintings to the National Gallery and he had also
aspired to a position there. In addition, Coningham and Moore shared a profound
dislike of Eastlake. Their comments against the acquisition of The Tribute Money can
be therefore interpreted as criticism directed towards Eastlake, which was perhaps
also motivated by the disappointment for their own lack of a professional position
at the National Gallery, as much as arguments vented against the painting itself.

An altogether more measured character than Coningham or Moore, Dyce too
had been mentioned as possible candidate for the directorship. Therefore his
comment about the dangers to employ local art dealer as agents are perhaps to be
interpreted as express to convey his own ethos of honesty and transparency. The
feelings of suspicion and mistrust expressed by Dyce towards art dealers, however,
were very topical at the time. A deep contempt for professional mediators was also
present in the writings, and actions, of the much influential critic John Ruskin.
Although Ruskin had a friendly relationship with Eastlake, he did not criticise the
Titian acquisition, and he was not aiming to undermine the new director, he too had
an agenda that is worth highlighting here. Ruskin, in fact, had wished to select in
person works for the National Gallery. In 1852, just in the same weeks when
Woodburn was fetching The Tribute Money in Paris, Ruskin had set his heart into
purchasing four paintings by Tintoretto, which were still in situ in Venetian
churches. Ruskin tellingly confided to Eastlake that he believed he ‘could get at
some pictures which a picture dealer could not’.

A crucial matter contested by Dyce and Ruskin was on who should
claim the cultural authority to decide and
practically procure purchases for the nation.

The acquisition of The Tribute Money, then, flared up two different strands of
controversy. The first was fomented by the political polemics, headed by figures
such as Coningham and Moore, against the National Gallery administration. The
second was provoked by the mistrust against professional dealers expressed by a
faction of critics and collectors, such as Dyce and Ruskin, who aimed to disentangle
National Gallery acquisitions from the (perceived) control of the London art trade.
Both Eastlake and Woodburn then sat on a metaphorical accused’s dock. Eastlake,
however, had been able to defend his decisions during the 1853 Select Committee. By
separating his own work, competencies and ethos from the actions of the other
Trustees, had succeeded in deflecting any blame for this acquisition and managed to
survive the 1853 questioning in such a strong position that he was subsequently, to

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December 1884).
89 John Ruskin to Charles Eastlake, Letter, 10 March 1852, New York, Pierpont Morgan
Library, Ms MA2239. Robertson, 126–129.
much chagrin of Coningham and Moore, offered the directorship of the National Gallery. Woodburn had not been so fortunate. He had not been invited to state his position at the 1853 Select Committee and, in absentia, he emerged as the guilty part in the Titian affair or, perhaps, the scapegoat.

Figure 7 Charles Lock Eastlake, *Ippolita Torelli*, 1851. Oil on Canvas, dimensions unknown. Formerly London: Tate (destroyed 1928).

It is also worth noting that there was yet another complicating factor. Many of the critics of *The Tribute Money* were professional artists with an active practice and who occupied institutional positions: Eastlake was President of the Royal Academy and William Dyce was a Royal Academician and part of the Council of the Royal College of Art. At the time, the imitation of Italian art of the past was greatly en vogue. Particularly, earlier sixteenth-century Venetian painting and Roman grand manner, or the Raphaelesque purity of the late-fifteenth century – the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood had been founded in 1848. Works of this period by Eastlake and Dyce are exemplary of such eclectic choices. Paintings like *The Escape of Francesco Novello di Carrara, with his Wife, from the Duke of Milan* of 1853 (London, Tate) and *Ippolita Torelli* of 1851 [Fig. 7] (formerly London, Tate) by Eastlake; *The

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91 Conlin notes that Eastlake was not the only candidate for the directorship, other candidates were James Dennistoun, George Scharf and William Dyce. Conlin, 248–250. Also commented by Whitehead, 141.
Meeting of Jacob and Rachel of 1850 [Fig. 8] (Leicester, New Walk Museum) by Dyce employ well-defined areas of colour and shade and a tendency to align the figures on the surface plane of the picture, all characteristic of the younger Titian but absent in his later work.

The preference for earlier paintings by Titian and the dislike expressed for later works such as The Tribute Money can be seen then as part of the dialogue of living painters with their predecessors. But painters like Eastlake and Dyce were also cultural operators: their actions as such were also spurred on by their artistic practice. The selection of the art of the past displayed in the National Gallery, in which Raphael and young Titian were presented as the apex, created a counterpart to the contemporary art of Eastlake and Dyce shown next door in the Royal Academy (until 1869 the National Gallery and Royal Academy shared the same building in Trafalgar Square), and established a continuum in the history of art that legitimised the work of living painters. The Tribute Money, as a late, painterly work by Titian disrupted this narrative.

Conclusion

It is, then, wholly unsurprising that the attribution of The Tribute Money to Titian was to be abandoned. Even if the National Gallery officially maintained the attribution to Titian until Frederic Burton’s 1889 catalogue, the splendour of this work was somehow tarnished and it came to languish in the background of Titian’s oeuvre. For instance, already in the 1865 catalogue of works in the National Gallery, written by Ralph Nicholson Wornum and revised by Eastlake, even if The Tribute Money was still attributed to Titian its entry was remarkably curt: only its Biblical reference and provenance were reported in four lines, whereas the other eight Titian paintings listed were provided with a lengthier description of their subject, which in
the case of the *Bacchus and Ariadne* extended to fifteen lines. A final blow to the painting was inflicted in 1877. Then, Crowe and Cavalcaselle dismissed the attribution of *The Tribute Money* with finality, judging it executed with ‘a treatment far more crude and unsatisfactory than we can concede even to Palma Giovine in his bad days’.

In 1878 Henry Blackburn witnessed that *The Tribute Money* was labelled ‘School of Titian’ in the galleries and hung on the north wall of Gallery XIV in a secondary position well above the eye-line, as it was displayed above a large painting, the portrait of *La Dama in Rosso* by Giovanni Battista Moroni. In 1888 Edward Cook reiterated the doubts on the attribution, ‘Titian’s great picture on this subject is at Dresden, this is probably a reminiscence by some pupil in his school’. It was not until Wethey’s monograph in 1969 that the painting was again ascribed to Titian and Woodburn’s opinion on *The Tribute Money* fully vindicated.

Penny has eloquently described the case of *The Tribute Money* as an example of connoisseurship disregarding provenance. Yet, in light of the new documents examined, it can also be described as a case of professional prejudice, personal agendas and commercial questions overriding any kind of evidence. As shown, the dispute around this painting was not debated by recurring to stylistic, documentary or even logical arguments, but enacted according to subjective scripts, where prices and hype influenced strongly the valuation of aesthetical worth. The sale was a crucial element to determine the picture’s fortune: if Murillo’s *Immaculate Conception* enjoyed ‘celebrity status’ and the prestige and price of a masterpiece, the understated purchase of *The Tribute Money* through the mediation of a mistrusted agent had a direct impact on the diminishing of its status as work of art.

Going beyond the single case study, this paper has complicated a well-known layer of the social history of connoisseurship: its relationship with

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95 ‘If the Tribute Money to which Titian alludes in his letter be that which once formed part of the treasure brought from Spain by Marshal Soult, and now belongs to the National Collection, it bears the master’s name, yet displays a treatment far more crude and unsatisfactory than we can concede even to Palma Giovine in his bad days. Nor can it be supposed that Titian would send such a picture as his own to the King of Spain, unless he secretly despised, and could with impunity challenge the taste of the Monarch’, John Archer Crowe and Giovan Battista Cavalcaselle, *Titian: His Life and Times*, London: John Murray, 1877, 389.


99 Penny, 262.

100 Penny, 262.
commerces. The argument developed here has not followed the well-trodden path of scholarly enquiry that connects directly the naming practice of attribution with the valuation scale of the art market: namely the fact that when a work is attributed to a more prominent artist its commercial value will certainly increase. Instead, it has placed the connection between market and connoisseurship, within the complex dynamics of art sales as ‘tournament of values’, and shown how these social competitions, and the pricing resulting from them, can have a direct, significant and long-lasting impact on an artwork’s historiography.

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101 This particular view of connoisseurship and the market has been especially explored in studies that analyse the relationship between Berenson and Duveen, see for instance, Rachel Cohen, Bernard Berenson, a life in the picture trade, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013, esp. 84–156; see also Catherine Scallen, Rembrandt, Reputation and the Practice of Connoisseurship, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003.

102 Appadurai, 3–63 [20–25].