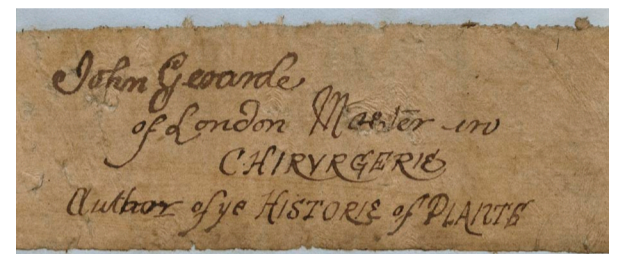


Understanding the History of Ownership

What is 'provenance'?

When applied to art objects the word 'provenance' is used to refer to the origin of a work and where it has been since it was created. The provenance of a painting often describes who has owned the picture over time. There are sometimes marks on the backs of paintings which can help to trace its history.

For example, fragments of a label on the back of the portrait previously thought to be the Duke of Monmouth (NPG 1566), on display in this room, suggest that the portrait was previously owned by the Wray family (see image top right).



This label was found on the back of the portrait formerly thought to be John Gerard (NPG 1306), confirming this previous identification.

Documentary sources can also provide vital details which can help us understand how they were valued and where they came from. The letter pictured right is from the fine art dealer who sold the portrait formerly known as Margaret Tudor (NPG 1173), to the National Portrait Gallery in 1898. It gives details both about the previous owner and who the sitter was thought to represent before it was identified as Margaret Tudor.

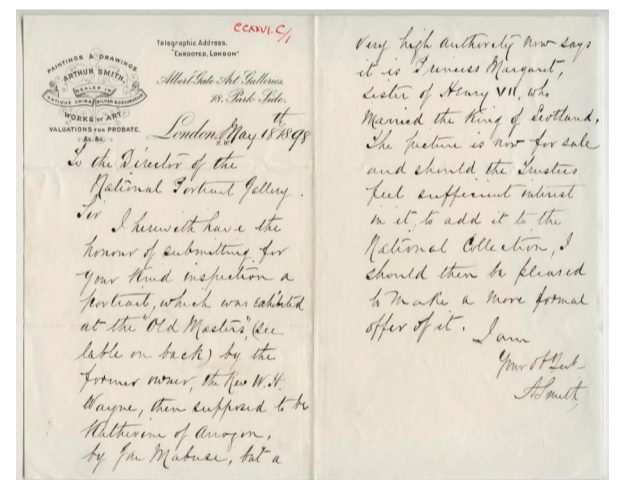


Image of letter from Arthur Smith dealers regarding the portrait formerly known as Margaret Tudor (NPG 1173)

From the time a painting leaves an artist's studio, it begins a life of its own that often outlives the original owner. Sometimes a portrait will remain in the same family and is passed down from generation to generation, but often portraits are sold or given away to other owners. Some, such as those on display in this room, make their way to a public gallery such as the National Portrait Gallery.

The older the work of art, the harder it can be to trace its entire history and it can sometimes prove impossible. The portrait formerly known as Sir Ralph Winwood (NPG 40) on display in this room, for instance, has been in the collection of the National Portrait Gallery since 1858, just two years after it opened, but despite attempts by various researchers, its provenance cannot be traced beyond its previous owner.



Unknown man, formerly known as Sir Ralph Winwood by unknown artist
Oil on canvas, c.1617-20 (NPG 40)

Understanding the History of Ownership

Why is the provenance important?

Before entering the National Portrait Gallery's collection, most portraits have changed owners several times. This journey of transferred ownership can result in a clearer understanding of a work of art. For example, knowing who originally owned a portrait can sometimes help us to identify the sitter as portraits are likely to have been commissioned or bought by a family member or friend. Also, establishing the provenance of a painting is important in helping to ensure that the work is authentic and has not been stolen at some time in its history.

How has provenance helped with the research for this exhibition?

All of the portraits on display in this exhibition were acquired by the National Portrait Gallery as portraits of known sitters. However, since the date of their acquisition, research has caused the Gallery to remove the identities that they have previously been given. In some cases this is because there is no strong evidence to confirm the identity but in other cases curators are now certain that the previously attributed identity was incorrect.

The aim of the National Portrait Gallery, is to exhibit portraits that promote the appreciation and understanding of the men and women who have made or are making British history and culture. As such, the identity of a sitter is very important and without it, a portrait cannot be displayed at the gallery in London. The research undertaken for this exhibition has helped to further our knowledge of the sitters in these portraits and given us more information about who they might be or who they definitely are not. Much of this research has been guided by the provenance of the works.



The following example demonstrates how knowledge of provenance has been used to attempt to discover more about portraits in this exhibition:

Portrait of an unknown man, formerly known as Sir Thomas Overbury (NPG 2613)



Sir Robert Dudley,
Duke of Northumberland
by Nicholas Hilliard
© Nationalmuseum, Stockholm

Research into the history of this portrait has uncovered evidence to suggest that the sitter may be Sir Robert Dudley (1574-1649), son of Queen Elizabeth I's favourite, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester (1532/3-1588). The portrait was purchased by the National Portrait Gallery in 1933, from a sale of the 17th Viscount Dillon's estate at Ditchley Park. Through tracing the history of the Ditchley estate, one previous owner seemed a likely connection to the portrait: Elizabethan courtier Sir Henry Lee (1533-1611). A patron of the arts and owner of a large picture gallery, Lee had purchased Ditchley in 1583. Through this connection, Lee's godson, the young Robert Dudley, became a prime candidate for the sitter's lost identity. After cross-referencing this painting with known portraits of Dudley as well as other potential sitters, it has become evident that the sitter bears a striking resemblance to a portrait of Robert Dudley by the artist Nicholas Hilliard, now in the National Museum, Stockholm.