

News release

Friday 31 March 2023

Statement from National Portrait Gallery and Getty on plans to share Reynolds' *Portrait of Mai*

The National Portrait Gallery and Getty today announced plans to jointly acquire and share ownership of Sir Joshua Reynolds' masterpiece, *Portrait of Mai (Omai)*, in a new model of international collaboration that will maximize public access to this supremely important work.

The announcement follows long-term discussion and planning by the partners, who intend to share the work for public exhibition, research, and conservation care. The London-based National Portrait Gallery and the Los Angeles-based Getty Museum intend to enter a joint ownership agreement, and in both locations, the public will be able to view the work free of charge.

Nicholas Cullinan, Director of the National Portrait Gallery, said: "We are delighted to announce an innovative and exciting strategic partnership with Getty to hopefully become co-owners of Sir Joshua Reynolds' majestic *Portrait of Mai* and a joint endeavour to advance scholarship and understanding of the fascinating and complex themes the work embodies. The portrait is unique in both British and world culture and yet has never been in a museum collection: now it has the potential to be in two, one facing the Pacific from where Mai came, and the other only yards from Reynolds' studio, where it was painted. For the Gallery it is important that this outstanding portrait is for the UK public, and we will share it with other institutions across the country. This is a painting that should belong to all of us and we know it will mean a great deal to our combined audiences, locally, nationally and globally. We would like to thank the owner of *Portrait of Mai* for working with us so collaboratively and all those who have donated so far, for making this painting within our reach."

Arts and Heritage Minister Lord Parkinson of Whitley Bay, said: "I am absolutely delighted that, thanks to the export bar process, the National Portrait Gallery and Getty are closing in on finalising a deal so this exceptional painting will be able to be viewed by members of the public from across the UK, and across the globe. Both institutions have worked tirelessly to make this joint acquisition possible, and I would like to thank them for their stellar efforts, as well as all those who have generously made donations, particularly Art Fund and the National Heritage Memorial Fund."

Katherine E. Fleming, CEO of the J. Paul Getty Trust, said: "Getty, which strives to identify new models for thinking about and sharing cultural heritage, is delighted by this opportunity to participate in an innovative approach to ownership – one that maximizes accessibility and viewability while placing *Portrait of Mai* in a rich and multi-faceted transatlantic context."

Timothy Potts, Maria-Hummer Tuttle and Robert Tuttle director of the J. Paul Getty Museum, said: "Reynolds' *Portrait of Mai* is both an icon of British portraiture and a uniquely noble representation of a person of color from the Pacific islands—a region that was in Mai's day being colonized by Britain and other European nations. Reynolds depicts his subject in a pose at once beneficent and commanding,

modelled loosely on some famous ancient Roman sculptures. The complex artistic and historical issues that this painting raises will form the basis for a joint research initiative on 18th century British portraiture involving exhibitions, conferences, and technical investigations. We hope very much that this acquisition and the collaborations that flow from it will inspire other innovative models of collecting, sharing, and protecting artistic heritage across nations, cultures, and peoples."

Nearly eight feet high, Reynolds' spectacular image of Mai holds a pivotal place in global art history, depicting the first Polynesian to visit Britain, and is widely regarded as the finest portrait by one of Britain's greatest artists.

Known as "Omai" in England, Mai (ca. 1753-1780) was a native of Raiatea, an island now part of French Polynesia, who traveled from Tahiti to England with Captain James Cook. He spent the years 1774-76 in London, where he was received by royalty and the intellectual elite, and indeed became something of a celebrity. Mai returned to his homeland in 1777 and died there two years later.

If the National Portrait Gallery is successful in the final phase of its fundraising campaign, the painting will first be exhibited at the Gallery, which will reopen, following its recent transformation, in June 2023. Mai will travel periodically between the two countries, sharing time equally between them, including being displayed in the Getty Museum when Los Angeles hosts the 2028 Olympic Games.

This collaboration follows previous joint initiatives of the NPG and Getty, including the publication of the National Portrait Gallery's Later Victorian Portraits Catalogue, which began in 2003, and a current project on the Gallery's Lucian Freud Archive, both funded by the Getty Foundation.

Each partner will contribute half of the £50m funds needed to acquire the painting. The NPG has raised the majority of the funding, including a significant £10m pledge by the National Heritage Memorial Fund, an Art Fund grant of £2.5m, the largest in its history, and many donations from generous trusts, foundations, and individuals. This leaves just under £1m remaining and the National Portrait Gallery is continuing to fundraise.

The partnership has the support of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Arts Council England, the National Heritage Memorial Fund and Art Fund who have all welcomed this innovative approach.



Installation view of Portrait of Mai (Omai), Sir Joshua Reynolds c 1776, Oil on canvas; 236 x 145.5cm. Image courtesy of the owner.

ENDS

About Joshua Reynolds' Portrait of Mai (Omai)

Reynolds painted Mai while at the height of his creative powers, exhibiting the portrait at the Royal Academy of Arts in London in 1776. He portrayed his imposing subject barefoot before a tropical landscape, dressed in flowing robes, including a traditional tapa (bark-cloth) sash, and a headdress (Mai is known to have dressed in British clothes while in London). His pose and hand gestures were probably inspired by the Apollo Belvedere, then one of the most admired antique sculptures, celebrated by Winckelmann in 1755 as the classical epitome of "noble simplicity and quiet grandeur." While Mai's face affects a distant, heroic gaze and bears the hallmarks of idealization, there is an unmistakable individuality in his strong facial features and tattooed hands.

Reynolds, who apparently painted Mai's portrait for personal reasons, kept the picture in his London studio until his death in 1792. It was shortly after acquired by Frederick Howard, 5th Earl of Carlisle, who installed it in his country estate, Castle Howard, in Yorkshire, England. The painting remained there until 2001, when it was acquired at auction by a private collector, who has now offered it for sale.

About National Portrait Gallery

Founded in 1856, the National Portrait Gallery tells the story of Britain through portraits, using art to bring history to life and explore living today. From global icons, to unsung heroes, our Collection is filled with the stories that have shaped, and continue to shape a nation. We celebrate the power of portraiture and offer encounters with some of the world's greatest and most exciting new artists, promoting engagement with portraiture in all media to a wide-ranging public by conserving, growing and sharing the world's largest collection of portraits.

The Gallery in St Martin's Place, London is currently closed until 22 June 2023, while essential building works take place on the Inspiring People redevelopment project, which will transform the Gallery, including a complete refurbishment of the building and a new learning centre. During the closure period, we have continued to share our Collection digitally, as well as through a series of nationwide partnerships and collaborations.

www.npg.org.uk

About Getty

Getty is a leading global arts organization committed to the exhibition, conservation, and understanding of the world's artistic and cultural heritage. Based in Los Angeles, Getty's Foundation, Conservation Institute, Museum, and Research Institute work collaboratively with partners around the world. Getty shares art, knowledge, and resources online at Getty.edu and welcomes the public for free at its Getty Center and the Getty Villa.

The J. Paul Getty Museum collects Greek and Roman antiquities, European paintings, drawings, manuscripts, sculpture and decorative arts to 1900, as well as photographs from around the world to the present day. The Museum's mission is to display and interpret its collections, and present important loan exhibitions and publications for the enjoyment and education of visitors locally and internationally. This is supported by an active program of research, conservation, and public programs that seek to deepen our knowledge of and connection to works of art

Media Contacts:

Poppy Andrews
Senior Communications Manager, National Portrait Gallery
pandrews@npg.org.uk

Cole Calhoun
Getty Communications
ccalhoun@getty.edu
001.310.440.7186