Kress Provenance Research Project
Case Study: Attributed to Jacopo Tintoretto,
Bust Portrait of a Young Man in Black
(K1803)
Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami | Coral Gables, FL

The Kress Provenance Research Project consults specialized archives world-wide in order to find clues to ownership. We also rely on traditional art historical methodology and sources, including photograph archives and auction sales catalogues.

This Venetian portrait was sold to the Samuel H. Kress Foundation in 1950 by its long-standing dealer, Alessandro Contini Bonacossi, as by Jacopo Tintoretto. In 1973, Fern Shapley published it in the Kress Collection Catalogue as attributed to Tintoretto's daughter, Marietta, and included the name Hoswald Helson, Brighton, in the provenance prior to Contini. Nothing is known of Helson, including whether he was a dealer or collector.

As part of our systematic research into the provenance of Kress collection paintings, we keep a running file of objects that had been in the United Kingdom and as time permits, check for photographs of the paintings in question at the Witt Library. Originally assembled by art historian Sir Robert Witt, and bequeathed to the Courtauld Institute of Art,

the Witt Library now contains some two million reproductions after paintings, drawings and prints of western art, including original photographs as well as cuttings from auction sales, exhibition catalogues, and periodicals. While the images themselves are of tremendous use to conservators and art historians, it is the annotations typed or written onto the mounts, by Witt or others, which provide clues to provenance information.

In the case of the Lowe painting, a visit to the Witt Library revealed a photograph on the mount of which was typed “Lowther Castle.”

Lowther Castle was built in the early nineteenth century on the historic estate of the Earls Lonsdale in the Lake District of England. The estate thrived until the time of Hugh, the 5th Earl, who spent most of the family fortune, which was then further eroded by taxes and a loss of

Photograph of K1803 from the Witt Library, Courtauld Institute of Art, London.
income due to the Depression. Hugh's successor, his brother Lancelot Edward Lowther, 6th Earl Lonsdale [1867-1953] had little choice but to sell off assets. In 1937 the entire library was sold, and between April and June of 1947 a three part sale of the remaining contents of Lowther was held on the premises. Given the annotation on the Witt photograph, we speculated that the Tintoretto might have been in that sale, as the date was so close to Contini’s sale of the painting to Kress in 1950.

A thorough review of the 1947 sale catalogue revealed a likely match to K1803: no. 1689, Venetian 16th Century, Portrait of a Gentleman in a Black Coat and Black Hat. While the catalogue is not illustrated, we felt quite strongly that no. 1689 was the Lowe painting. For one thing, there are no other paintings in the sale even remotely like its subject and attribution – the sale consists in the majority of English and Dutch pictures. The dimensions given in the sale catalogue are also very close to the Lowe painting, if reversed from the common format of height preceding width.

In checking a representative number of the dimensions given for other items in that sale, we concluded they must all have been reversed from the standard - otherwise most of the landscapes would be vertical, and the portraits horizontal. We wanted to prove our hypothesis by checking the dimensions of another picture included in the sale. As luck would have it, by searching our database of former owners of Kress paintings, we found that K1826, Young Cowherd with Cows, now attributed to the Circle of Giacomo Ceruti in the collection of the Snite Museum of Art, University of Notre Dame, was included as no. 1743 in the Lowther sale. And, indeed, in the catalogue its dimensions were recorded width before height.

The Ceruti, then anonymously called Neapolitan School, is one of very few Italian pictures in the Lowther sale – one of the others being the Lowe picture. It’s enticing to speculate that Contini Bonacossi, who also sold the Snite painting to the Kress Foundation in 1950, had sent agents to the Lowther sale on his behalf. However this is just speculation. An annotated copy of the sale catalogue gives the buyer of the Lowe painting as the London dealer J. Leger & Son; the annotation for the Snite painting is illegible, but definitely does not read Leger. So it seems likely that the two paintings were acquired separately and shortly thereafter offered to Contini, who sold them both to Kress.

Nancy Yeide, May 2014