

Rediscovered: Canova's 'Giorgione' hoax for sale at London Art Week

by Frances Allitt

A painting created by Antonio Canova (1757-1822) as an 18th century art world prank has been rediscovered after more than 200 years.

It will be offered by Italian dealership Antonacci Lapicciarella Fine Art in London this month for a price in the region of £1m.

The story of the painting has been well known since it was first exhibited in 1792.

The 2ft 5in x 2ft 1in (72.5 x 64cm) oil on board was created by Canova as part of an elaborate practical joke. A fictional self portrait of the Venetian Renaissance master Giorgione was painted over a 16th century *Holy Family* to lend it an air of authenticity.

Canova and his patron colluded to present the work to a group of leading artists in Rome – all of whom declared it an authentic work of Giorgione.

A year later Canova revealed himself as the artist.

The painting quickly fell out of the public eye following the



Left: Antonio Canova's fictional self portrait of the Venetian Renaissance master Giorgione.

prank. In 2016, Damiano Lapicciarella and Francesca Antonacci came across it in a private collection in Rome.

"Of course we knew the story of the Canova painting but we simply assumed that it had long vanished," says Lapicciarella. "It's like finding the Holy Grail, finding one of those mysterious paintings you never quite know whether they still exist."

Following extensive analysis, including consultation with other experts (such as Fernando Mazzocca, who has written the catalogue for the painting), they

were able to identify the painting.

Canova's patron had passed it to Giovanni Gherardo de Rossi, who had sold it to the Pozzi family and from there it ended up in a private collection about 100 years ago. It had never left Rome.

It is now offered as part of *London Art Week* (June 29 – July 6) – the second Canova rediscovery to be included in that event. The other is his white marble *Bust of Peace*, estimated to make in excess of £1m at Sotheby's auction of July 4.

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