

## Foreword

The late Sir Denis Mahon was one of the most distinguished scholars and collectors of his age. I was privileged to get to know him well in his later years (he died on 24 April 2011 at the age of 100), but I first came across him when I was a student at the Courtauld Institute of Art in the 1960s. Sir Denis was already an acclaimed authority on Baroque paintings and one of his specialities was the life and work of Nicholas Poussin. The recognised authority in this field was Sir Anthony Blunt, the Director of the Courtauld Institute and Surveyor of the Queen's Pictures (who was subsequently unmasked as a Soviet spy). Nonetheless, Sir Denis had the temerity – as it seemed to me then – to challenge Blunt's connoisseurship and to question his chronology of Poussin's oeuvre. This had been set out in the great Poussin exhibition in the Louvre that Blunt curated. A very public art historical spat ensued, with Sir Denis's views appearing in a series of powerful articles. Today these views have largely proved to be right, establishing Poussin as a pure painter, rather than a philosopher who expressed his thoughts in paint.

This concentration on the nature and quality of painting was typical of Sir Denis's approach to works of art and allowed him to build up the premier collection of 17<sup>th</sup> century painting in Britain, including the work both of famous and then little known artists. It included Poussin's *Rebekah Quenching the Thirst of Eliezer at the Well*, previously misattributed to the Roman painter Pietro Testa. In 1995 he again identified Poussin's *Sack of Jerusalem* which had also been attributed to Testa and this is now in the Israel Museum. The artist with whom Sir Denis was most closely associated with and one he championed throughout his life was Guercino, several of whose paintings he acquired. Most spectacularly, when he was already advanced in age, he identified *St Francis Receiving the Stigmata*, a painting of 1633 made for the Franciscan church of San Giovanni in Persiceto near Bologna, which had been stolen twice, lost for almost two centuries and cut in half. Recovered and restored to its original magnificence it was shown at a special exhibition at the Foundling Museum in 2006.

It is hardly surprising that Caravaggio was another of Sir Denis's favourite artists and here again he identified several works which were regarded as copies or works by lesser artists. He saw the *Young St John the Baptist* in the mayor's office in Rome which was regarded as a later copy. Mahon was not so sure and as a result of his observation and research it was identified as Caravaggio's original work and is now one of treasures in the Capitoline Gallery in the city. A similar story surrounds Caravaggio's picture called *The Cardsharps*, which was identified by Sir Denis from a sale in which it was catalogued as a copy. Again, following detailed study and scientific tests, Sir Denis declared the picture to be from the hand of the master himself. This attribution has been challenged by some art historians but is accepted by many others – and, given Sir Denis's track record, it is difficult not to accept his judgement.

Despite his vast knowledge of *seicento* painting, Sir Denis Mahon was an easily approachable figure and a generous scholar, who enjoyed sharing his knowledge and enthusiasms with others. His paintings were lent to museums throughout the country and, following his death, the entire collection was left to numerous galleries, with the sole proviso that they should remain open free to the public. Given Caravaggio's close association with the Order of St John, it is entirely fitting that *The Cardsharps* is hanging here and we are grateful to The Sir Denis Mahon Charitable Trust for placing the picture on loan with the Museum and for continuing Sir Denis's work in a way he would have approved. Moreover, the current exhibition of textiles and clothing shown in the picture is something that Sir Denis would have enjoyed and seen that it provided yet another way of bringing others to appreciate his greatest love, the art of painting itself. We are grateful to our friends at the Diocese of Novara for enabling the Museum of the Order of St John to display their wonderful collection of textiles for the first time in this country. We are indebted to the Rubelli Group for lending important pieces of their collection and for supporting the exhibition with their generous sponsorship. Special thanks are also due to Regione Piemonte for their much appreciated contribution.

**Dr Alan Borg**

Librarian

Museum of the Order of St John