

Purchase of a painting by Sir Henry Raeburn

Committee on the Jean F Watson Bequest

2 December 2003

Purpose of report

- 1 To consider the purchase of a painting by Sir Henry Raeburn (1756-1823).

Main report

- 2 The following painting by Sir Henry Raeburn is offered for sale:

Title:	Sir James Stirling
Date:	c. 1795
Medium:	oil on canvas
Size:	50 x 40 inches, 127 x 102 cm

- 3 This portrait of Sir James Stirling, Lord Provost of the City of Edinburgh, fits into a series of portraits completed by Raeburn of Edinburgh worthies in the last decade of the 18th century. These include portraits of Dr William Robertson (coll: University of Edinburgh), Professor Adam Ferguson (coll: University of Edinburgh) and the Rev. Hugh Blair (coll: Kirk of the Canongate, Edinburgh). They all share compositional similarities, and even the same studio furniture.
- 4 Sir James Stirling was first elected Lord Provost in 1790. His father was a respectable Edinburgh merchant, having a shop selling cloth and other goods in the Luckenbooths. James made his fortune in the West Indies, first as Secretary of Archibald Stirling, a great planter, then as Secretary of Sir Charles Dalling, the Governor of Jamaica. On his return to Edinburgh, Stirling entered the world of banking. His marriage to the daughter of one of the bank's senior partners established him in the civic ranks.
- 5 James Stirling was Provost between 1790-2, and again between 1794-6 and 1798-1800. During his first term of office he was faced with riots in the city over the reform of the Scottish burghs. These he dealt with in a manner which restored order, but for which he was later criticised. During his final term, his successful attempts to obtain military convoys for Scottish ships against French and Dutch privateers won him favour. In 1800, at a time of high prices and a fuel shortage, he was

instrumental in bringing relief to the poor by the supply of food and fuel at reduced rates.

- 6 A contemporary etching by John Kay depicts Sir James Stirling as a tall, elegant figure. In Raeburn's portrait he has a pale complexion, an attribute that was well known. A contemporary tale relates to an occasion where Sir James, in full processional robes, was pointed out to a country woman. "Is that the Lord Provost?", she exclaimed, "I thocht it was the corpse rinnin' awa' with the mortcloth!". The Kay etching is already in the city's collection.
- 7 The painting before the panel depicts Sir James sitting in a high backed red damask chair, wearing a black velvet suit and chains of office. A heavy red drape behind the chair is pulled back to reveal a distant depiction of the Edinburgh Bridewell. The scroll that the sitter holds also bears the name of the building.
- 8 The Edinburgh Bridewell, a new prison built to the designs of Robert Adam between 1791 and 1795, is perhaps an unusual choice for commemoration. At the outset, a prison had not been considered among the buildings necessary for the New Town of Edinburgh. By 1790, however, this view had changed and a competition was organised among the leading architects. The winner was Robert Adam. The design is quite different from much of Adam's other work, relying heavily on traditional Scottish architecture, and with a strong fortress shape that serves as a reminder of its function. It was demolished to make way for St Andrews House in the 1930s.
- 9 The painting is in excellent condition, and has just been cleaned. It remained in the Stirling family's possession until 1947, where it was sold through Christie's on July 17th. The painting has been viewed in London, but additional advice will be sought from the National Galleries of Scotland about the authenticity and condition of the painting.
- 10 The work is being sold by *Historical Portraits* of London. It first came to our attention when they were completing background research on the Bridewell building earlier this year. The price is £40,000, which includes a gallery discount of £8,000. Should the Committee agree to purchase the work, applications for grant aid would be made to both the National Fund for Acquisitions and other appropriate grant giving bodies.

Recommendations

- 11 Acquire the painting *Portrait of Sir James Stirling* by Sir Henry Raeburn.



Herbert Coutts
Director of Culture and Leisure

25:11:03

Appendices	N/A
Contact/tel	Ian O'Riordan 0131-529 3955
Wards affected	City Wide
Background Papers	The Jean F Watson Bequest files are held by the Museums and Arts Division