

Russell Flints sell at auction for a “royal” price

Paintings by a celebrated Scottish artist, collected by legendary Queen frontman Freddie Mercury in the final months of his life, have fetched over £220,000 at auction.

Mercury started collecting works by the Edinburgh-born watercolourist Sir William Russell Flint in June 1991, just five months before he died.

He bought his fifth and final painting, a glamorous nude titled “Gabrielle”, at an auction just 17 days before his death on November 24 at the age of just 45.

Flint’s watercolours are said to have been “one of Freddie Mercury’s last passions”. He hung them overlooking the staircase in his home in Kensington, South London, where he could enjoy them in his final days.

The five paintings went under the hammer in two sales dedicated to Mercury at Sotheby’s in London, where they were sold for up to five times their estimates.

Simon Toll, Sotheby’s senior director and specialist in British Art post-1850, said: “Freddie wasn’t an avid collector of art but he bought things that he liked to decorate his house.

“Freddie bought these just before he died, which I think shows a real resilience of spirit. Even though he knew that he was dying, he still wanted to be surrounded by beautiful things.”

He added: "All of the watercolours by Flint exceeded their high estimates... 'Gabrielle' almost tripled its estimate to sell for just shy of £89,000.

"This exquisite work was the final piece Freddie ever acquired, purchasing it just a few weeks before his untimely death. Two further works by Flint sold for more than five times their estimates."

Mercury bought three Flint paintings, the watercolours "Gossip in a Park", "Disputation at the Well" and "Cecilia posing as the poet Robert Herrick's Julia", at auction on 6 June 1991.

The following day, he returned to Sotheby's to purchase "Silver Shade, Languedoc".

"Gossip in a Park" fetched £35,560; "Disputation at the Well" £22,860; "Cecilia posing as the poet Robert Herrick's Julia" £40,640; and "Silver Shade, Languedoc" made £33,020.

"Cecilia" was Cecilia Green, the beautiful former ballerina who appears in many of Flint's greatest pictures. These included the painting of "Gabrielle"- a name chosen by Flint to suggest continental glamour and exoticism – which Mercury bought at auction in London on 7 November 1991.

The nude painting was expected to fetch £30,000 in Sotheby's series of auctions paying tribute to the late performer's "inimitable life, work and art", but eventually sold for £88,900.

Mr Toll said: "Gabrielle was an exotic persona that Flint invented for this nude. I think it's the same with Freddie. When he took to the stage in his fabulous costumes he was playing a role and I think he saw in Flint this flamboyance and confidence on display."

Mercury, the world famous lead singer with rock group Queen, was renowned for his incredible voice and flamboyant stage

persona.

He was diagnosed with AIDS in 1987 but continued to record into 1991, around the time he bought the first of his paintings by Flint.

Flint (1880-1969) was born and educated in Edinburgh. One of the greatest watercolourists of the last century, his prints adorned the walls of millions. His former studio in Camden Hill was only a ten minute walk from Mercury's home.



Sir William Russell Flint, *Silver Shade, Languedoc*, est. £15,000-20,000



Sir William Russell Flint, Gabrielle, est. £30,000-50,000



Sir William Russell Flint, Gossip in a Park, est. £5,000-7,000



Sir William Russell Flint, *Disputation at the Well*, est. £12,000-15,000



Sir William Russell Flint, *Cecilia posing as the poet Robert Herrick's Julia*, est. £6,000-8,000