

Masterpiece of modern British art at risk of leaving the UK

5.3.2026 - | Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs

A temporary export bar has been placed on a painting by the celebrated British contemporary artist Howard Hodgkin.

- The painting has been valued at more than £1.7 million
- Export bar is to allow time for a UK gallery or institution to acquire the painting

An export bar has been placed on a painting by modern British artist, Howard Hodgkin in an effort to save the masterpiece for the nation.

Following expert advice, Ministers have applied an export bar to allow time for a UK buyer to come forward and ensure this culturally important work remains accessible to the public.

Howard Hodgkin was a celebrated figure in British contemporary art and is considered to be one of the world's greatest colourists. His work is often described as abstract, however he famously described his paintings as "representational pictures of emotional situations," aiming to capture the essence of specific memories, encounters, and feelings.

Mrs Acton in Delhi is a vibrant oil on canvas work that marks a turning point in Hodgkin's career. Hodgkin first travelled to India in 1964 and kept vivid travel diaries which record several days spent with John Stewart Acton and his wife in Delhi in 1967. The painting depicts Mrs Acton reclining on a terrace in Delhi, India, where her husband was a British Council representative.

The British Council championed Hodgkin's work internationally as a representation of British excellence and creative exchange. The British Council is the UK's primary international organisation for cultural relations, making this work a direct visual record of British diplomatic presence and cultural exchange in India.

Hodgkin's painting was also a centrepiece of the 2017 UK-India Year of Culture, which was a major initiative celebrating the shared history and cultural ties between the two nations.

This painting documents the transition in Hodgkin's style from early Pop Art influences to the emotive abstraction that came to define late twentieth-century British painting.

Cultural Property Minister Baroness Twycross said:

Howard Hodgkin was one of Britain's most distinctive artistic voices, and Mrs Acton in Delhi represents a pivotal moment in his remarkable career.

This painting is a vibrant and powerful piece from a remarkable artist. I hope this export bar provides the opportunity for a UK buyer to come forward and ensure this important work remains accessible to the public.

Mark Hallett, RCEWA Committee Member said:

Howard Hodgkin was one of Britain's most important modern artists and Mrs Acton in Delhi shows him at his best. The picture is a bold and colourful fusion of figurative and abstract forms of painting. Its swirling assemblage of motifs draws on the traditions of European and Indian art, and engages in dialogue with the work of leading contemporaries such as David Hockney, Peter Blake, Patrick Caulfield and R.B. Kitaj. Finally, the picture offers a fascinating contribution to the story of modern corporate collecting in the UK. For all these reasons, it cries out to be kept for the nation.

The Committee made its recommendation on the basis that the painting met the second and third Waverley criteria for its aesthetic importance and outstanding significance to the study of modern British painting, corporate collecting history and networks of patronage and promotion.

The decision on the export licence application for the painting will be deferred for a period ending on 4 June 2026 inclusive. At the end of the first deferral period owners will have a consideration period of 15 Business Days to consider any offer(s) to purchase the painting at the recommended price of £1,753,400 (plus VAT of £68,480). The second deferral period will commence following the signing of an Option Agreement and will last for four months.

Notes to editors

1. Organisations or individuals interested in purchasing the painting should contact the RCEWA on 02072680534 or rcewa@artscouncil.org.uk.
2. Details of the painting are as follows: Sir Howard Hodgkin (1932-2017), Mrs Acton in Delhi. Oil on canvas, 122 x 147.5cm. Painted 1967-1971
3. Provenance: Kasmin Gallery, London; J. Walter Thompson Collection, London; Acquired from the above by the present owner. Sold at auction (Bonhams, London, 16 October 2025)
4. The Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest is an independent body, serviced by Arts Council England (ACE), which advises the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on whether a cultural object, intended for export, is of national importance under specified criteria.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/masterpiece-of-modern-british-art-at-risk-of-leaving-the-uk>