



in about 1994, it was bought by an elderly gentleman from Preston, also in Lancashire, who, in 2019, then consigned it to Whyte's. The auctioneers started researching the artwork and, recalls chairman emeritus Ian Whyte, 'the first thing we did was to write to Prof Kenneth McConkey, who is the leading expert on John Lavery's paintings. He said: "Oh, that painting was stolen from Stonyhurst College." We were really shocked by that.'

Staff at Whyte's immediately called the Irish Garda, but also had to break the news to the seller that his painting wasn't actually his after all. 'He was shocked and surprised, but these things happen,' says Mr Whyte. 'Sometimes, if something is stolen, it can remain undetected for quite a while. It's only when it appears publicly in an auction or an exhibition that people say: "That's the painting that was stolen."'

‘It inspires me to reflect on the privilege of forming young “men and women for others”’

Follow your art

In a heist with a happy ending, a stolen Lavery oil made its way back to Stonyhurst College, Lancashire, where it now inspires headmaster John Browne, as Carla Passino discovers

WHEN a consignment arrived from Lancashire for the upcoming Irish & International Art sale in late 2019, staff at Whyte's auctioneers had a nasty surprise. Not because its quality was disappointing—indeed, it was a masterpiece—but because the painting in question, *Youth and Age* by John Lavery, had been stolen decades earlier from Stonyhurst College, in Clitheroe, Lancashire.

The school, explains headmaster John Browne, had received *Youth and Age* in 1924, the bequest from a long-standing friend of Stonyhurst, Patrick Small. Completed in 1885, the painting

marked Lavery's transition from disciple to master, according to a 1914 review by COUNTRY LIFE: 'In the beautiful little *Youth and Age*, he makes a tremendous progress forward and we know he has been worshipping at the tomb of [French painter Jules] Bastien-Lepage,' wrote Hugh Stokes on June 13. 'The advance in technical skill from the *Marguerite* to the *Youth and Age* is remarkable. The first is the clumsy labour of an earnest but unaccomplished student: the second, that of a skilled artist.'

After thieves stole the oil from the school, it made its way into a long-since closed antiques shop, where,

John Lavery's seminal *Youth and Age*, 1885, marked his own coming of age as an accomplished artist

Luckily, he explains, there are safeguards in place: most auctioneers use the Art Loss Register service to check whether anything is wrong with an artwork's ownership: 'We send our catalogues to them and they come back to us before the auction, which they would have done in this case, too, but Kenneth spotted it first.'

Swift action from the Garda and the British police ensured *Youth and Age* was soon back at Stonyhurst, where it remains today. 'This double portrait hangs in my study and, every day, it inspires me to reflect on the privilege of forming young "men and women for others", to use the Jesuit phrase,' says Mr Browne. 'Once a year, I use it as the focus for an assembly to explore the counterpoint between the wisdom of age and experience and the energy and optimism of youth. Schools are places for young people to grow into the best that they can be. For me, of all the treasures at Stonyhurst, this painting is one of the most poignant reminders of our role as educators.' 🐘