

British millionaire buys then donates religious paintings

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Canterbury, England, April 1 (ENInews)--A self-effacing multi-millionaire, Jonathan Ruffer, 59, has become a cultural icon here after buying a series of 17th century religious paintings from the Anglican church for 15 million pounds and then giving them back so they can remain on public display and potentially boost art tourism in parts of the rundown northeast of England.

In a parliamentary debate on 31 March on the future of the paintings, Member of Parliament Tony Baldry said, "the paintings will be sold to a new trust which will have a specific obligation to ensure their preservation and continued public display at Auckland Castle [see of the Anglican bishops of Durham]. We are immensely grateful to him [Ruffer] for an act of generosity that will ensure continued public access to these works of art in their natural home."

Painted by Francisco de Zurbaran, a contemporary of Velazquez and El Greco, the representations of the Biblical patriarch Jacob and his sons have been kept at Auckland Castle at Durham since 1756 when they were bought by Bishop Richard Trevor for just under 150 pounds.

Earlier this year, the Church Commissioners, who manage the Church of England's 5 billion-pound investment portfolio, proposed to sell the Zurbarans at public auction in the hope of using the money to fund church ministry in poorer parts of England.

Enter Jonathan Ruffer of Ruffer Investment Management, one of Britain's top investment firms. Known to his friends as a quiet, self-effacing art lover, he bought the paintings, which each stand at around eight feet tall and hang in the Long Dining Room at Auckland Castle.

Talks have started between the National Trust (a conservation organisation in England and Wales that protects places of historic interest and natural beauty) and

Durham County Council to open the castle to greater public access. Council executives say the ongoing presence of the Zubarans will boost tourism.

During parliamentary debate, the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport, Edward Vaizey, said, "this is an unequivocally good news story. Jonathan Ruffer stands testimony to philanthropy in this country."

Thousands of people in the north east of England signed a petition asking that the paintings remain at the castle and supported a campaign organized by Helen Goodman, Labour MP for Bishop Auckland, to keep them in Britain.