15. William Holman Hunt: *Tuscan Girl Plaiting Straw*

William Holman Hunt's (1827-1910) *An Italian Girl (Tuscan Girl Plaiting Straw),* oil on canvas, 52.1cm by 41.9cm, initials in monogram lower left, in original frame designed by the artist, was painted in Italy in late 1868 and early 1869 in the aftermath of a devastating time for the artist. In 1865 his exhibition at the Hanover Street Gallery had resulted in serious debts and he was about to marry Fanny Waugh. The following year the bank in which Hunt was a major shareholder collapsed and he left England with his pregnant wife bound for Jerusalem only to find at Marseilles that an outbreak of cholera prevented his taking ship for the eastern Mediterranean. The couple went overland to Italy and Fanny gave birth to their son in Florence but she died of a fever in late December. After a brief visit back to England to leave his infant son with his wife's family, he returned to Italy and was invited to stay at the Villa Medici in Fiesole by its owner, the Anglo-Italian painter and art dealer William Blundell Spence. He set up his studio in the stables and, stimulated by his developing interest in High Renaissance painting from visiting the galleries of Florence, he set about producing two paintings which would provide income. At the same time he had the doleful task of creating an appropriate monument for his late wife, who had been buried in the English Protestant cemetery in Florence. The innovative design of an ark on water carved in marble was begun by Italian masons but the finishing of the tomb was carried out by Hunt himself.

At the Villa Medici he chose Spence's gardener's children as his subjects. *Tuscan Girl Plaiting Straw* and *Caught* (Private Collection) were painted simultaneously and there is a distinct family resemblance between the girl and the young boy who forms the subject of *Caught*. Hunt records in his memoirs the affinity to the works of Pietro Perugino. The Renaissance artist's *Portrait of Francesco delle Opere* (pictured) which, in the 19th century was thought to be a self-portrait, was in the Uffizi and, like *Tuscan Girl,* sets a half-length figure against a panoramic Tuscan landscape. Hunt wrote in his memoirs of painting 'a damsel as a Tuscan straw-plaiter of the type of gently features particular to the Apennines, such as Perugino loved to picture'.

Hunt negotiated a price of £600 for the two paintings with his dealer Ernest Gambart and sent instructions on how the painting was to be framed. Gambart found a buyer for *Tuscan Girl* and the painting passed through various English collections before being acquired in 1931 by the 2nd Lord Leverhulme who continued the collecting taste, albeit in more modest fashion, that had been established by his father (Cf. case 14).

Left: *Tuscan Girl Plaiting Straw* by William Holman Hunt. Photo: Robert Holden Fine Art Agents



Left: *Portrait of Francesco delle Opere* by Pietro Perugino

The Panel considered the painting to be pre-eminent under the second and third criteria, in acceptable condition and, after negotiation, fairly valued. It has been permanently allocated to the Lady Lever Gallery in accordance with the condition attached to the offer.