

The Fitzwilliam Museum saves 'Brideshead' Cabinets for the nation

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An important pair of 17th century Roman 'pietre dure' cabinets have been saved from export by the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Image



Roman 'pietre dure' cabinets

The Fitzwilliam Museum announced today (Monday 8 August 2016) its successful bid to raise the £1.2million needed to save an important pair of pietre dure Roman cabinets for the nation. No other pair of Roman hardstone cabinets exist in a public collection in Britain.

The Fitzwilliam is grateful for the support of NHMF for their generous grant of £700,000 and to the Art Fund for their early adoption of this project with a £200,000 grant. The Fitzwilliam also received generous support from numerous other benefactors, including the Pilgrim Trust, to prevent these treasures from leaving the UK.

These unique and highly prized cabinets have been part of the private collection at Castle Howard, Yorkshire, since their purchase by Henry Howard, the 4th Earl of Carlisle, most likely in Rome during his second 'Grand Tour' of Italy (1738-9). They were offered for auction at Sotheby's London, last summer by the Trustees of Castle Howard and sold to a foreign buyer for £1.2 million.

A member of the Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art, (RCEWA), Christopher Rowell, stated that the cabinets, represent 'the high watermark of the British taste for Italian princely furniture' and that 'with the exception of the National Trust's cabinet at Stourhead, made in Rome around 1585 for Pope Sixtus V, these are the most significant cabinets of this type in Britain'.

Their historic and cultural value was such that the then Culture Minister Ed Vaizey placed a temporary export bar on the 400-year-old Italian cabinets to provide an opportunity to save them for the nation.

The cabinets were made in Rome in the first quarter of the 17th century almost certainly for a member of the papal Borghese dynasty, one of the most powerful and wealthy families of their day, and represent the highest quality of furniture-making in 17th century Italy. Veneered with ebony and rosewood, they have been further embellished with inlays of expensive, exotic and vividly coloured semi-precious hardstones (such as lapis lazuli and jasper) and with gilt-bronze statuettes and escutcheons. They are among the most significant cabinets of this type left in Britain, dating back to 1625.

Each cabinet sits on a Neo-classical stand, probably made c. 1800 to the designs of the influential Regency designer, Charles Heathcote Tatham, for display in the just-completed spectacular Long Gallery at Castle Howard, Yorkshire. Fashioned from mahogany, they boast gilded caryatid supports and other classical ornaments. Showpiece cabinets, like these, were the most prestigious display furniture in 17th-century Europe and were lavishly decorated to reflect the status and taste of their owners; and have been eagerly collected ever since.

Tim Knox, Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum, remarked: "Splendid hardstone mounted cabinets such as these were the ultimate trophy of British Grand Tour collectors in the 18th century. With their lavish inlay of electric blue lapis lazuli, and glowing jaspers, and later English stands with gilded caryatids (supports in the form of antique maidens), they are a perfect combination of Italian pomp and English splendour. Nowhere in the UK is it possible to see a pair of Roman cabinets of quite this swagger and splendour. I am thrilled that we have saved these remarkable objects from export and that they can take their place amidst

the Fitzwilliam's world-class collections. They are a fitting acquisition to celebrate the 200th birthday of our founder, Lord Fitzwilliam."

Sir Peter Luff, Chair of NHMF, said: "Exquisitely beautiful and exceptionally rare, it is when you consider these cabinets in their original context at Castle Howard, one of our finest country house interiors, that they become very important to the UK's heritage."

Stephen Deuchar, Art Fund Director, said: "We are very happy to support the Fitzwilliam in acquiring this captivating pair of cabinets, a fantastic addition to the permanent collection in its bicentenary year."

Sir Mark Jones, Chair, The Pilgrim Trust said "It is great news that these spectacular cabinets, so important for understanding the history of taste in Britain, are to stay in the country."

The pair of cabinets will go on display at the Museum on Wednesday 10th August, when they will be unveiled as part of the celebrations in honour of the Founder's Birthday.

Notes to editors

Fitzwilliam Museum

Founded in 1816 the Fitzwilliam Museum is the principal museum of the University of Cambridge and lead partner for the University of Cambridge Museums (UCM) Major Partner Museum programme, funded by The Arts Council. The Fitzwilliam's collections explore world history and art from antiquity to the present day. It houses over half a million objects from ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman artefacts, to medieval illuminated manuscripts, masterpiece paintings from the Renaissance to the 21st century, world class prints and drawings, and outstanding collections of coins, Asian arts, ceramics and other applied arts. The Fitzwilliam presents a wide ranging public programme of major exhibitions, events and education activities, and is an internationally recognised institute of learning, research and conservation. www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk

Bicentenary Business Partners

The Museum's year-long celebrations of exhibitions and events for all have been made possible by its Business Partners. TTP Group plc, ACE Cultural Tours, Hewitsons LLP, Marshall of Cambridge, Rheebridge Ltd and Sotheby's are

supporting the bicentenary year.

The Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest (RCEWA)

RCEWA is an independent body, serviced by The Arts Council, which advises the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) on whether a cultural object, intended for export, is of national importance under specified criteria.

Art Fund

Art Fund is the national fundraising charity for art. In the past five years alone Art Fund has given £34m to help museums and galleries acquire works of art for their collections. It also helps museums share their collections with wider audiences by supporting a range of tours and exhibitions, including ARTIST ROOMS and the 2013-18 Aspire tour of Tate's Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows by John Constable, and makes additional grants to support the training and professional development of curators.

Art Fund is independently funded, with the core of its income provided by 122,000 members who receive the National Art Pass and enjoy free entry to over 230 museums, galleries and historic places across the UK, as well as 50% off entry to major exhibitions. In addition to grant-giving, Art Fund's support for museums includes the annual Art Fund Prize for Museum of the Year (won by The Whitworth, Manchester, in 2015), a publications programme and a range of digital platforms.

Find out more about Art Fund and the National Art Pass at www.artfund.org

The Pilgrim Trust

The Pilgrim Trust is an independent, endowed foundation that gives around £2m in grants each year. It was established in 1930, by an American, Edward Stephen Harkness. 60% of funding is directed towards preserving the fabric of architecturally or historically important buildings and outstanding museum and archival collections and artefacts. The rest is allocated towards the UK's social welfare needs, currently supporting women and girls with complex needs, particularly early interventions that address those needs before they become too deep rooted. www.thepilgrimtrust.org.uk

Arts Council England

The Arts Council, champions, develops and invests in artistic and cultural experiences that enrich people's lives. It supports a range of activities across the arts, museums and libraries – from theatre to digital art, reading to dance, music to literature, and crafts to collections. www.artscouncil.org.uk

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