

Campaign to acquire the bronze angels commissioned for tomb of Cardinal Wolsey

10 July 2014

The V&A launches fundraising campaign to acquire four bronze angels, commissioned for the tomb of Cardinal Thomas Wolsey.

Image



Actor Paul Jesson who plays Cardinal Wolsey in Hilary Mantel's book 'Wolf Hall'

"The recovery of Wolsey's angels is one of those miracles that historians pray for; something that seems irrevocably lost has been there all the time. To claim the angels for the nation would connect us to one of the liveliest eras of our history and one of its most remarkable men." - Hilary Mantel

The V&A is seeking to acquire four bronze angels originally designed for the tomb of Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, chief advisor to King Henry VIII and once one of the most powerful men in England. Launching the fundraising campaign, the National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF) has granted £2million and the Art Fund has pledged £500,000, totalling half of the £5million purchase price. The Wolsey Angels, once thought lost, have been reunited for temporary display in the V&A's Medieval & Renaissance galleries to encourage donations towards the remaining £2.5million needed by the Museum to acquire them for the permanent collection. The public can donate to the campaign in the gallery, online or via text.

Martin Roth, V&A Director, said: "The Wolsey Angels are a vital part of our national history and artistic heritage. Little of Benedetto da Rovezzano's English work survives and we are fortunate to be able to put these outstanding sculptures on display. We are very grateful to the NHMF and Art Fund for supporting this important acquisition. The angels would be a highly significant addition to the National Collection of Sculpture, held and preserved at the V&A for future generations."

Dame Jenny Abramsky, Chair of the NHMF, said: "The Wolsey Angels are unique survivors of the turbulent Tudor court. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity for the V&A to acquire them and we're pleased to be playing our part with a £2m contribution. It is hugely exciting that the quartet has been reunited and put on display for the first time in over two decades and we hope that visitors will enjoy both the beauty of the bronzes in their own right as well as the extraordinary story behind them."

Stephen Deuchar, Director of the Art Fund, said: "The commission, design, creation and subsequent history of the Wolsey Angels lend them an unusual, colourful and important place in English visual culture. We are delighted to be supporting the V&A's determination to secure and reunite the group, and to be contributing to their purchase with a grant of £500,000. I urge the public to donate to the V&A's campaign."

The four bronze angels were commissioned in 1524 from the Florentine sculptor Benedetto da Rovezzano as part of a magnificent tomb in the Renaissance style, reflecting Cardinal Wolsey's wealth and statesmanship. The angels, each measuring around a metre in height, were created between 1524 and 1529 - a period in which Henry VIII was seeking to annul his marriage to Catherine of Aragon. Wolsey's inability to persuade the Pope to annul the marriage led to his fall from power and he died in 1530. Along with the rest of Wolsey's possessions, most of the tomb (including the angels) was appropriated by Henry VIII who intended to use it for himself.

Benedetto was commissioned to complete the tomb for the King and he established himself at Westminster, where he employed founders and other craftsmen. However, progress was halting and Henry VIII did not see the tomb finished. Each of Henry VIII's three children expressed the intention to complete the memorial posthumously, but failed to do so. Elizabeth I moved the parts of the tomb to Windsor in 1565, where they stayed until 1645-6. During the Civil War elements of the tomb were sold to raise funds and only the black stone chest, now housing the remains of Admiral Lord Nelson in the crypt of St. Paul's

Cathedral, was known to have survived. Four large gilt-bronze candlesticks, made for the King's tomb, were acquired and installed at St. Bavo cathedral in Ghent.

The existence of the angels remained unknown until two of them appeared in a Sotheby's sale in 1994, unillustrated and catalogued simply as being 'in Italian Renaissance style'. They were acquired by a Parisian art dealer and later the Italian scholar Francesco Caglioti convincingly attributed them to Benedetto. In 2008 the remaining pair of angels was discovered at Harrowden Hall, a country house in Northamptonshire, now owned by the Wellingborough Golf Club. It was subsequently revealed that two of the angels had been stolen from Harrowden Hall in 1988.

The V&A has been offered the opportunity to purchase both pairs of angels for £5million. All four angels are on display at the V&A on tall pillars, as in Benedetto's original design, when they were placed at the four corners of the tomb.

Benedetto da Rovezzano (1474-1552) was a contemporary of Michelangelo and was described by Giorgio Vasari as "...among our most excellent craftsmen." One of his early commissions, in 1508, was to finish Michelangelo's bronze sculpture of David (now lost), indicating his metalworking skills were much in demand. He worked in England between 1519 and 1543 where his pre-eminent patron became Cardinal Wolsey. English examples of Rovezzano's work are rare.

Notes to editors

Donations can be made via the [V&A's Save the Wolsey Angels page](#).

The Art Fund is the national fundraising charity for art, helping museums to buy and show great art. Over the past 5 years they have given £26m to help museums and galleries acquire works of art for their collections, and placed hundreds of gifts and bequests, from ancient sculpture and treasure hoards to Old Master paintings and contemporary commissions. The Art Fund is independently funded, the majority of their income coming from over 100,000 members who, through the National Art Pass, enjoy free entry to over 220 museums, galleries and historic houses across the UK, as well as 50% off entry to major exhibitions. More information about the Art Fund is available at the [Art Fund website](#).

Further information

For further press information about the appeal please contact Alice Evans in the V&A press office on 020 7942 2508 or email a.evans@vam.ac.uk.