

7 August 2006

Restored Chinese vase unveiled in ground-breaking conservation exhibition

Mission Impossible? Ethics and choices in conservation
Mellon Gallery, Fitzwilliam Museum, to 24 September

From paintings to sculpture, manuscripts to furniture, *Mission Impossible?* explores conservation across the breadth of The Fitzwilliam Museum's world-class collections. It considers issues that face the conservator and curator daily when deciding the best treatment for works of art in order to preserve them for the benefit and enjoyment of future generations whilst making them accessible to today's visitors.

The exhibition was planned long before a visitor to the Fitzwilliam Museum in January this year damaged three 17th century Chinese vases on display. Today, the first of the vases to be restored by conservator Penny Bendall takes its place in the exhibition, is unveiled by John Dix, Managing Partner of Cambridge law firm Hewitsons who have supported the restoration project, and will go on show to the public from tomorrow.

"Hewitsons has a long association with the Fitzwilliam, having held our annual Cambridge reception here for many years." said John Dix. "We are delighted to be able to help the Museum by meeting the costs of the reconstruction of the vases and I am particularly pleased to unveil today the first vase to be restored."

Conservator Penny Bendall said "I'm thrilled the vase can go back on display in such a topical exhibition. The conservation of decorative objects has to be easy on the eye - they are made to be admired! With the introduction of modern techniques and materials this can be achieved in the majority of cases, whilst maintaining the ethical standards in line with current practice."

The exhibition includes dramatic conservation 'case-studies' drawn from the Fitzwilliam's collections of fine art, antiquities and applied arts. Visitors can observe the impact of agents of degradation: the self-destructing components of glass and artists' pigments, the damaging effects of light, changes in relative humidity, unsuitable storage, past inappropriate treatments and the ravages of pests, including rats, beetles, termites and that most ubiquitous specimen, man.

An interactive section of the exhibition includes working models which encourage visitors to 'Please Touch', thereby enabling them to see, and actually contribute to, damage taking place, demonstrating dramatically how works of art may suffer from repeated handling.

Ian McClure, exhibition curator, Assistant Director (Conservation) at The Fitzwilliam Museum and Director of the Hamilton Kerr Institute for paintings conservation, said: "This exhibition aims to show the range of problems conservators and curators face across the breadth of museum collections and to inform visitors at every level, from children gleefully molesting the 'touch me' panels and peering at magnified insect pests, to the technically-minded interested in the mechanism of iron gall ink corrosion. Part of the exhibition will tour from 2007 to museums in the East of England Hub region, where it will be tailored to be relevant to each venue".

The exhibition is generously supported by Renaissance East of England, The Marlay Group, Cambridge University Press, Conservation by Design and Preservation Equipment Limited. A programme of talks and courses complements the exhibition; details from www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk, or telephone 01223 332904.

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.../Further information and images

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Open: Tuesday – Saturday: 10.00 – 17.00

Sundays and Bank Holidays: 12.00 – 17.00

Admission free

NOTES FOR EDITORS

The Fitzwilliam Museum houses the University of Cambridge's art collection and is a public museum and art gallery with an international reputation. More than half a million objects and works of art are held in five curatorial departments: Antiquities, Applied Arts, Coins and Medals, Manuscripts and Printed Books and Paintings, Drawings and Prints. The Museum attracts around 300,000 visitors a year. Admission to the permanent collections and to temporary exhibitions is free.

Website: www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk

The museum has laboratories for the conservation of antiquities, applied arts, manuscripts and printed books and works of art on paper. Conservators work alongside curators, researching and investigating the materials and technology of the objects. They assess and record condition and undertake conservation treatment where necessary. In addition, they monitor and help to maintain appropriate environmental conditions for long-term preservation of the collections in storage and on display.

The Hamilton Kerr Institute at Whittlesford - a department of the Museum - is responsible for the conservation of the Museum's collection of paintings and, in addition, carries out conservation work for such external clients as The National Trust, The Royal Collection and other publicly accessible collections. Its postgraduate course in painting conservation attracts students from all over the world. The Institute won the 2004 Pilgrim Trust Award for the conservation of the 14th century Thornham Parva Retable and has received international acclaim for its work on the 13th century Westminster Retable.

Website: www-hki.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk

Penny Bendall has been practising the art of ceramic conservation for 18 years and has worked extensively on both commercial and museum projects. In 2003 she was granted the Royal Warrant and regularly works for the Royal Palaces in Windsor, at Sandringham and also in Buckingham Palace.

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