

**Embargoed until 00.01 Friday 9 November 2007**

## **Restored Chinese vases reunited on public display**

Three monumental late 17th century Chinese vases, damaged last year at The Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, are back on public display today (9 November) following the complex process of restoration. A specially designed case, overlooking the staircase where the vases had originally been displayed for almost sixty years, now houses the imposing lidded baluster jar - 80 cm in height and weighing approximately 45 kg - flanked by two slightly smaller porcelain vases of 'yan yan' shape. All three vases had been smashed into hundreds of pieces when a visitor collided with them in January 2006.

The restoration of the vases was undertaken by Suffolk-based ceramic conservator Penny Bendall and took six months to complete. Penny, who trained at West Dean College and holds a Royal Warrant, said, "The sheer size and weight of the vases proved a challenge at times during the conservation process but I am very pleased to have brought this extensive project to a successful conclusion. The emphasis on minimum intervention throughout has hopefully demonstrated that, in the majority of cases, conservation to exhibition standard can successfully be achieved without excessive retouching."

Fitzwilliam Museum Director Duncan Robinson said, "We are very pleased with the result of this major restoration project and delighted to see the Qing vases back on display in the Museum. The risk that sunlight and heat would eventually degrade the adhesive used in their conservation has prevented us from putting them back in the window recess where they were originally displayed, but the advantage of their new location is that visitors will be able to walk around them."

Cambridge law firm Hewitsons generously supported the restoration of the vases and Managing Partner John Dix was on hand as they were installed in their new case ready to go on show to the public. "The restoration of these vases is a remarkable achievement," he said. "It is a great pleasure for Hewitsons to have been associated with this project and we are delighted that visitors to the Fitzwilliam may now continue to enjoy these magnificent vases as they have done for many decades."

The redisplay of the Qing vases in Gallery 17 from 9 November is accompanied by the launch of a new interactive feature on the Fitzwilliam Museum website, which traces the project to restore the vases and includes a time-lapse video of the reconstruction of one of them; visit <http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/gallery/chinesevases/>

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**Further information and images from:** Marketing and Press Office,  
The Fitzwilliam Museum, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RB.  
Telephone: 01223 332941/332900; FAX: 01223 332923  
Email: [fitzmuseum-press@lists.cam.ac.uk](mailto:fitzmuseum-press@lists.cam.ac.uk)

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Trumpington Street  
Cambridge CB2 1RB  
England

Telephone 01223 332900  
Facsimile 01223 332923  
[www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk](http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk)

## NOTES FOR EDITORS

### The Fitzwilliam Museum's Chinese Vases

The three restored Chinese vases are Qing Dynasty, reign of Kangxi (1662-1722) and date from the late 17th or early 18th century. From a set of five vases which entered the Fitzwilliam Museum's collections in 1948, they had been displayed for decades - in line with the Fitzwilliam's distinctive house style and without incident - on a recessed window sill on an imposing 1930s marble staircase and enjoyed by the Museum's 300,000 visitors a year, until damaged by a visitor in January 2006.

Painted in enamels in the *famille verte* palette with traces of gilding, the vases are decorated with peonies and other flowering plants, phoenixes, pheasants, butterflies and insects. Two vases are of 'yan yan' shape (height 71 and 72.5 cm) and one is a heavy baluster jar with cover (height 80 cm) which weighed about 45 kg and could not be lifted single-handedly by a curator.

The impact that toppled the vases resulted in pieces of porcelain being distributed over a wide area of the staircase landing and no less than 28 steps. After careful evaluation of the damage, the site of the accident was photographed and the vases systematically documented and removed over a period of two and a half days. The pieces were then placed in 24 large lined trays, carefully labelled and cross-referenced with the location from which they were retrieved.

Museum staff were confident at an early stage that the vases could be restored and sought advice from experienced oriental ceramic conservators. Following careful evaluation of the damage, Penny Bendall was appointed to carry out the conservation work in March 2006. In August 2006, the restored baluster jar went on public display in the Museum's exhibition *Mission Impossible? Ethics and Choices in Conservation*.

### The Fitzwilliam Museum

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 Fitzwilliam's treasures range from Ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman antiquities to the arts of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and include masterpieces by Titian, Canaletto, Stubbs, Constable, Monet, Renoir and Picasso, one of the world's foremost Rembrandt print collections, Handel music manuscripts and the famous Fitzwilliam Virginal Book, one of the most significant collections of Korean ceramics outside South-East Asia, medieval illuminated manuscripts and outstanding collections of pottery, porcelain and medieval coins. The Fitzwilliam Museum's stewardship and management of its collections meet the highest national standards as affirmed by full accreditation from the Museums Libraries and Archives Council (MLA).

The Fitzwilliam Museum attracts around 300,000 visitors a year. It is open Tuesday to Saturday, 10.00 am to 5.00 pm, Sundays and Bank Holidays, 12.00 noon to 5.00 pm; closed Mondays, Good Friday and 24-26 & 31 December and 1 January.

Admission to the permanent collections and to temporary exhibitions is free. Website: [www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk](http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk)

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