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Renovations and revivals at the Fitzwilliam Museum

New Director Tim Knox, talks about future plans

After his first six months in post the new Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Tim Knox, reveals his aspirations for the historic building and world-renowned collections of the University of Cambridge's principal art museum, including major building works currently underway on the portico and future acquisitions.

Tim Knox was previously Director of the atmospheric Sir John Soane's Museum in London, which he carefully restored over the last eight years. An architectural historian, Knox is keen to see the Fitzwilliam take its place as one of the UK's finest neo-classical buildings - a masterpiece in its own right.

Knox commented: "My predecessors have done brilliant work to improve the building and programmes of the Fitzwilliam. Duncan Robinson implemented the Courtyard extension in 2004, which gave the Museum much-needed facilities, including its first dedicated education and conservation studios, and a proper shop and café, while Timothy Potts has left a legacy of groundbreaking international exhibitions. I am committed to continuing our major exhibitions programme, but our next focus of attention must again be the fabric of the building, improving circulation and the display of the collections, and making the Fitzwilliam a more welcoming place. Surplus 'Do not touch' signs will be banished, displays of fresh flowers will come back to the galleries, and photography is now allowed throughout the Museum."

First steps include the renovation of the Founder's Building in time for the Museum's bi-centenary celebrations in 2016. The first stage is already underway, with the grandiose portico on Trumpington Street swathed in scaffolding. Behind it, contractors are repairing the roof and elaborate coffered vault, and will also restore the torches once held by the griffins that perch on the pediment. The signage and lighting will be improved and the elaborate railings, with their impressive spikes and pineapples, will also be given a much-needed lick of paint - bronzed, with gilded and silvered enrichments.

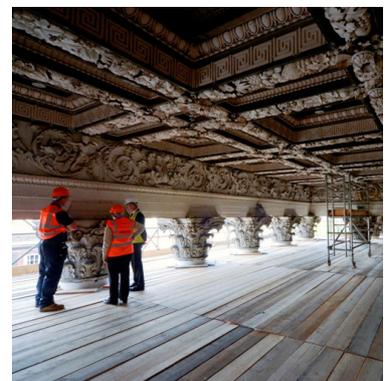
Knox continued: "I want to reassert the importance of our grand Founder's entrance. I don't see monumental porticoes as elitist or intimidating - we want people to revel in the opulence and magnificence of the Museum. The entrance hall gives the Paris Opéra a run for its money, and yet the Museum is free to visit and we want everyone to feel welcome in this wonderful setting."



Tim Knox in the Fitzwilliam Museum



A detail from the repair work of the portico roof



Tim Knox inspecting the portico repair work on the scaffolding

Press Release | The Fitzwilliam Museum

Knox plans to open the lofty, columned, Founder's Library, containing the rare books collected by Viscount Fitzwilliam, and hitherto only accessible to scholars or for exclusive tours. The Museum is also renovating its much-loved Armoury, and installing more environmentally-friendly air-handling systems, so the galleries upstairs can be maintained more efficiently.

Knox will also be helping to steer the development of the University of Cambridge Museums (UCM) Major Partner Museum programme, sponsored by Arts Council England, whose mission is to unlock the collections of the University's eight museums, and the world-class research activities which underpin them, to a larger and more diverse audience.

Knox adds: "In addition to our ground-breaking research, public programmes and far-reaching education and outreach activities, we should showcase the full range of conservation work done by our Museums, both in our buildings and outside of Cambridge. For instance, our Hamilton Kerr Institute at Whittlesford is dedicated to the conservation of easel paintings in oil and tempera. It is an extraordinary resource. I want to make more of the Hamilton Kerr, and this might involve bringing their activities back into Cambridge and closer to the Museum, where people can actually see and participate in conservation in action. Then there are the Fitzwilliam's storerooms, which contain spectacular collections of works of art and antiquities of all types from all over the world. For reasons of space only a fraction of our holdings are on permanent display. They include specialist collections such as clocks and watches, Japanese netsuke, extraordinary jewellery and fans, but there are also major works in storage including paintings by John Singer Sargent and William Hogarth. We need to reorganise gallery spaces to improve displays, and increase the number of items on public view. We also want to improve working conditions for staff and create a larger, more flexible, space for temporary exhibitions."

"But we should also continue to collect - collections are the lifeblood of a museum and underpin new research and discoveries about the lives, culture and beliefs of our predecessors. Recently we have been acquiring things that aren't currently that fashionable, but are comparatively cheap - such as Japanese erotic prints, or elaborate mid-Victorian china - which earlier collectors and benefactors thought too difficult or vulgar for the Fitzwilliam. One of the areas I am looking forward to improving is our representation of 20th and 21st century art. We have important modern pictures and sculpture, but we need to improve its quality and breadth. We should do this by gift and bequest: Cambridge as a centre of learning and an enjoyable place to visit it has few rivals. Visitors are astonished by the range and excellence of our collections - how wonderful for some great benefactor of contemporary art to know that their collection will sit alongside our superlative Old Masters, or Impressionist pictures, to be admired and studied by students, residents and visitors for centuries to come."

"However, we can only encourage collectors to leave their treasures to the Museum if we have the room to display them, and if our existing collections are beautifully and intelligently displayed. I want to make the place sing."

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For further information and images contact the Marketing and Press Office:

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Notes to editors:

Forthcoming major exhibitions at the Fitzwilliam Museum

A world of private mystery: John Craxton, RA (1922-2009)

3 December 2013 to 21 April 2014

A fresh retrospective on John Craxton - from his beginnings as a young hope of post-war British art, creating dark, meditative images of the natural world, to works of incredible vibrancy, light and colour from his later life in Crete.

Silent Partners: Artist and Mannequin from Function to Fetish

October 2014 - January 2015

Silent Partners explores artists' uses of the mannequin from the Renaissance to the 20th century. The exhibition will unveil the mannequin's secret life to show how, from being an inconspicuous studio tool, a piece of equipment as necessary as easel, pigments and brushes, the lay figure became the fetishised subject of the artist's paintings, photographs and objects, and eventually, in the 20th century, a work of art in its own right.

Tim Knox Biography

Tim Knox was previously Director of the Sir John Soane's Museum in London since 2005. During his time there he masterminded the restoration of the two houses, Nos. 12 and 14 Lincoln's Inn Fields, which flank Soane's original Museum at No. 13. The ambitious OUTS (Opening up the Soane) project, which has involved raising over £7 million, is now fully planned and financed, and ready to move into its second phase, the first having provided a new exhibition gallery, new conservation studios and a new museum shop.

Tim Knox studied History of Art at the Courtauld Institute of Art. He was appointed Assistant Curator at the Royal Institute of British Architects Drawings Collection in 1989. In 1995 he moved to the National Trust as its Architectural Historian, becoming Head Curator in 2002. He was much involved with the restoration of the gardens at Stowe in Buckinghamshire, and championed the acquisition of the Workhouse in Southwell, Nottinghamshire, Tyntesfield in Somerset, and the restoration of the Darnley Mausoleum in Cobham Park, Kent.

His appointment in April 2013 to the Fitzwilliam follows the appointment of his predecessor Timothy Potts to the Directorship of the Getty Museum in Los Angeles in September 2012.

The Portico Refurbishment

The Museum's magnificent portico, designed by architect George Basevi in 1835, is being restored. The work includes repairs to the roof, which was letting in water, damaging the plasterwork ceiling of the portico below. Some of the iron fixings supporting the decoration had rusted through, which meant that the giant lotuses on the ceiling were unstable. The ceiling will be fully restored, including the superb frieze which runs around it, with its sculptures of wild animals, boys and dogs emerging from stylised foliage. In addition, the steps will be equipped with handrails and the lighting improved. Lastly, the extraordinary cast-iron gates and spiked railings will be repainted in their original livery of bronze, silver and gold.

The University of Cambridge is funding this project. The Museum remains open throughout the works and the refurbished Portico will be unveiled in the Spring of 2014.

The Fitzwilliam Museum

Founded in 1816 the Fitzwilliam is the principal museum of the University of Cambridge and leads the University of Cambridge Museums (UCM) Major Partner Museum consortium. 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 and outstanding collections of applied arts, ceramics, coins, and Asian arts. Welcoming over 470,000 visitors a year, 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