

Half million pound restoration transforms Cambridge landmark

'Temple of the arts' restored to its original splendour for the first time in over 100 years

- Railings repainted their original livery of bronze green with 23.5 carat gold leaf ornaments
- Grade I listed plasterwork ceiling and frieze rescued from collapse
- Restoration took over a year to complete – and is just in time for the Tour de France on 7 July

Giant plaster lotuses, burnished golden pineapples and a host of wild animals are now available to see in their original glory for the first time in over 100 years, after a £430,000 project to restore the portico of the Fitzwilliam Museum.

Completed in 1848, the Fitzwilliam was designed by Neoclassical architect George Basevi, and is one of the grandest museum buildings in the world. The conservation project, funded by the Museum and the University of Cambridge, has taken over a year to complete – and has been finished just in time for the passing of the Tour de France on Monday 7 July. In addition to restoring the elaborate plasterwork ceiling and frieze, the railings have also been returned to their original colours of gold and green. The railings have spent the last century under a coat of uniform black paint, which hardly did justice to their elaborate decoration combining fearsome spikes, curling acanthus foliage and giant pineapple finials.

The plasterwork coffering inside the portico was at risk of collapse following water damage from the leaking roof, while its elaborate details were obscured by dirt. Parts of the frieze, including sculptures of wild animals being pursued by boys and dogs, were crumbling away. The giant plaster lotuses – each one fixed by a rusting peg – were in danger of dropping into the heavy bird netting below.

Over the past year the roof has been repaired, while the plasterwork has been cleaned and consolidated. Less visible pigeon netting has been installed, so that the rich ornament can be seen clearly. Following analysis of paint samples to discover the original colours, the black railings were repainted in a sharp bronze green, with certain details highlighted with a very fine layer of 23.5 carat gold leaf (which is stronger than 24 carat) – carefully researched to obtain the correct allocation of green and gold.



Restored portico and railings.



Restored plaster ceiling.



Gilded pineapple.



Staining and damage to the frieze before restoration.

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The plans for the restoration were drawn by architects Annand & Mustoe, and the conservation works were carried out by specialist heritage building contractors Fairhurst Ward Abbotts under the supervision of Cambridge University Estates Management.

Tim Knox, Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum, commented: "The early nineteenth-century century was the apogee of ornamental ironwork, and green was an extremely fashionable colour – imitating green patinated bronze. We don't really know why it was smothered in black paint, but it may have been due to the sheer expense of applying the gold leaf. We are incredibly grateful to the University of Cambridge for making this restoration possible. The Fitzwilliam is a much-loved local landmark and is internationally recognised for its importance and beauty. Immediate restoration was needed to ensure the portico would be safe for our visitors, while the condition of the wonderful railings was a disgrace. We hope that local residents and visitors to the City will enjoy seeing the building returned to its original splendour."

The recent works to the Museum have also included the refurbishment of the gallery of Dutch Golden Age paintings, where the gallery's air conditioning system has been renewed – the beginning of a major project to lower the Fitzwilliam's carbon footprint. The Charrington Print Room has also been restored, and will be reopened next month.

The Fitzwilliam Portico restoration in numbers:

- 9 tonnes of lead repaired on the roof
- 10 tubs of honeysuckle limewash for repainting
- 12 bags casting plaster to repair the coffering
- 40 kilograms of rubber silicone for mould making
- 15 kilograms modelling clay were needed for a new stag's head on the frieze
- 200 packs of gold leaf for the railings

- Ends -

For further information and images contact the Press Office:

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Notes to editors:

The Fitzwilliam Museum, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RB

FREE ADMISSION

OPEN: Tuesday - Saturday: 10.00 - 17.00

Sundays and Bank Holiday Mondays: 12.00 - 17.00

CLOSED: 24-26 & 31 December, 1 January and Good Friday.

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 applied arts, ceramics, coins, and Asian 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