

Rare medieval church painting saved by 16th century recycling and 21st century conservation

A rare surviving English medieval panel painting has been given a new lease of life after conservation at the Hamilton Kerr Institute, Cambridge. Remarkably, new evidence found by conservators shows the painting owes its survival to recycling during the Protestant Reformation of the Church in England.

Now on display at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, *The Kiss of Judas*, is one of the rarest artworks of its type. At the time of the Reformation, beginning in the 16th century and later during the English Civil War, church paintings were destroyed in their thousands – few survive across the UK. Unlike *The Kiss of Judas*, many of them are defaced.

Painted in bright oil colours, with details picked out in silver and gold leaf, the lively scene from c.1460 is all the more astonishing as it depicts the moment of Christ's betrayal, by Judas Iscariot. Devout Catholic parishioners often scratched and gouged at the hated figure of Judas, so this painting would have been at risk from Catholic and Protestant alike in its time. The painting was purchased by the Fitzwilliam Museum in 2012 from the Church of St Mary, Grafton Regis, Northamptonshire. The church did not have the funds to conserve the work and maintain it in appropriate environmental conditions. As it is forbidden for churches to sell historic artefacts in their possession, a special Faculty had to be applied for from the Diocese of Peterborough which allowed the Church to sell the painting to the Fitzwilliam via a private treaty sale.

The acquisition was made possible by with generous contributions from The Pilgrim Trust, Gatsby Educational Foundation, The Sir Michael Marshall and Lady Marshall Charity Fund, Paul and Louise Cooke Endowment, The Finnis Scott Foundation, The Marlay Group, The Bernard Sunley



The Kiss of Judas, c.1460
The Kiss of Judas, c.1460. Photo Chris Titmus
© Hamilton Kerr Institute/Fitzwilliam Museum,
Cambridge



Infrared detail of the back revealing traces of faint lettering from the 16th century.
Photo Lucy Wrapson
© Hamilton Kerr Institute & Fitzwilliam
Museum, Cambridge

Press | The Fitzwilliam Museum

Foundation, The Kirby Laing Foundation, the Perceval Fund, and the support of many generous private donors.

The Church of St Mary was able to repair its roof and other features with the proceeds of sale and a replica of the picture will be displayed there in due course.

When the panel arrived for conservation treatment it had a considerable layer of surface dirt, bat faeces and heavily discoloured varnish which made it difficult to see the image. State of the art non-invasive technology including x-ray analysis and assessment using infra-red and ultraviolet light identified details, pigments and possible areas of fragility: cleaning, protection of the wood from further insect damage, and a new layer of modern varnish have preserved the object for generations to come.

But, it was a discovery on the back of the boards that revealed the remarkable story of how the painting survived.

The reverse was covered with a fairly modern backing board of plywood – when the conservator Dr Lucy Wrapson removed this, she found the back of the planks making up the painting had, under close inspection, faint traces of writing. 16th century lettering was revealed using infra-red photography, proving the painting had been recycled at the time of the Reformation, the offending image turned around and the back converted into a painted board. It is thought that it may have listed the 10 commandments, typical of a Protestant church furnishing.

Dr Lucy Wrapson commented: “We cannot know for sure why the painting was re-used in this fashion, perhaps it was simple economy, reversed so it could still fit the space for which it was intended. Or perhaps it could have been deliberately saved. The painting is fascinating, and conservation and cleaning has revealed the vibrant original medieval colours.”

The Kiss of Judas has had an interesting life, and was moved several times. It is not known precisely what area of the church it was originally painted for, though possibly for a rood screen, or more likely as decoration above the chancel arch of a church.

The painting was dated by dendrochronologist Ian Tyers. The panel is made up of boards imported to England from the eastern Baltic, Ian looked at the growth rings and identified the tree was felled after 1423 and estimated a usage date of c.1437-1469.

Later in its life, probably in the 19th century, a fourth board was tacked on from a damaged original companion painting (*The Flagellation of Christ*) – this was overpainted to match the style of *The Kiss of Judas* and perhaps to turn it into a decorative door. Remarkably, this part of *The Flagellation of Christ* came from the same original, larger painting as *The Kiss of Judas*, which must have once formed part of a cycle of paintings depicting the Passion of Christ.

It was first recorded in St Mary's Church in Grafton Regis, Northamptonshire in the early 20th century, but it may have been made elsewhere in the Midlands. Infra-red photography identified a coat of arms beneath the overpaint of the fourth board, showing the original paintings from the Passion cycle may have originated near Leicester. Dr Lucy Wrapson found that the closest match of the coat of arms was of a branch of the Belgrave family from Leicestershire.

The painting is on display in the Rothschild Gallery of medieval works in the Fitzwilliam Museum. Further projects exploring non-invasive conservation science will be taking place at the Museum for its bicentenary in 2016. Two exhibitions will explore the cutting edge technology conservators employ today - *Death on the Nile: Uncovering the afterlife of ancient Egypt* and *COLOUR: The art and science of illuminated manuscripts*. Entry to the Museum is free.

- Ends -

For further information and images contact the Press Office:
01223 332941 | press@fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk

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.

The Fitzwilliam is celebrating its 200th anniversary in 2016.
www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk