

Wednesday 20th June 2018

FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM SAVES RARE BUST OF QUEEN VICTORIA FROM EXPORT

Sir Alfred Gilbert's little known masterpiece – a virtuoso monumental white marble bust of Queen Victoria as an ageing monarch – has been saved for the nation after the Fitzwilliam Museum raised the necessary £1,077,607 to prevent it being exported to a museum in New York.



Sir Alfred Gilbert, R.A., Queen Victoria, 1887-1889, marble.
© Army & Navy Club

This majestic marble monolith is arguably the most impressive and sensitive portrait ever made of the iconic and oft-portrayed Queen-Empress, without doubt one of the most important women in British history. It is a pivotal work in the development of British sculpture at the end of the nineteenth century and is entirely carved by Gilbert; the most talented and idiosyncratic sculptor of Victorian Britain. It is the only surviving marble by Gilbert in the UK.

The Fitzwilliam devoted the recent Hartley-Johnson Bequest to this acquisition of international significance along with gifts from individual benefactors. The shortfall was generously met by a grant of £267,607 from the National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF). This breath-taking bust will now join the distinguished permanent sculpture collection of the Fitzwilliam Museum and will be installed on Wednesday 20 June, to coincide with Queen Victoria's 181st anniversary of her accession (20 June 1837). It represents the final acquisition made by former Director Tim Knox, before his departure to head up the Royal Collection.

Sir Alfred Gilbert RA (1854–1934) is the most famous, talented and significant sculptor of the Victorian era, and leader of the New Sculpture movement (1880-1900) that focussed on domestic sculpture of a spiritual and symbolist nature, and architectural decoration. Gilbert's best-known work is 'Eros', the dynamically posed figure that crowns the Shaftesbury Memorial at Piccadilly Circus (1886–93). Gilbert rarely worked in marble; most of his sculptures are in bronze or mixed media, making this piece even more exceptional.

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The bust was commissioned in 1887 by The Army and Navy Club to celebrate Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee (marking the Queen's fiftieth year on the throne and her return to public life after a period of prolonged mourning). It was inspired by Gilbert's over life-size full-length bronze portrait-statue of Queen Victoria, known as the Jubilee Memorial, made for Winchester. Unveiled by her daughter, Princess Louise, in August 1887, it received immediate critical acclaim, with Rodin calling it the best monumental figure in England.

Gilbert carved the bust of Victoria between 1887 and 1889 (whilst simultaneously working on 'Eros'): he was in his early thirties; she was in her late sixties and at the height of her popularity. This Bernini-esque bust showcases Gilbert's supreme talents as a marble carver. The virtuoso rendering of the different textures – sagging pudgy skin, wispy hair, luxurious billowing drapery, crisp lace shawl, and intricate jewellery, including the star of the Order of the Garter and a poignant double-portrait medallion of Victoria and Albert – are unparalleled in nineteenth-century British sculpture, as is the empathetic carving of the grieving, careworn widow with her sad and introverted expression. Although the bust appears highly naturalistic, Gilbert did not, in fact, work from the life but entirely from photographs, using his own mother as a model for the drapery, saying at the time: "One was Queen of my country – the other Queen of my heart." Gilbert originally made a metal crown for the bust but decided against it (presumably on aesthetic grounds), and although he promised the Club to make a replacement in marble, he never delivered it, which is why Victoria is shown, unusually, without a crown.

The decision to defer the export licence followed a recommendation to the DCMS in 2017 by the Reviewing Committee On The Export Of Works Of Art And Objects Of Cultural Interest (RCEWA) who objected on all three of its Waverley criteria. RCEWA member Lowell Libson explained at the time, "Sir Alfred Gilbert, a leading but mercurial light in the British 'New Sculpture' movement, is now regarded as one of the greatest European sculptors of the period. This monumental portrait bust of the Queen-Empress is not only an important icon made at the apogee of British power but a complex and hugely sympathetic image. It is also a tour de force of marble carving, a medium which Gilbert rarely employed."

Reacting to the news that the bust would now be on public display at the Fitzwilliam, Michael Ellis, Minister for Art, Heritage and Tourism, said: "This exceptional depiction of Queen Victoria belongs in the UK and I am thrilled that it has been saved for the nation. Our export bar system exists to keep nationally important works of art in this country. It is brilliant news that people will now be able to see this masterpiece for free in the Fitzwilliam Museum."

Sir Peter Luff, Chair of National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF), said: "A monarch who defined one of the most important eras of British history, captured by one of the era's leading sculptors – that's what makes this bust of Queen Victoria by Sir Alfred Gilbert so special. Its loss from these shores was unthinkable

and that's why the National Heritage Memorial was so pleased to be able to step in with the final piece of funding, ensuring that Gilbert's bust of Queen Victoria remains in the UK for future generations to study and enjoy."

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About the Fitzwilliam Museum

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 coins, Asian arts, ceramics and other applied 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

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, Good Friday

Business Partners The Fitzwilliam Museum is supported by our Business Partners during 2018; TTP Group plc and Brewin Dolphin

The Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest

www.artscouncil.org.uk/export-controls/reviewing-committee (RCEWA) is an independent body, serviced by The Arts Council, which advises the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) on whether a cultural object, intended for export, is of national importance under specified criteria.

National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF)

The National Heritage Memorial Fund was set up in 1980 to save the most outstanding parts of our national heritage, in memory of those who have given their lives for the UK. www.nhmf.org.uk .

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