

July 2012

Sea myths set in stone

Fitzwilliam Museum acquires Roman relief sculpture once belonging to Emperor Hadrian

The Lansdowne Relief

Dark grey limestone

AD 100 -150

Height: 56 cm, Width: 181.5 cm, Depth: 23 cm

Acquired with the aid of the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Helena Bonham-Carter Fund and other individuals.



Detail from The Lansdowne Relief
© The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

An important Roman sculpture featuring classical sea myths that has been on loan to the Fitzwilliam for eight years has now joined the Museum's permanent collection. The acquisition was made possible by generous grants from the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Helena Bonham-Carter Fund and other individuals.

One of the most imposing items in the Museum's Greek and Roman gallery, the Lansdowne Relief dates back to AD 100 - 150 and features remarkable carvings of classic mythological stories on the theme of the sea. Made from dark grey limestone, it was created for the Roman Emperor Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli, near Rome, which is today one of the largest, best known and best preserved sites to have survived from Roman times.

The Relief shows three 'marine' myths - Odysseus sailing past the island of the Sirens, tied to the mast in order to resist their song; the wine-god Dionysos conveying the gift of wine, in the form of a spreading grape vine, across the sea to Greece; and the Argonauts in their ship encountering the man-slaughtering Stymphalian Birds.

The Relief was discovered in 1769 by the painter, dealer and entrepreneur Gavin Hamilton. Along with other pieces of Roman sculpture and architecture, Hamilton sold it to the Marquess of Lansdowne for display in his London town house. The Relief formed the mantelpiece of a monumental fireplace in Lansdowne House, flanked by classical and Egyptian-style sculpture.

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The Relief has been on long term loan to the Fitzwilliam Museum since 2004 and has formed a major part of the displays since the Greek and Roman gallery was completely refurbished in 2010.

The Fitzwilliam displays three other items from Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli - two pilaster capitals with ornate acanthus leaf decoration, and a fine marble bust of Hadrian's male lover, Antinous, shown in the guise of Dionysos. The Relief combines with these to extend the story that can be told in the Fitzwilliam of the great complex of Tivoli.

Dr Timothy Potts, Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum commented: "The Relief exerts a major impact on the gallery: its striking colour and material and intriguing form and iconography draw people across the room to look at it and read about its ancient and its later contexts. It has been a focal point for education programmes, used by school groups as a starting point to discuss images of Greek myths, and by university students studying Hadrian's Villa as a show-case of Roman imperial art. Now we have acquired the Relief permanently we are planning an important series of events and teaching programmes around it, generously supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF)."

The HLF funded six-month programme of talks and education events, starting early in 2013, is set to include talks on the Relief's imagery and original purpose, Q & A sessions with specially trained volunteer interpreters, creative writing events and stone-carving workshops.

Robyn Llewellyn, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund East of England, said: "HLF is delighted to be able to support this project that guarantees the continued public display of the Lansdowne Relief, with a range of events allowing the public to engage more with this significant marble. Conservation work will also ensure the Relief's safekeeping for future generations."

- Ends -

For further information and images contact the Marketing and Press Office:
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Notes to editors:

The Heritage Lottery Fund

Using money raised through the National Lottery, the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) sustains and transforms a wide range of heritage for present and future generations to take part in, learn from and enjoy. From museums, parks and historic places to archaeology, natural environment and cultural traditions, we invest in every part of our diverse heritage. HLF has supported over 33,000 projects, allocating £4.9billion across the UK, including over £334million to the East of England alone. Website: www.hlf.org.uk

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Press Release | The Fitzwilliam Museum

Founded in 1816 the Fitzwilliam is the principal museum of the University of Cambridge, with collections exploring 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 400,000 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.

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