

- UNDER STRICT EMBARGO UNTIL 00.01 ON MONDAY 13 AUGUST -



## The Fitzwilliam Museum strives to save national treasure

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Nicolas Poussin (1594 – 1665)

*Extreme Unction*

Oil on canvas

95.5 x 121cm

**CAMBRIDGE, 13 August, 2012:** The Fitzwilliam Museum today announces the launch of a Public Appeal to acquire Nicolas Poussin’s masterpiece *Extreme Unction* (c. 1638-40). The painting, the value of which has been agreed at £14m, has been made available to the Fitzwilliam Museum for just under £3.9m, thanks to H.M. Government’s Acceptance-in-Lieu scheme. Thus far, nearly 10% of this target has been pledged, and the Museum and the Art Fund have today begun their joint campaign to raise the rest of the money.

One of the surviving Seven Sacraments painted in Rome for the renowned scholar and connoisseur Cassiano dal Pozzo, *Extreme Unction* (‘Final Anointing’) has long been considered by critics to be the finest work from one of the most remarkable series of paintings ever conceived. It depicts a dying man being anointed with oil in accordance with the rites of the early Church. The painting is of critical importance to the study of western art. Poussin’s work has influenced many great painters from David and Ingres to Cézanne and even Picasso, and continues to inspire artists to this day.

*Extreme Unction* is currently owned by The 11<sup>th</sup> Duke of Rutland’s 2000 Settlement. As a result of the sale in 2011 for £15m of Poussin’s *Ordination* to the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, the Trustees incurred inheritance tax. To pay for this the Trustees have offered *Extreme Unction* through H.M. Government’s Acceptance-in-Lieu system, with a condition that it be allocated to the Fitzwilliam Museum. As the painting’s value is greater than the tax which arises from the sale of *Ordination*, a net payment is due to the Trustees from the Fitzwilliam of £3,875,917 if the acquisition is to proceed. The Fitzwilliam has only until early November 2012 to raise the necessary funds to acquire the painting.

Dr. Timothy Potts, Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum, said, “This would be the most significant old master painting acquired by the Museum in nearly a century and would transform our representation of French art and of the classical tradition through a masterpiece by the greatest French painter of the seventeenth-century. It is a “destination painting” that will both benefit from the context of our great European collections and add greatly to the experience and programmes that we can offer the public. It will be a uniquely rich resource for teaching at all levels, drawing as it does

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in style and subject matter from ancient Roman art, the rituals of the early Christian church, and Poussin's own artistic grounding in France and Rome. A national and international treasure, it would be very much at home at the Fitzwilliam, and we are delighted that the Art Fund has joined with us in seeking to acquire it for Cambridge."

*Extreme Unction* is currently on display in Gallery 3 at the Fitzwilliam Museum for all to see. Admission to the Museum is free. The Fitzwilliam also has ambitious plans to create wide-ranging public programmes around the themes of the painting, for a wide public of all ages and backgrounds.

Art Fund Director Dr. Stephen Deuchar commented: "This is a truly unique opportunity to acquire a painting of such immense importance. Even for a museum collection as fine as the Fitzwilliam's, this great Poussin would be a transformative acquisition. We salute the determined efforts of the Museum to acquire it for the public, and we urge anyone who cares about art to dig into their pockets and pay what they can to help us reach our target."

The Museum is appealing to all of its supporters to help in raising funds, including the Friends of the Fitzwilliam. The Museum has also applied to the Heritage Lottery Fund and together with the Art Fund will approach various other charitable institutions to contribute to the Appeal. Organisations should contact Development Officer Sue Rhodes at the Museum directly on 01223 332939; individuals can send a contribution in the form of a cheque made payable to the 'Fitzwilliam Museum Development Trust' to: The Development Office, the Fitzwilliam Museum, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, CB2 1RB, or give online at [www.artfund.org/poussin](http://www.artfund.org/poussin).

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**For further information and images contact the Marketing and Press Office:**  
Telephone: 01223 332941 | Email: [fitzmuseum-press@lists.cam.ac.uk](mailto:fitzmuseum-press@lists.cam.ac.uk)

## Notes for Editors

**Nicolas Poussin (1594 - 1665)** was the greatest French painter of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. He initially studied painting in Paris and then moved to Rome at the age of thirty. In the following decades his renown across Europe grew and, save for a brief spell in the service of the King of France, Poussin made his home in Rome permanently.

### The Masterpiece

Commissioned in Rome by Poussin's friend the renowned connoisseur Cassiano dal Pozzo, *Extreme Unction* (c. 1638-40) depicts a dying man being anointed with oil in accordance with the rites of the early Roman church. To enhance the realism of the scene, Poussin drew on his extensive study of the art and artefacts of classical antiquity to represent the costumes, setting, and the structure of the painting itself, with the figures disposed frieze-like across the composition. This classicising tendency went on to make an inestimable impact on Western art.

Today, the sobriety and control of Poussin's paintings can seem difficult, or remote, to audiences. But in *Extreme Unction* subject and style are so perfectly aligned that Poussin's stark, lyrical, line, and controlled play of light and shadow bring out the full depth of emotion that marks this momentous scene. Through the rhythmic beauty of the composition and passages of resplendent, often joyous, colour, Poussin allows us to contemplate and engage with the most natural and inevitable of events in human existence: the passage from life to death.

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## The Public Appeal

Poussin initially painted for a relatively small, but hugely enthusiastic, group of patrons, but by the 18<sup>th</sup> century collectors throughout Europe were clamouring to buy his pictures. Viscount Fitzwilliam himself was one, though later scholarship proved that his would-be Poussin was a copy. The Duke of Rutland was more fortunate, and his purchase in 1785 of Poussin's series of Seven Sacraments – then among his important works to be seen in Rome – caused a sensation in England. Their acquisition was heralded as a coup for the nation, and when the series was exhibited at the Royal Academy it was visited by King George III himself.

From the 18th century onwards, painters, scholars and connoisseurs have evaluated the importance of the Rutland series by comparison with a later group of the same subject, painted in 1644–48 and now in the collection of the Duke of Sutherland, on long-term loan to the National Galleries of Scotland. Most critics, from Sir Joshua Reynolds on, have consistently judged the first, Rutland, series to be the finer of the two; *Extreme Unction*, in particular, has been singled out as the most intelligently constructed and beautifully painted of all the Sacraments.

The set of Sacraments is no longer complete: one, *Penance*, was destroyed by fire in 1816, *Baptism* was sold around 1939 and is now in the National Gallery of Art, Washington and *Ordination* was sold in 2011 to the Kimbell Art Museum, Forth Worth, Texas. As a result of this last sale, and consequent Inheritance Tax, the Fitzwilliam Museum has been offered through the Acceptance-in-Lieu scheme the unique opportunity to purchase the painting at a fraction of its agreed value, £14,000,000. It will only cost the Museum £3,875,917 to ensure that this masterpiece remains in Britain.

## 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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. Admission to the Museum is free.

[www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk](http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk)

The Fitzwilliam Museum, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RB

OPEN: Tuesday – Saturday: 10.00 – 17.00, Sunday and Bank Holiday Mondays: 12.00 – 17.00

## The Art Fund

The Art Fund is the national charity which helps museums and galleries to buy, show and share art for the enjoyment of all. Over the past five years, the Art Fund has given over £24 million towards art of all kinds, from Old Masters to new media, and supported a range of programmes which share and show art to wider audiences, including the national tour of ARTIST ROOMS, the Art Fund Prize for Museums and Galleries, and Art Guide, a pioneering smartphone app offering the most comprehensive guide to seeing art in the UK. The Art Fund is independently funded and the majority of its income comes from 90,000 supporters who purchase a National Art Pass, costing from £50, which gives free entry to over 200 museums, galleries and historic houses across the country as well as 50% off many major exhibitions. Find out more about the Art Fund and the National Art Pass at

[www.artfund.org](http://www.artfund.org).

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