

Monday 6 June 2016

FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM RESTORES RENAISSANCE MASTERPIECE TO ITS FORMER GLORY

A 10-year research and conservation project at the Fitzwilliam Museum's Hamilton Kerr Institute on Sebastiano del Piombo's (1485–1547) *Adoration of the Shepherds* c. 1510, enables the masterpiece to go on show at the Fitzwilliam for the first time in 70 years.

In the 40th anniversary year of the Hamilton Kerr Institute a major research and conservation project with one of the key Renaissance masterpieces from the Founder's collection of the Fitzwilliam has been completed in time for the Museum's 200th birthday.



Conservator Youjin No working on Sebastiano del Piombo's *Adoration of the Shepherds* © The Fitzwilliam Museum

The physical history of Sebastiano del Piombo's *Adoration of the Shepherds* is remarkable and explains why the research and conservation project at the Hamilton Kerr Institute has taken many years to complete.

The picture was originally painted on a wooden panel, but while owned by the Duc de Orléans in eighteenth century Paris, the paint layers were removed and transferred onto canvas, in a misguided attempt to preserve it. This caused widespread damage to the original paint and the composition was almost completely overpainted in subsequent attempts at restoration. However, critical areas of the original paint remained intact and it was decided to remove all the old overpainting and bring the composition back to life by judicious and specialised restoration of the losses.

Rupert Featherstone, Director of the Hamilton Kerr Institute explained, 'We have researched and unravelled the entire history of the painting, uncovering the original, from layers and layers of overpaint and varnish. Then we painstakingly reconstructed the missing areas, to faithfully recreate Sebastiano's painting.'

In order to understand the artist's technique, a microscopic particle of paint, smaller than the head of a pin, was taken from the Virgin's blue robe and analysed under a microscope during research. Examination of the paint cross-section demonstrated Sebastiano's sophisticated system of layering with an application of pink paint beneath the blue, as well as his use of superior and expensive

The
Fitzwilliam
Museum
200 YEARS

pigments, such as ultramarine blue. This and other forms of state-of-the-art analysis greatly helped to reconstruct the missing areas. Close study of an early full-size copy of Sebastiano's original painting from The Louvre, Paris, made sometime in the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century, before Sebastiano's painting was transferred from wood to canvas, was important in reconstructing areas of significant paint loss.

Rupert Featherstone added, 'We have conserved over 3,000 pictures in the last forty years at the HKI, but the Sebastiano is one of our biggest projects. Some might have argued to leave the painting as an archaeological relic, but I think we have made the right judgement to restore it so it can be appreciated as the masterpiece it is, aesthetically and historically. The scientific research that was conducted to aid our understanding of the technique of the artist has been key in being able to recreate it.'

Sebastiano del Piombo spent his early years in Venice where he learnt the art of painting under Giovanni Bellini (c.1431-1516) and then Giorgione (1477-1510). At the invitation of the prominent patron and Sieneese banker Agostino Chigi (1466-1520), Sebastiano moved to Rome in 1511, just as Michelangelo (1475-1564) unveiled the first part of his decoration of the Sistine Chapel ceiling. Michelangelo and Sebastiano developed a close friendship, sharing drawings, ideas and designs.

The *Adoration of the Shepherds* was painted soon after Sebastiano moved to Rome, and demonstrates the influence of Giorgione's *The Adoration of the Shepherds* (1505/10, National Gallery of Art, Washington) in its overall composition and Venetian colouring but with a sense of Roman form gained from Michelangelo.

The picture was considered to be by Giorgione when the founder of the Fitzwilliam, Lord Fitzwilliam, bought it after the French Revolution in 1800 at the sale in London of the Duc de Orléans' collection. In 1913, it was attributed to Sebastiano on the basis of the fusion of elements characteristic of the Roman school - such as the monumental figures - and others more closely associated with Venetian painting, notably the rich colours and lyrical landscape background.

The Hamilton Kerr Institute is one of the world's leading centres for teaching and research into the conservation of easel paintings and historical painting techniques and materials. As a department of the Fitzwilliam Museum the Institute has undertaken the conservation of paintings in its collections since its foundation forty years ago, and it also takes on conservation projects for other clients such as the Royal Collection and the National Trust.

The riverside property was given to the University of Cambridge for the Fitzwilliam Museum by the late Sir Hamilton Kerr (1903-74), previously the MP for Cambridge. The conservation of the painting has been partly funded by the Fitzwilliam Museum's Marlay Group.

Sebastiano del Piombo's *Adoration of the Shepherds* will be Object of the Month at the Fitzwilliam in June and can be seen in the Flower Gallery (17). A YouTube video about the restoration will be available to view from the Fitzwilliam Museum website on Monday 6 June.

Rupert Featherstone will give a free lunchtime talk, *Rescuing Sebastiano's Adoration of the Shepherds* on Wednesday 15 June, 13.15 - 14.00, at the Fitzwilliam Museum.

- 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 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

Bicentenary Business Partners

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