

Macclesfield Psalter saved for the Nation

24 January 2005

Following the launch last September of a high-profile Art Fund campaign to save the export-stopped Macclesfield Psalter, this remarkable medieval manuscript has been secured for the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Image



Section from the Macclesfield Psalter

£1.7million had to be found by the 10 February 2005 deadline, and the money has finally been raised with just two weeks to go. If the Fitzwilliam's bid to buy the Psalter had failed, it would have departed for the Getty Museum, Los Angeles. The Fitzwilliam has now made a matching offer to the owner, and the Getty has gracefully withdrawn its interest.

The campaign, which kicked-off with a £500,000 grant from the independent charity the National Art Collections Fund (Art Fund), captured the public imagination. The Macclesfield Psalter's illuminations demonstrated just how extraordinary the world of the medieval imagination could be, from the macabre to the exuberant. When the Art Fund launched a public appeal on the BBC's Culture Show, people responded enthusiastically with donations ranging from £1

to an anonymous contribution of £15,000. The public appeal raised £180,000 in all. The National Heritage Memorial Fund – the Government's heritage fund of last resort – also played a crucial role, awarding a major grant of £860,000 which gave a tremendous mid-way boost to the fundraising attempt and brought the target within reach. The Fitzwilliam and its Friends allocated £150,000 from their own funds, and many other trusts and foundations generously added their support.

David Verey, Chairman of the National Art Collections Fund, said: "The export stop placed on the Macclesfield Psalter last year presented us with an irresistible opportunity to secure something of unique national interest. This devotional manuscript is an outstanding example of English artistic mastery – dating from one of those rare periods when English artists were the pride of Europe – and it mines a rich vein of dark and ribald humour. We are thrilled to have played a key role in saving it for the Fitzwilliam, and to have lent not only our financial support but also our campaigning strength to the cause."

Liz Forgan, Chair of the National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF), said: "I can think of no better way to kick-off the 25th anniversary year of the National Heritage Memorial Fund than with the news that the Macclesfield Psalter is taking up permanent residence in the Fitzwilliam Museum. This manuscript is an irreplaceable chronicle of late medieval life and like the Mappa Mundi and the Sherborne Missal, also saved with the help of the NHMF, it would have been a huge loss if it had left these shores for good."

Duncan Robinson, Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum, said: "We are absolutely delighted by the outcome of our efforts to acquire the Macclesfield Psalter. The public response to the appeal to save for the nation this gem of our medieval heritage has been overwhelming. At the same time, we wish to acknowledge the enthusiastic support of both the National Art Collections Fund and the National Heritage Memorial Fund which was crucial to the success of the campaign."

James Stourton, Deputy Chairman of Sotheby's Europe, said: "We are very pleased for the Fitzwilliam Museum. The discovery of this manuscript by Sotheby's at Shirburn Castle in 2003 was an extraordinary event. It is a wonderful thing that even in the present time, a manuscript of this importance can come out of the woodwork. The Macclesfield family hope that it will be enjoyed by many thousands of visitors to the Museum."

The Macclesfield Psalter was sold to the Getty Museum, California, at Sotheby's in June for £1.7million. However, the Government's export review system, which recognised the outstanding importance of the Psalter to this country, gave the

Fitzwilliam the chance to match this sum. Indeed, the manuscript contains some of the most remarkable examples of English painting before the age of Constable and Turner. It is a jewel-like treasury, consisting of 252 richly-illustrated pages, each a work of art in itself. The manuscript is also a fascinating record of medieval English humour, teeming with highly bizarre and imaginative marginal illustrations. These images, possibly designed to ward off evil (or hold the reader's attention if it happened to wander from more spiritual matters), include grotesques with faces in their bottoms, strange naked wild men, a dog dressed as a bishop, a trouserless man pulling a dragon's tongue, and an astonishingly naturalistic giant skate which swims across the page.

The Psalter was produced in the 1320s, probably at Gorleston, at a time when East Anglia was one of the foremost artistic centres in Europe. The volume is very small (170 x108 mm), and contains forty-six historiated initials, fourteen large miniature paintings (mainly from the life of King David), and hundreds of lushly decorated borders and marginal scenes. The miniatures include depictions of the patron saints of Suffolk and Gorleston Church. Perhaps the chief joy of the work is the secular imagery in the margins, which displays an uninhibited humour and inventiveness.

The Psalter was possibly commissioned by the 8th Earl of Warenne, who was a commander of armies in Scotland and Aquitaine, who was closely involved in the affairs of King Edward II, and whose other claim to fame is that he was excommunicated for multiple adultery. The numerous rabbits in the border (rabbits were a common symbol of lust) are often depicted by their warrens, possibly a pun on the family name. The Earl of Warenne also commissioned the famous Gorleston Psalter in the British Museum and the Douai Psalter, a masterpiece which was reduced to fragments during the First World War. The Macclesfield Psalter was discovered when Sotheby's experts were asked to catalogue the library of the Earl of Macclesfield at Shirburn Castle in Oxfordshire, prior to the auction of most of the Earl's books and manuscripts.

For further information and selected high resolution images please contact Alison Cole (020 7225 4820) or Tanera Bryden (020 7225 4822) at the Art Fund.

Notes to editors

National Art Collections Fund

The National Art Collections Fund (Art Fund) was founded in 1903. It is the UK's leading independent art charity. It has 80,000 members. Since its foundation, the Art Fund has helped UK public collections acquire over 850,000 works of art. In 2004 the Art Fund offered £4.3 million to museums and galleries and distributed 11 gifts and bequests. The Art Fund is independent of government and raises money from membership subscriptions, donations and legacies.

The Fitzwilliam Museum

The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge houses the University of Cambridge's art collection and is a public museum and art gallery with an international reputation.

It is committed to preservation, research, interpretation, learning, access and display.

The Fitzwilliam's treasures range from Ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman antiquities to the arts of the 21st century and include one of the finest collections of medieval and renaissance manuscripts in Britain – over 1,000 spanning the period from the ninth to the sixteenth centuries and representing all major schools of European illumination. The Fitzwilliam Museum offers public and educational courses and drop-in sessions as well as gallery teaching and wide-ranging provision through printed materials, on-line catalogues, web-based resources and hand-held computers offering audio and visual guides to highlights of the collections. The Fitzwilliam attracts around 300,000 visitors a year; admission is free.

Further information

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