

Rare painting of Spanish Armada defeat subject to export bar, acquired by National Museums NI

02 August 2019

An exceptionally rare, miniature painting entitled *The Spanish Armada off the Coast of England*, which was temporarily subject to a UK export bar, has been acquired by National Museums NI.

Image



With the support of the National Heritage Memorial Fund, Art Fund, the Department for Communities, Friends of the Ulster Museum and the Esmé Mitchell Trust, the work has been acquired by National Museums NI and is now on display at the Ulster Museum.

The unique painting by an unknown artist, but bearing the monogram “V.H.E.”, shows the meeting of Spanish and English fleets battling off the coast of England with Queen Elizabeth I, accompanied by the Earl of Leicester, Robert Dudley, and

her entourage, watching as English fire-ships approach. Experts believe the miniature was produced between 1590 and 1610, after the famous series of 16th century battles resulted in the defeat of the Spanish.

It draws inspiration from Queen Elizabeth I's speech to the troops at Tilbury, in August 1588. The address is widely considered to be her most famous.

The miniature is one of only two known near-contemporary depictions of the Spanish Armada approaching the English coast. The second of which is part of the National Maritime Museum's collection in Greenwich.

Due to the painting's national importance, it was subject to a temporary export bar put in place by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) to prevent its export from the UK until a buyer was found.

It will be displayed in the Ulster Museum's Spanish Armada gallery alongside treasures recovered from the *Girona*, a Spanish Galleass, which was discovered off the Antrim coast in 1967 by Belgian diver Robert Sténuit.

National Museums NI had previously tried to purchase the miniature in 2003 but was outbid at auction. The acquisition marks the first time National Museums NI has saved such a significant work from being exported.

Kathryn Thomson, Chief Executive for National Museums NI, said: "We are very excited to announce that, with the generous support of our funders, we have finally been able to acquire this exquisite and rare painting which will be displayed in the Ulster Museum alongside our internationally renowned collection of objects recovered from two of the ships from the Spanish Armada.

"Uniquely, the painting shows what is likely to be the Spanish Galleass *Girona* in its foreground, the ship from which many of the artefacts on display were recovered.

"We're looking forward to welcoming visitors to the museum to see this rare work of art – itself a national treasure. It will offer visitors a unique insight into this moment in history, while in the surroundings of treasures and weaponry – tangible connections to life aboard one of the immense, powerful ships depicted."

Anna Carragher, Northern Ireland Trustee of National Heritage Memorial Fund, said: "This is a rare and incredibly special miniature. It is one of only a few works inspired by Elizabeth I's rallying of her troops at Tilbury as the Spanish Fleet gathered – one of her most famous addresses. Our Trustees felt it essential it

remain in the UK and in Ulster Museum's Spanish Armada gallery in particular, where it will help tell the Armada story to future generations."

Stephen Deuchar, Director of Art Fund, said: "Rightly considered a 'national treasure', this vibrant miniature depicts one of the most pivotal episodes in English naval history, and Art Fund is proud to see such a piece remain in the UK on display, complementing Ulster Museum's existing collection."

Shirley Chambers from the Department for Communities said: "The Department is delighted that the Ulster Museum has been able to add the Armada miniature to its renowned collection and hope that it attracts visitors for years to come."

The painting is now on display in the Ulster Museum. Admission is free.

For more information about National Museums NI, visit nmni.com.