

British Museum and Wiltshire Museum jointly acquire the unique Lacock Cup

24 December 2013

The British Museum and Wiltshire Museum have jointly acquired the Lacock Cup, one of the most significant pieces of secular English medieval silver with support from the National Heritage Memorial Fund, the Art Fund and private donations.

Image



British Museum

Lacock Cup, c.1430-1450, England, silver-gilt

Dating from the mid 15th century, the Lacock Cup is an English silver and partially gilded drinking cup which has been owned by the Church of St. Cyriac in Lacock, Wiltshire, and used by its congregation for over 400 years. It has been on loan to the British Museum since 1963 and until the 1980s continued to return to the church to be used as a chalice for certain religious festivals.

The Lacock Cup is a stunning piece of craftsmanship and has a unique history. In the medieval period the cup was used for feasting. The cup is elegantly decorated, formed of hammered sheet silver, edged with gothic motifs and twisted ropework which has been gilded. The sweeping lid and trumpet shaped foot would have drawn the attention of the viewer, as it does today. In the post-Reformation era, the cup became a sacred vessel: a chalice for communion wine in a Protestant church. The dual roles of this piece, as feasting cup and holy chalice, offer a window onto the turbulence of the Reformation, when long held traditions as reflected in art were transformed under successive Protestant and Catholic monarchs. It encapsulates a rich array of practices, historical shifts, and both human and divine associations.

While this cup is of a type known to be popular in the late Middle Ages, most examples were destroyed due to changing fashions and consequently few pieces remain. It was the cup's donation as a chalice to the church that enabled it to survive destruction. A rare survivor, with a unique history, the Cup is in near perfect condition today, despite its central role in the community, where it has been used and venerated for centuries.

In January 2013 the Church of St. Cyriac in Lacock offered the Lacock Cup for sale to the British Museum for the price of £1.3 million. A fund raising appeal was immediately launched and the target for acquiring the Cup was reached by contributions from National Heritage Memorial Fund (£650,000), John Studzinski (£200,000), the Art Fund (£150,000) and the remaining funds from the Museum's internal resources, the British Museum Friends, The American Friends of the British Museum, and additional contributions.

The cup will be displayed in the Sir Paul and Lady Ruddock Gallery of Medieval Europe 1050 – 1500 alongside treasures from the period such as the Royal Gold Cup and the Lewis Chessmen. Two replicas of the cup will be created as a result of this important acquisition. One replica will go on display in the Wiltshire Museum Medieval Gallery, alongside other items from Lacock, and the other replication will be given to the Church of Saint Cyriac's in Lacock for liturgical use.

Neil MacGregor, Director of the British Museum, said: "I am delighted that this beautiful and rare cup has been acquired so that it can continue to be enjoyed by visitors to the British Museum as well as in Wiltshire Museum alongside important pieces from Lacock and the Medieval period."

Dr John Catchpole of Lacock Parochial Church Council said: "The church plans to invest the proceeds of the sale to generate income to help to maintain and repair

the beautiful Grade I listed church of St Cyriac's in Lacock as a place of worship for future generations, and are delighted that the British Museum and Wiltshire Museum will now share this unique cup."

Dame Jenny Abramsky, Chair of National Heritage Memorial Fund, said: "The Lacock Cup is an exceptional piece of silverware which encapsulates a number of fascinating stories relating to Medieval history, including the brutal Reformation period. There was absolutely no doubt in our minds that the National Heritage Memorial Fund should step in to fund this rare and beautiful chalice cup. Now it has been successfully acquired by the British Museum and Wiltshire Museum, it will become a key part of their collections and will also be loaned out so the maximum number of people can enjoy it."

Stephen Deuchar, Director of the Art Fund, said: "We're so pleased to have helped the British Museum and the Wiltshire Museum jointly acquire the Lacock cup after 51 years on loan in Bloomsbury. Thanks to both museums' strong network of national programme activity, this exquisite and important work of medieval silverware will be seen across the UK in the years to come."

David Dawson, Director of the Wiltshire Museum, said: "It is a privilege to be working with the British Museum to jointly acquire this important cup. We are planning to improve our displays so that we can showcase the cup in a special exhibition so that people from Lacock and Wiltshire can see the cup locally for the first time in many years."

The Lacock Cup will be on public display from 23 December in the Sir Paul and Lady Ruddock Gallery of Medieval Europe 1050 – 1500, Room 40.

Notes to editors

The Art Fund is the national fundraising charity for art, helping museums to buy and show great art. Over the past five years they have given £26m to help museums and galleries acquire works of art for their collections, and placed hundreds of gifts and bequests, from ancient sculpture and treasure hoards to Old Master paintings and contemporary commissions. They are independently funded, the majority of their income coming from over 100,000 members who, through the National Art Pass, enjoy free entry to over 220 museums, galleries and historic houses across the UK, as well as 50% off entry to major exhibitions. More information can be found at the [Art Fund website](#).

The Wiltshire Museum in Devizes is home to the best Bronze Age archaeology collection in Britain, drawn from the Stonehenge and Avebury World Heritage Site. The collections are designated by Government as being of National Significance. It is an independent charity, and is run by the Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society a registered charity founded in 1853. Their mission statement is 'Inspiring people to explore the archaeology, history and environment of Wiltshire'. More information can be found at the [Wiltshire Museum website](#).

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