

Grant awarded to help save personal archive of British designer Rex Whistler

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Today, a £350,000 grant from the National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF) was awarded to help save the personal archive of celebrated 20th-century British designer Rex Whistler for the nation.

Image



Rex Whistler's drawing for an advertisement for Guinness

Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum is planning to purchase the archive, which contains over 1,000 items and is the only substantial collection of material relating to Rex Whistler in existence. It is hoped that this NHMF award will help the museum to raise the remaining £10,000 needed to acquire the archive.

Whistler came to prominence between the world wars, carving out a dazzling career. Alongside commercially designing for Wedgwood Pottery, Shell Petroleum, Guinness and the London Underground, he also painted many members of London's fashionable society including his own set – the Bright Young Things – including writer Edith Sitwell and photographer Cecil Beaton. He also produced mural cycles, stage designs and book illustrations, as well as portraits, designs for the decorative arts and commercial material. His career was tragically cut short when he was killed on his first day of action in Normandy in 1944.

The highlights of the archive, assembled by Whistler's brother Laurence after his death, include:

- drawings for the Tate Restaurant mural – *In Pursuit of Rare Meats*, completed in 1927
- portraits, advertisements, stage sets, book jackets and illustration
- designs for Shell Petroleum and the Post Office
- diaries and letters – many of which have never been seen in public before
- personal sketchbooks from throughout his life, including one he left on a train en route to Munich in 1929, which found its way back to his brother in 1958
- Sketches that he submitted to the annual Royal Drawing Society competitions for which he almost invariably won prizes
- Originals of book illustrations for Hans Andersen's *Fairy Tales and Legends*
- Annotated sketches and portraits of Whistler himself and his friends

Dame Jenny Abramsky, Chair of NHMF, said: "Whistler was a prolific and prominent artist. Much of his most influential work was designed to be enjoyed through his high profile commercial commissions. This universal and unique appeal is why the Trustees of the National Heritage Memorial Fund felt it was so important to safeguard this extensive collection for future generations to enjoy."

Adrian Green, Director of the Salisbury & South Wiltshire Museum, said: "We are absolutely delighted that the NHMF has helped to support the museum with the acquisition of the archive. We are now only £10,000 short of achieving our fundraising total. Acquiring the archive will ensure that future generations appreciate the talent of an artist whose work epitomises the interwar era."

At the outbreak of war, Whistler joined the Welsh Guards, training as a tank commander on Salisbury Plain, where he not only painted and sketched many of his fellow soldiers, but also transformed the interior of the officers' mess, painting the inside as a Bedouin tent.

Some of the Whistler archive is now on display at the Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum as part of *Rex Whistler: A Talent Cut Short* exhibition, which runs until 29 September 2013. Once the full amount has been raised some of the material in the collection will undergo conservation before being digitised for wider enjoyment.

Anyone wishing to make a contribution towards the fundraising should contact museum Director Adrian Green on 01722 820 542 or email

Notes to editors

Rex Whistler (24 June 1905 – 18 July 1944):

- Reginald John 'Rex' Whistler was born on 24 June 1905, at Eltham, Kent
- He showed a precocious talent for art from a young age
- He was accepted at the Royal Academy, but disliked the regime there and was 'sacked for incompetence'
- He then proceeded to study at the Slade School of Art, where he met Stephen Tennant, soon to become one of his best friends and a model for some of the figures in his works
- Upon leaving the Slade, he burst into a dazzling career as a professional artist. His work encompassed all areas of art and design. From the West End theatre to book illustration (including works by Evelyn Waugh and Walter de la Mare, and perhaps most notably, for *Gulliver's Travels*) and mural and trompe-l'oeil painting
- Paintings at Port Lympne Mansion (within Port Lympne Wild Animal Park), Plas Newydd, Mottisfont Abbey and Dorneywood among others show his outstanding talent in this genre
- His most noted work during the early part of his career was for the café at the Tate Gallery completed in 1927 when he was only 22
- He was commissioned to produce posters and illustrations for Shell Petroleum and the Radio Times. He also created designs for Wedgwood china based on drawings he made of the Devon village of Clovelly
- Whistler's elegance and wit ensured his success as a portrait artist among the fashionable; he painted many members of London society, including Edith Sitwell, Cecil Beaton and other members of the set to which he belonged that became known as the 'Bright Young Things'
- When war broke out, although he was 35, Whistler was eager to join the army. He was commissioned into the Welsh Guards as Lieutenant 131651
- In 1944 he was sent to France following the D-Day landings, where he was killed

Further information

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Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum: 01722 332 151 or visit the [Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum website](#).