

Rare collection of mezzotints saved for the nation

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The British Museum, with the support of the National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF) and the Art Fund, has acquired a magnificent and rare collection of prints dating from the 1680s to the 19th century that give valuable insight into scarcely recorded aspects of British life.

Image



Phaeton by Benjamin Green

Antony Griffiths, Keeper of the Prints and Drawings Department at the British Museum said "This is the largest acquisition for the British Museum print collection in the last hundred years, and makes available to the world a very important part of the history of British art."

In the late 18th century, British printmaking became one of the UK's greatest exports and an essential element of Continental Anglomania. Mezzotint is a copperplate process that burnishes down a roughened copper plate so that the design emerges as light against black. It was the first tonal method of printing and was the medium by which British prints took Continental markets by storm in

the late 1760s and 1770s, trailblazing the later fashions for stipple and colour printing.

Comprising 7,250 prints that chart social history up until the First World War, the collection includes rare 17th century mezzotints called 'drolls' which recorded semi-popular British culture and visual iconography. The collection also includes 18th and 19th-century portrait and subject prints along with the Northumberland album - an intact album of satires on fashion and other topical subjects assembled by the Duchess of Northumberland in the 1770s.

The British Museum has purchased the collection for £1,250,000 with support of just under £440,000 from the National Heritage Memorial Fund, £250,000 by the Art Fund, £300,000 from the British Museum Friends, £161,987 from private donations and £100,000 from other British Museum sources.

Carole Souter, NHMF's Chief Executive commented: "This collection of prints is fascinating and throws so much light on British life and our cultural heritage. The National Heritage Memorial Fund is delighted to be able to help support this important collection which is now safeguarded for future generations of scholars and visitors to enjoy."

Stephen Deuchar, director of the Art Fund, said: "These captivating mezzotints offer a fascinating insight into our cultural history. Now that the prints will be held at the British Museum, people will be able to marvel at the works and learn about this important printing technique. We're thrilled to have helped make this acquisition possible, alongside the support of the NHMF. It's a great example of how private and public funding can come together to support important acquisitions."

This outstanding collection exists due to the dedication of the Hon. Christopher Lennox-Boyd who has spent nearly 40 years amassing a unique collection of more than 40,000 British mezzotints. After examination of this extraordinary collection, the British Museum has acquired a selection of these rare prints to fill gaps unrepresented in any other UK collection.

Very few of the works have ever been described in modern sources and now as part of the British Museum's collection they will for the first time be fully catalogued and made available to the public and scholarly community online and through publications, loans and exhibitions. Together with the 18,000 British mezzotints already in the collection, they will form a comprehensive resource that will transform aspects of the study of British art shedding new light on previously

unexplored parts of British art, history and society. Some prints record paintings that have long been lost, representing the only surviving record of artistic practices. Others give visual form to aspects of British life that are rarely seen in art, whilst more document levels of popular visual culture that have not yet been studied.

Notes to editors

The purchase price for the collection was £1,250,000. £438,013 has been contributed by the National Heritage Memorial Fund, £250,000 by the Art Fund, £300,000 from the British Museum Friends, £161,987 from private donations and £100,000 from other British Museum sources.

The Art Fund

The Art Fund is the UK's national fundraising charity for works of art. They believe that everyone should have access to great art and that by bringing together the contributions of all our members and supporters, they can play a part in enriching the range, quality and understanding of art for all to experience. They campaign, fundraise and give money to help museums and galleries buy and show art, and promote its enjoyment through our events and membership scheme. Recent grant highlights include leading the £3.3million campaign to save the Staffordshire Hoard, and helping to buy a new commission, Antony Gormley's *6 Times*, for the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art. They don't receive government funding; with members and supporters making their work possible.

The British Museum

The Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum holds the nation's prime reference collection of prints and drawings of Western art from the end of the fourteenth century to the present. It is one of the best three such collections in the world. There are more than two million works in total, which are available to the public through exhibitions, loans, a Student Room in the British Museum, and through the British Museum website, where nearly a third of a million have been posted, most with images attached. This is the largest and best source of information on Western prints and drawings available anywhere.

Further information

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