

SECURING VAN DYCK'S 'PORTRAIT OF A WOMAN' AND THE BACON CUP

The Ashmolean Museum has been presented with the opportunity to acquire 'Portrait of a Woman' by Anthony van Dyck (1599-1641) along with 9 pieces of English silver, including the Bacon Cup, from the celebrated Cassel Collection - the last remaining in private hands - in a hybrid arrangement under the UK government's Acceptance in Lieu (AIL) scheme.

The total value of the group is about £15million but with the AIL scheme the Ashmolean can acquire them for just £500,000. We are approaching key public funders in the UK and have already received some pledges of support. We are working to raise at least £150,000 over the next 6 months in order to complete the acquisition.





PORTRAIT OF A WOMAN

'Portrait of a Woman' is a wonderfully ambitious early portrait by the Flemish artist Anthony van Dyck (1599-1641), which he painted around 1618-20. The full-length oil painting presents a richly-dressed young woman adorned with fine jewellery, including pearls and gold chains, while seated in front of a billowing red curtain.

Painted before Van Dyck left for Italy in 1621, this portrait does not yet display the Venetian characteristics of his later portraits, but testifies to his status as Peter Paul Rubens's most talented pupil in Antwerp. The portrait is a companion piece to a full-length portrait of a man, tentatively identified as a member of the Vinck (Vincque) family of prosperous Antwerp merchants who traded in luxury goods. The sensitively painted dog beside the woman's chair, a symbol of fidelity, suggests that these companion portraits were made on the occasion of her marriage. The two portraits were only separated in 1829 with the male portrait remaining in Belgium, now in the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp. These pendants are rare examples of full-length portraits by Van Dyck in his First Antwerp Period (1618-21) before he left for Italy and England, where he would become the most popular portraitist at the court in London.

The Ashmolean holds a major collection not only of splendid drawings and prints by Van Dyck but also some of his paintings and oil sketches. One of the artist's most spectacular pictures from his First Antwerp Period is 'The Deposition', which is dated around 1619, the same period as 'Portrait of a Woman'. The Museum also holds a handful of later oil sketches by Van Dyck. Most notable is a small-scale monochrome painting, 'Charles I and the Knights of the Garter in Procession', which was a design for a set of tapestries to decorate the walls of the Banqueting Hall in Whitehall, but this commission was never realised. This grisaille panel was accepted by HM Government in lieu of Inheritance Tax and allocated to the Ashmolean in 2002. Two rapidly executed oil studies, also at the Ashmolean, were made by Van Dyck around 1628 in preparation for a large group portrait of the Brussels Aldermen painted for the Town Hall in Brussels (destroyed 1695). These two male heads show the artist's extraordinary talents at a later moment with a different type of portraiture. The glamorous full-length 'Portrait of a Woman' from ten years earlier would vastly enrich the Museum's presentation of Van Dyck as one of the greatest portraitists in seventeenth-century Europe.



THE CASSEL SILVER

The group comprises 9 outstanding pieces of 16th-18th century silver including the celebrated Bacon Cup.

Sir Ernest Cassel (1852-1921) was a German born merchant banker and financier raised in the Ashkenazi faith who, after emigrating to the UK in 1869, rose to become a trusted friend of King Edward VII. Cassel was a pioneering collector of historic English silver but his exceptional collection was comparatively little known in his lifetime. However, it was later recognised for its rarity, splendour and importance.

On Cassel's death the Bacon Cup was passed down through his family, eventually being loaned to the Ashmolean by one of his descendants. It's acquisition, along with a selection of other remarkable silver including 'The Blacksmiths' Cup' - a Commonwealth

silver standing cup - and a pair of 17th century silver-gilt ginger jars and covers, will enhance the Ashmolean's already outstanding English silver collection - one of the finest in the world - while expanding the legacy of Sir Ernest Cassel.

HISTORY OF THE BACON CUP

This silver gilt cup and cover is one of three cups made for English politician Sir Nicholas Bacon (1510-79) from the Great Seal of Queen Mary I (reigned 1553 - 1558). The cup was made by Affabel Partridge, goldsmith to Queen Elizabeth I.

When Queen Elizabeth I ascended the throne in 1558, she commissioned a new Great Seal. Her sister Mary's seal was rendered unusable and given to Sir Nicholas Bacon as the new Lord Keeper of the Great Seal. Sir Nicholas had the seal made into three cups in the 1570s,

as heirlooms for his country houses: Gorhambury in Hertfordshire, Redgrave in Suffolk and Stewkey (now Stiffkey) in Norfolk. The cup the Ashmolean has an opportunity to purchase is the Stewkey Cup.

The bowl of the cup is engraved with the arms and motto of Sir Nicholas; the family crest, and a boar – a pun on the name Bacon – forms the finial, hence the 'Bacon Cup'. The cup is amongst the few surviving examples of 16th-century London hallmarked silver and, with its connection to the Courts of Queens Elizabeth I and Mary I and is a historically important work which perfectly demonstrates the goldsmiths' art of the Tudor period.



IMAGE CREDITS

Page 1 Anthony van Dyck, 'Portrait of a Woman', Image © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

Page 2 Left, Affabel Partidge, 'The Bacon Cup'; Right (top and bottom), 'The Bacon Cup' (detail), Images © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

Page 3 Left, 'The Blacksmiths' Cup'; Right, Thomas Jenkins, Ginger Jar, Images © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.