



News Release

V&A saves rare medieval carving of the Deposition from the Cross for the Nation

“So beautiful, so moving, and all the more precious for being so very rare.” - Tom Holland, Historian and Author

The V&A has successfully raised the £2 million cost to acquire and save a rare 12th-century walrus ivory carving, depicting the Deposition of Christ from the Cross, for the nation, following a temporary export ban placed in November 2023 by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

The intricate carving is heralded as one of the finest and most important examples of English Romanesque ivory carving to survive today.

The Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest, which is supported by Arts Council England, helped keep the exceptional carving in the UK by recommending a delay in granting an export licence.

The acquisition is generously supported by a £700,000 grant from the National Heritage Memorial Fund, and a grant of £350,000 from Art Fund, as part of a national public appeal which included support from grant-making organisations, individuals, members of the V&A Director’s Circle and Young Patrons’ Circle, V&A Members and those who left a legacy gift in their Will.

The successful acquisition of the *Deposition from the Cross* will see the sculpture enter the V&A’s permanent collection and return to public display in V&A South Kensington’s Medieval and Renaissance galleries later this year, having previously been on long-term loan to the museum for 40 years from 1982 to 2022.

The sculpture will be re-united with the only known surviving piece believed to be of the same ensemble, a fragmentary ivory carving of Judas at the Last Supper, which is reported to have been discovered in Wakefield in the 18th century and given to the V&A in 1949. Together, both carvings would have likely once formed part of a larger work showing scenes from the Passion of Christ. At V&A South Kensington, the two pieces were exhibited side-by-side for decades.

Dr. Tristram Hunt, Director of the V&A, said: *“I am thrilled that the V&A has been able to save this elemental object of English art for the nation. In this small, sublime carving is captured a lost story of Christian culture, Romanesque design and medieval craftsmanship. I am hugely grateful to everyone who so generously contributed to secure this wondrous piece for the national collection.”*

Dr Simon Thurley CBE, Chair of the National Heritage Memorial Fund, said: *“The beautiful and expressive twelfth century *Deposition from the Cross* is one of the most important English pieces to have survived from the Romanesque period. I am thrilled that National Heritage Memorial Fund support will save the sculpture for the nation and secure a home for it at the V&A for audiences to enjoy in perpetuity.”*

Jenny Waldman, Director of Art Fund, said: *“This exceptional carving of the *Deposition from the Cross* provides a rare insight into our Medieval history. Backed by commitments from generous individuals, trusts and foundations, I'm delighted that Art Fund has been able to support the V&A to acquire this remarkable piece for its permanent collection, ensuring it remains a highlight in the Medieval & Renaissance galleries for everyone to enjoy.”*

History of the *Deposition from the Cross*

The *Deposition* is dated to about 1190-1200, and is likely to have been made in York, North Yorkshire, one of the UK's most important medieval centres of artistic patronage, trade and religion.

A revealing example of the craftsmanship and taste at the highest levels of society in the north of England in the late 12th century, the *Deposition* depicts the moment in the story of the Passion in which Christ's body is lifted from the cross by Joseph of Arimathea. Unique and intimate in its treatment of the subject's expressions and gestures, the *Deposition* has attracted praise for both its masterful skills of ivory carving, and its embodiment of feelings of human suffering, empathy, and compassion.

The *Deposition* offers a fascinating glimpse into the art and craftsmanship of England during the Middle Ages, having survived the widespread destruction of religious art and imagery during the English Reformation of the 16th century. An exceptionally rare piece, it is an invaluable resource for the study of cultural heritage and history in England and beyond, from patronage and taste in the Romanesque period, to global trade networks and historic sourcing of materials such as walrus ivory.

Extraordinary in its quality and condition, the *Deposition* ranks alongside two 12th century Romanesque objects of outstanding national importance which are already part of the V&A's collection: the Gloucester Candlestick, given to the Abbey (now cathedral) of St. Peter, Gloucester by Peter, Abbot from 1104-1113 and the Becket Casket reliquary enamelled with scenes from the life of St Thomas Becket.

The carving was on long-term loan to the V&A for 40 years until 2022. It has been exhibited at The Metropolitan Museum of Art (1970) and Hayward Gallery (1984).

The acquisition of the *Deposition from the Cross* has been made possible due to the support of the National Heritage Memorial Fund, Art Fund, The Headley Trust, V&A Americas Foundation, several legacy gifts, and many other generous donors.

Art Fund's grant was made possible with the support of the Rought Fund, The Leche Trust, the David and Emma Verey Charitable Trust and a group of generous individuals.

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For further PRESS information from the V&A please email press.office@vam.ac.uk (not for publication).

ABOUT THE V&A

The V&A is a family of museums dedicated to the power of creativity –its power to entertain and move, to enrich our lives, open our minds and change the world. We celebrate and share that power through a programme of exhibitions, events, educational and digital experiences, a collection of 2.8 million objects, and through our support for new works and commitment to conservation, research and sustainable design. Together, our work tells a 5,000-year-old story of creativity, helping to advance cultural knowledge everywhere, and inspiring the makers, creators and innovators of today and tomorrow. We are always working to broaden our audiences so that everyone can be part of the V&A –because the V&A and the power of creativity belong to us all.

ABOUT EXPORT LICENCING

The purpose of the export control system is to provide an opportunity for the UK to retain cultural goods judged to be of outstanding national importance that would otherwise be exported and to provide a guarantee of the legality of the export. The system is designed to strike a balance, as fairly as possible, between the various interests concerned in any application for an export licence.

[Export licensing | Arts Council England](#)

The Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest (Reviewing Committee) advises the Secretary of State for the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) whether a cultural object intended for export is a national treasure. Any item considered too important to leave the UK can be placed under temporary export deferral.

[Reviewing Committee | Arts Council England](#)

ABOUT THE NATIONAL HERITAGE MEMORIAL FUND

The National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF) was set up in 1980 to save the most outstanding parts of our national heritage, in memory of those who have given their lives for the UK. NHMF receives annual grant-in-aid of £5million from the UK government to help save some of our most-loved treasures such as paintings, natural heritage,

maritime and industrial vessels, and historic houses, from being lost forever. Any funds remaining from NHMF's annual allocation at the end of the financial year remain available to NHMF to award grants to exceptional heritage treasures such as the Portrait of Mai (Omai), The Artist Rooms, Titian's Diana and Acteon, the Honresfield Library, Tyntesfield Estate and Wentworth Woodhouse.

www.nhmf.org.uk

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ABOUT ART FUND

Art Fund is the national charity for art, helping museums and people to share in great art and culture for 120 years. Art Fund raises millions of pounds every year to help the UK's museums, galleries and historic houses. The charity funds art, enabling the UK's museums to buy and share exciting works, connect with their communities, and inspire the next generation. It builds audiences, with its National Art Pass opening doors to great culture. And it amplifies the museum sector through the world's largest museum prize, Museum of the Year, and creative events that bring the UK's museums together. Art Fund is people-powered by 135,000 members who buy a National Art Pass, and the donors, trusts and foundations who support the charity.

The National Art Pass provides free or discounted entry to over 900 museums, galleries and historic places, 50% off major exhibitions, and Art Quarterly magazine.

www.artfund.org