Appeal to secure portrait of black African muslim and freed slave

07/07/2010

The National Portrait Gallery today launches, with the support of the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and the Art Fund, an appeal to acquire for the nation the earliest known British oil painting of a freed slave, and the first portrait that honours a named African subject as an individual and an equal.

Never before seen in public, and currently on temporary display at the Gallery, this portrait of Ayuba Suleiman Diallo (c.1701-73) (known when he was in England as Job ben Solomon), shows the sitter painted in 1733 in his traditional dress wearing his copy of the Qur'an around his neck.

The portrait, from a private collection, was sold at auction in Christies in December, and is now under a temporary export bar. The Gallery needs to raise £554,937.50 to secure this important and compelling painting for future generations by 25 August 2010, after which time it is at risk of export. Art Fund members have kick-started the campaign with a £100,000 grant, and the Heritage Lottery Fund has awarded a grant of £333,000 towards the acquisition and a project to cover costs for its conservation, display, interpretation and regional tour to Leicester, Liverpool and the North East Museums Hub. In addition to the funds the Gallery is able to contribute to the purchase, it is now launching a campaign to raise £100,000 to complete the target.

Among the appeal's supporters are writers and broadcasters Bonnie Greer and Gus Casely-Hayford; writer and actor Kwame Kwei-Armah; Baroness Lola Young; artist Faisal Abdu'Allah, and Kids Company founder Camila Batmanghelidjh.

Broadcaster and National Portrait Gallery Trustee, Zeinab Badawi, attending the launch of the Appeal, says: 'This portrait is a rare example of a painting of an eighteenth-century African in Britain. This portrait would be a vital and powerful addition to the Collection at the National Portrait Gallery for its representation of Britain's diverse cultural heritage.'

A high status African from a prosperous family of Muslim religious clerics, Ayuba Suleiman Diallo was born in the Gambia. At the age of 29 he was captured as a slave and transported to work on a plantation in America. After being imprisoned for trying to escape, he met the lawyer Thomas Bluett who become aware of Diallo's high birth, intellect and education and took an interest in him, arranging to bring him to England in 1733. After his arrival, he mixed with high society and had a lasting impact on Britain's understanding of African culture, identity and religion.

During this time, Diallo was received with great enthusiasm by aristocrats and scholars including the Duke of Portland and Sir Hans Sloane, whom he helped with Arabic translations and his interest in the Qur'an. Sloane also arranged for Diallo to be presented at the Court of George II and later to be elected a member of the Gentleman's Society at Spalding. His supporters additionally arranged for him to sit for this portrait, which is also the earliest known painting by the artist William Hoare of Bath. The conflict for the sitter is recorded in a contemporary account which not only indicates the affection in which Diallo was held but sheds light on the practice of portraiture in England and other cultures.

"Job's Aversion to Pictures of all Sorts, was exceeding great; insomuch, that it was with great Difficulty that he could be brought to sit for his own. We assured him that we never worshipped any Picture, and that we wanted his for no other End but to keep us in mind of him. He at last consented to have it drawn; which was done by Mr Hoare." (Thomas Bluett, *Memoirs*, p.50)

The artist has responded sensitively to Diallo's personality by depicting him, at the sitter's own request, in his traditional dress and carrying his copy of the Qur'an around his neck. The painting has not previously been exhibited in public, although it was engraved in 1734 and a version was published again in 1750.

Sandy Nairne, Director of the National Portrait Gallery, London, says: "This engaging portrait of Diallo offers a more complex history of the eighteenth century – it is a vital acquisition."

Wesley Kerr, Chairman of the Heritage Lottery Fund London Committee, says: "This remarkable portrait of Ayuba Suleiman Diallo tells so many stories about our past and captures so well the intelligence, intensity and religiosity of an eighteenth-century African. HLF was delighted to offer £333,000 to help keep it here in the UK available for everyone to see, savour and learn from, through an imaginative programme of special exhibitions and studies. Diallo, as a high born African who was enslaved and taken to America, was one of millions of victims of the brutal Triangular Trade. But he triumphed to cut an impressive figure in the salons of literary and royal London, and succeeded in returning to West Africa a free man. In Hoare's picture, Diallo's bright eyes follow you round the room and our centuries-old diversity is brought to life. We very much hope that the National Portrait Gallery succeeds in raising the rest of the money to make this hugely significant painting free to all."

Stephen Deuchar, Director of the Art Fund, says: "This portrait is of exceptional historical and sociological importance. Art Fund members have kick-started the campaign with a £100,000 grant and we now urge members of the public to help the National Portrait Gallery acquire the work for everyone to experience."

Ayuba Suleiman Diallo (also known as Job ben Solomon) by William Hoare of Bath is currently on display at the National Portrait Gallery in Room 15 until 30 July 2010.

Notes to editors

The total project cost including acquisition and touring, community outreach, conservation and interpretation is £663,604. Breakdown of costs is as follows:

£333,000 Heritage Lottery Fund (50% of project costs). This is a second-round pass, which means it is a confirmed award.
£100,000 The Art Fund
£109,398 To be raised directly by National Portrait Gallery
£81,672 National Portrait Gallery contribution
£ 39,534 Non cash contributions by National Portrait Gallery
as well as the generous donations being sought from individuals, companies, trusts and foundations.

Portrait of Ayuba Suleiman Diallo also known as Job ben Solomon (c.1701-73) by William Hoare (c.1707-72), 1733. Oil on canvas, 762 x 642 mm

This portrait of Ayuba Suleiman Diallo (oil on canvas, 30 x 25 ins, 762 x 642 mm) was painted in 1733 by William Hoare of Bath (c.1707-72). Until its appearance on the art market in 2009 it was believed lost and was only known through Bluett's description of Diallo's sitting (see above) and engravings. The portrait is not signed but carries identifying inscriptions on the reverse (on the lining 'PORTRAIT OF / JOB: BEN: SOLOMON.' and on the stretcher 'PAINTED BY WILLIAM HOARE OF BATH IN 1733'). The identification of the sitter and the attribution of the artist given in this inscription are confirmed by the existence of two contemporary engravings after this portrait, one published as the frontispiece to the Memoirs of the Life of Job (1734) and the other published in the Gentleman's Magazine in 1750. The publication and wide-scale dissemination of these engravings in the eighteenth century also demonstrates Diallo's fame during the period. The painting, however, has descended in the same family since at least 1840 and has never been exhibited in public.

Ayuba Suleiman Diallo (c.1701-73) is significant to the history of the early eighteenth-century transatlantic slave trade and Britain's historical understanding of different cultures and religions. Born to a powerful family of Muslim clerics in the Senegambia region of West Africa, Diallo was a high-status, educated and wealthy individual who, as well as his native language, was versed in Arabic and came to learn English. In 1731, while on a trading mission to sell slaves down the River Gambia, Diallo was kidnapped, shaved of his beard – the distinguishing mark of his Islamic identity – and sold into slavery. He was then transported on a British ship to Maryland where he was sold and put to work on a tobacco plantation. Frustrated by the hard physical labour and the abuse he received when conducting his prayers, Diallo escaped. He was soon caught and imprisoned but was permitted to write a letter, in Arabic, to his father. This incident came to the attention of the English lawyer and missionary Thomas Bluett, who was impressed by Diallo's character, his literacy and strict observance of Islamic prayers and dietary laws, and concluded that Diallo was 'no common slave' (Bluett, Memoirs).

Bluett brought Diallo to London in 1733 where they lodged together for a while before Diallo moved to Africa House in the City, at the expense of the Royal African Company. During his time in England, he was received with enthusiasm by aristocrats and scholars including the 2nd Duke of Montagu and the Duke of Devonshire. He was soon regarded as an 'African gentleman' - an unusual accolade in the eighteenth century which reflects the esteem in which he was held by his supporters who admired his religious conviction and found reassuring parallels in his moral standards and monotheistic theology.

He translated Arabic manuscripts and inscriptions for Sir Hans Sloane and made three transcriptions of the Qur'an from memory. Sloane arranged for Diallo to be presented to King George II and Queen Caroline and to be elected a member of the Gentleman's Society of Spalding. Diallo was freed from slavery with money raised by public subscription and arrangements were made for his return to Africa, making him one of the very few victims of the slave trade to survive and return home. Although Diallo went back to owning slaves - as non-Muslims he considered them 'infidels' – he was determined to negotiate the freedom of a fellow Muslim who had been enslaved at the same time as him. He also brokered arrangements with the Royal African Company for the redemption of any Muslim slave who fell into their hands in the future.

Recognised as an accomplished portrait artist in oil and pastel who painted many of the leading members and their families of mid-Georgian society, Hoare worked in the studio of the painter and sculptor Giuseppe Grisoni with whom he travelled to Rome in 1728. On his return he settled in Bath, being one of the first artists to establish a studio there. Quickly securing a reputation he became a highly sought after portrait artist. As a founding member of the Royal Academy, he exhibited there until 1779 and had a lasting impact on the next generation of artists including future President of the Royal Academy, Sir Thomas Lawrence. In addition to pastels, drawings and studio works, the National Portrait Gallery houses four oil portraits by Hoare: Richard Grenville-Temple, 2nd Earl Temple (NPG 258), Henry

Pelham (NPG 221), Charles Wyndham, 2nd Earl of Egremont (NPG 449) and Christopher Anstey with his daughter' (NPG 3084.)

Using money raised through the National Lottery, since 1994 the Heritage Lottery Fund has not only revitalised hundreds of museums, parks, historic buildings, landscapes and wildlife sites, but has also given new meaning to heritage itself. People from every walk of life are now involved with the heritage that inspires them, making choices about what they want to keep and share from the past, for future generations. HLF has supported more than 33,900 projects, allocating over £4.4billion across the UK, including £865million to projects in London alone. To date, HLF has made 238 awards in LB Westminster amounting to just under £242million.

The Art Fund is a membership charity that helps museums and galleries buy works of art for all to enjoy through awarding grants, campaigning and fundraising. Recent highlights include the £3.3 million campaign to save the Staffordshire Hoard, a fundraising initiative that was kick-started with a £300,000 Art Fund grant. The Fund is financed by the generosity of its 80,000 members and supporters who have a passion for art and the institutions that house great collections. www.artfund.org

National Portrait Gallery, St Martin's Place, WC2H 0HE opening hours: Saturday-Wednesday: 10am – 6pm (Gallery closure commences at 5.50pm) **Late Opening:** Thursday, Fridays:10am - 9pm (Gallery closure commences at 8.50pm) **Recorded information:** 020 7312 2463 **General information:** 020 7306 0055 / www.npg.org.uk

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