Constable’s Salisbury Cathedral masterpiece saved

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This has been made possible through major grants from the Heritage Lottery Fund (£15.8million), the Art Fund (£1million), a very substantial donation from the Manton Foundation, and Tate Members.

The acquisition is part of a ground-breaking new partnership, called Aspire, between five national and regional galleries: Amgueddfa Cymru - National Museum Wales; the National Galleries of Scotland; Colchester and Ipswich Museums; Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum; and Tate Britain. The partnership will enable the work, owned by Tate, to go on almost constant view in partner venues across the UK. From today it will go on view in the Constable room at Tate Britain until the end of the year before being shown at the five national and regional galleries participating in the programme.

The work has been acquired for the special price of £23.1million with tax concessions, equivalent to an open market sale of £40million. The acquisition has been made possible through the most generous collaboration of the children of the late Lord Ashton of Hyde and purchased through the London fine art agents, Robert Holden Ltd. The painting had previously been on view at the National Gallery on long-term loan since 1983.

Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows is one of a series of monumental ‘six-footer’ canvases painted by the artist. This was the scale he reserved for his finest compositions, the paintings he wished to make a great impact in the crowded, competitive hang of the Royal Academy exhibitions. This work is the most visually spectacular of all the ‘six footers’, the most loaded in meaning and the one of which he was most proud. Constable called it ‘The Great Salisbury’, and wrote “I am told I got it to look better than anything I have yet done.”

Nicholas Serota, Director, Tate said: “Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows is one of the great masterpieces of British art. I am extremely grateful to the owners who have worked with us while we have raised the funds to ensure the painting remains in the UK. I would also like to thank the National Gallery for their support and the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Manton Foundation, the Art Fund and Tate Members who have recognised the importance of this work and that it should remain in the national collection. Through the innovative Aspire programme the work will now be widely accessible across Britain.”

Jenny Abramsky, Chair of Heritage Lottery Fund said: “HLF is proud to be a major funder of this masterpiece. Our investment of over £15million is substantial but reflects the fact that these moments – those that give us the chance to save such a precious and quintessentially British heritage icon – come along very rarely. It is unimaginable that this particular painting might have ended up anywhere other than in a UK public collection. Constable was truly a man of the people who believed that art was for everyone and not the select few and it is very fitting that the innovative approach of the Aspire project will ensure that many more people around the country will get to see and enjoy Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows than ever before. That’s really something to celebrate.”

Sandra Niles of the Manton Foundation said “The Trustees of the Manton Foundation were unanimous in their support of this effort to secure this extraordinary painting for many generations of audiences to enjoy. We hope that our grant is a way of recognising the lifelong interest and philanthropy of my grandparents, Sir Edwin and Lady Manton.”

Stephen Deuchar, Director of the Art Fund, said: “Constable’s Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows is a British icon. Now, thanks to a funding partnership between the Art Fund, the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Manton Foundation, it is entering the nation’s permanent collection and will be shown in many museums across the UK through an innovative sharing arrangement. It's a great pleasure to have helped Tate and its four partner museums make this happen.”

Adrian Green, Director Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum, said: "The Aspire partners are delighted that the funding has been secured to save Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows for the nation. The Aspire programme will ensure that the painting will reach as wide an audience as possible, particularly through a range of imaginative events at each of the partner venues. At Salisbury Museum the opportunity to see the painting and then ‘step out into the canvas’ will be an unforgettable experience."

The Aspire programme is a partnership between five UK institutions, all of which will organise special public programmes highlighting the painting. It will be seen in exhibitions and displays which include the partner venue’s existing collection and reflect the individual context of each site. After the initial five year period all the partners will continue to have special access to the painting for their exhibitions, while ensuring that this extraordinary work is lent to other institutions so that it can be enjoyed by a wide public.

Each display will be complemented by an education programme which encourages audiences to learn more about this painting and the work of John Constable. The project will establish a national network for Constable studies to promote exchange and create new opportunities for training and skills development with a particular focus on developing new audiences for heritage through traineeships and the provision of education materials for schools, teachers and families.

An image of the painting and colouring sheet, along with other related activities will be available online on Tate Kids. They will allow children to explore the painting in closer detail.

Notes to editors

Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows depicts Salisbury Cathedral under both a heavy cloud and a striking arched rainbow from across the River Avon. The scene has been interpreted as a metaphor for pressure felt by the Church of England from its diminished political importance. The painting was first exhibited at the Royal Academy’s Summer Exhibition in 1831 and later in a regional exhibition in Birmingham as directed by Constable who wanted the work to be seen by as many people as possible.

The UK holds seven of the twelve large-scale works Constable exhibited, and five of the thirteen full-size sketches that he made for these. The work was one of two which were privately owned. There are three pairings of sketch and finished painting in Britain. Securing this work for the UK has now added a fourth pairing. The full-size sketch for Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows is held by the Guildhall Art Gallery, London.

The order of displays in the Aspire programme is as follows: National Museum Wales, 2014; Christchurch Mansion, Ipswich, Colchester and Ipswich Museums, 2015; Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum, 2016; National Galleries of Scotland, 2017; Tate Britain, 2018.

Further information

Tate press office: Elizabeth Flanagan or Ruth Findlay on 020 7887 4941 or pressoffice@tate.org.uk.