Museum acquires Jean de la Valette portrait bust

02/12/2011

The acquisition gives the museum a superb renaissance masterpiece that forms the centrepiece for displays about the Knights of Malta. The bust will also become a central object within the Museum's regular learning and activities programme, and will be used with the local community, school groups and families to explore themes of heroism and gift-giving of the period.

Jean de la Valette, 47th Grand Master of the Order of St John of Jerusalem, was in post when the Ottoman Turkish forces of Suleiman the Magnificent laid siege to Malta in 1565, in what was to become one of the most famous military actions in European history. The Great Siege lasted from May to September, with heavy casualties on both sides, but the Knights held out and the Turks were defeated. Much of the credit for the victory went to Valette, who was hailed as a hero throughout the west.

Wesley Kerr, Chairman of the Heritage Lottery Fund for London, explains the significance of the acquisition:

"This bust is of international importance and a rare and vivid surviving example of the work of 16th century master artist, Milanese sculptor and gold/silversmith Leone Leoni. Very few objects of this type and age can be attributed to specific artists and as such the piece will take pride of place as one of highest profile exhibits at the Museum. We are delighted to be able to help the museum acquire the object and that people of all ages will be able to learn about its remarkable place in European history and be in physical presence of its beauty."

Almost certainly a gift to Valette, the outstanding bust, of silver and gilt bronze, was sent in gratitude after the siege had ended; at this time he was showered with presents from the great and good of Europe. The bust is a remarkable portrait by a master goldsmith; and although only 23 centimetres high, it shows Valette wearing a gilt and embossed parade armour, with his Maltese cross visible behind the fabric sash across his breast. Every facet of the armour, from the embossed decoration to the individual rivets and leather shoulder straps, is perfectly reproduced, while the silver head is a masterpiece of modelling, and the finest extant depiction of Valette.

The bust is attributed to Leone Leoni (1509 – 22 July 1590), who worked at the Papal Mint in Rome and the Imperial Mint in Milan and is regarded as the finest Cinquecento medallist. It could well have been a gift from a member of the Habsburg family, for whom Leoni worked extensively. It was almost certainly looted from Malta by Napoleon in 1798 and only resurfaced in a sale in Paris in 1860. It was offered to the museum by Daniel Katz Ltd for £350,000 and has been acquired through generous grants from The Heritage Lottery Fund, the Art Fund, the V&A Purchase Fund, The Pilgrim Trust, The Linbury Trust, The Headley Trust and the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths.

The Museum of the Order of St John is devoted to the history of the Order of St John and St John Ambulance. The Order was founded in Jerusalem almost 1000 years ago and subsequently based on Rhodes and Malta, and the modern Order has been central to British life for the last 150 years. The role of St John Ambulance volunteers has been crucial in both war and peace and St John continues to provide ambulance services and First Aid training on a national (and international) scale. The Museum was itself recently subject to a complete redevelopment with the aid of a £1.53million grant from the HLF, and re-opened in November 2010.

Notes to editors

The HLF grant to the project Bust of Jean de la Valette is for £259,300 (71% of project costs) and is a second-round pass, which means it is a confirmed award.

The Art Fund
The Art Fund is the national fundraising charity for art, helping UK museums and galleries to buy, show and share art. Over the past 5 years, the Art Fund has given £24 million to buy art and supported a range of projects and programmes aimed at helping more people enjoy art. The Art Fund is independently funded and the majority of income comes from 85,000 supporters who purchase a National Art Pass, costing from just £37.50, which gives free entry to over 200 museums, galleries and historic houses across the country as well as 50% off major exhibitions.

Find out more about the Art Fund and how to buy a National Art Pass. Media contact 020 7225 4888, media@artfund.org.

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Opening times
Monday - Saturday, 10am - 5pm
Tours
Tuesday, Friday and Saturday, 11am and 2.30pm
(tours last about an hour)
Visits to the Museum of the Order of St John are free of charge; a small donation is suggested for guided tours.