

Press Release  
**British Museum  
acquires  
outstanding  
alabaster Virgin  
and Child**

*For immediate release*

The British Museum has acquired an outstanding 14<sup>th</sup> Century English alabaster figure of the Virgin and Child which is the best-preserved of its kind on display in a UK national collection. The alabaster figure enters the permanent collection at the British Museum with support from the Art Fund, National Heritage Memorial Fund and private donations. The sculpture probably originates from the Midlands and provides a precious insight into carved alabaster from the period that was otherwise largely destroyed, hidden or sold abroad during the English Reformation. It joins the British Museum's permanent collection alongside iconic objects that define the medieval age, such as the Lewis Chessmen, the Royal Gold Cup and the Holy Thorn Reliquary of Jean, duc du Berry.

This statue is particularly exciting because it provides insight into a period of history during which almost all religious imagery was lost and destroyed due to the Reformation. The 14<sup>th</sup> Century artists who worked alabaster of this quality attracted the attention of King Edward III, who ordered a carved alabaster altarpiece from Peter the Maceon of Nottingham in the late 1360s. The altarpiece he commissioned for the chapel of St George at Windsor, along with the totality of comparable pieces in situ, were destroyed, buried or sold abroad during the English Reformation. This statue of the Virgin and Child is a rare survivor that escaped this wave of destruction triggered by Protestantism, having perhaps been exported to the continent at the time of its manufacture, or sold off when imagery of this sort was no longer allowed.

The unknown British sculptor demonstrates great skill in suggesting both the divinity of the Virgin and her role as loving mother. The viewer is encouraged to identify with the tender relationship between the mother and her son. This interactive object has been touched and kissed by the faithful with the face of the Virgin and the foot of Christ worn through adoration. The standing Virgin is crowned as Queen of Heaven. The Christ Child is seated on her right arm and holds an orb in his right hand and, with his other hand, touches the Virgin's chest.

The sculpture is in remarkable condition and is extraordinary in having suffered no major breakages. Even rarer is the survival of large portions of the original decoration, including gilding and imitation jewels which decorate the chest of the Virgin. There are traces of original red and green painting and substantial gilding across the sculpture. The figure has a sophisticated sway emphasising the relationship of mother and child. The reverse of the sculpture is uncarved, suggesting that the figure was originally positioned against something within a tabernacle or architectural niche.

The British sculptor is unknown but the technical finesse of the carving indicates that it was made by a master who was highly skilled in working alabaster, which was a luxury material. Over the course of the 14<sup>th</sup> Century, alabaster (particularly English alabaster, which was prized for its whiteness) became a popular material for artists working across continental Europe; from Italy to Flanders.

The alabaster Virgin and Child was held at the Redemptorist monastery in Saint-Truiden, Belgium, for many years before it was bought by the famous collector Dr Albert Figdor in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. It was sold at his posthumous sale and entered into a European private collection until it was sold to Sam Fogg from whom the British Museum acquired it. It has been purchased for the British Museum collection with contributions from the Art Fund (£90,000), National Heritage Memorial Fund (£90,000) and private donations.

**The sculpture is now on display in the Sir Paul and Lady Jill Ruddock Gallery of Medieval Europe (G40).** It joins the South Cerney head and foot, which are the sole surviving examples of a 12th Century English wooden Christ figure. The South Cerney fragments were part of a larger sculpture that was broken in the English Reformation. The juxtaposition of these objects provides a narrative for British sculpture that includes the production, trade and destruction of art.

Acquired with the support of the Art Fund, the National Heritage Memorial Fund, The Ruddock Foundation for the Arts, The John Armitage Charitable Trust, Simon Keswick, Wellington and Virginia Sun Yee, the Patrons of the British Museum and Hamish Parker for Genevieve Greenall marking her confirmation.

**Hartwig Fischer**, director of the British Museum, said, 'This beautiful and moving sculpture is a poignant acquisition for the British Museum to make as we approach the festive season. I am very grateful to the Art Fund, the National Heritage Memorial Fund and the individual patrons and donors who have helped secure this unique alabaster sculpture for the collection. The announcement of this acquisition marks the end of a successful year for the Museum, as we continue to grow and expand our record of human history. I look forward to our visitors being able to enjoy this object in its new home on display in the Museum.'

**Stephen Deuchar** from the Art Fund said "We are pleased to support this early Christmas present for the British Museum's visitors - an alabaster of great rarity and quality. Its survival from the widespread destructions of the English Reformation, and recent rediscovery, offers great possibilities for further research and interpretation."

**Sir Peter Puff**, Chair of the NHMF, said: "This is a serenely beautiful piece of English sculpture, a rare survival that provides a glimpse of the famed Midlands alabaster that was highly sought-after across the world in the 14th and 15th centuries. This National Heritage Memorial Fund grant will ensure it is safeguarded for future generations.'

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## Notes to Editors:

### Art Fund

Art Fund is the national fundraising charity for art. In the past five years alone Art Fund has given £34 million to help museums and galleries acquire works of art for their collections. It also helps museums share their collections with wider audiences by supporting a range of tours and exhibitions, including ARTIST ROOMS and the 2013-18 Aspire tour of Tate's Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows by John Constable, and makes additional grants to support the training and professional development of curators.

Art Fund is independently funded, with the core of its income provided by 122,000 members who receive the National Art Pass and enjoy free entry to over 230 museums, galleries and historic places across the UK, as well as 50% off entry to major exhibitions. In addition to grant-giving, Art Fund's support for museums includes the annual Art Fund Museum of the Year, a publications programme and a range of digital platforms.

Find out more about Art Fund and the National Art Pass at [www.artfund.org](http://www.artfund.org)

Madeline Adeane, Art Fund Press Office,  
020 7225 4804 [MAdeane@artfund.org](mailto:MAdeane@artfund.org)

### National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF)

The National Heritage Memorial Fund 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. It is receiving £5million Government grant in aid in 2016-17. [www.nhmf.org.uk](http://www.nhmf.org.uk). This item joins a diverse range of over 1,200 iconic objects and places which have been safeguarded by the NHMF to the tune of over £300million. These include:

- The Coenwulf Coin
- The Mary Rose
- The Flying Scotsman
- The last surviving World War II destroyer, HMS Cavalier

- A collection of the work of WWII code-breaker Alan Turing
- The personal archive of Siegfried Sassoon, WWI soldier, author and poet.
- Skokholm Island, Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in Pembrokeshire

Natasha Ley, NHMF Press Office, 020 7591 6143/ or  
out of hours 07973 613820 Email:  
[natashaL@hlf.org.uk](mailto:natashaL@hlf.org.uk)

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**For further information**

Please contact the Press Office on 020 7323 8394 /  
8522 or [Nelvin@britishmuseum.org](mailto:Nelvin@britishmuseum.org)

For public information please print [britishmuseum.org](http://britishmuseum.org) or  
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