

NEWS RELEASE

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V&A acquires the most exquisitely modelled piece of English porcelain, discovered at a French flea market

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Today the V&A announces it has acquired a previously unknown porcelain sculpture *Head of a Laughing Child* (about 1746–49) after its chance discovery at a French flea market eight years ago. Following extensive research, the V&A can now reveal that the sculpture was almost certainly cast from an original clay model made by the renowned French-born sculptor Louis-François Roubiliac, who was active in London in the 1740s. The sculpture, acquired with generous support from Art Fund, joins the V&A's National Collection of Ceramics. It is now on display in the museum's British Galleries, alongside some of the earliest examples of English porcelain revealing the vibrant artistic milieu of mid-eighteenth-century London.

A rare survival, the sculpture was discovered in south west Brittany in France in 2011 by retired porcelain dealer Louis Woodford, who recognised it as a significant piece of English porcelain. Since then, detailed research has confirmed it was made at London's Chelsea porcelain factory, England's first major porcelain factory established in 1743. The sculpture's glassy body and glaze, as well as the surface pitting, are typical of the early experimental period at the Chelsea porcelain factory.

Art historical and stylistic analysis strongly suggest that Roubiliac was the creator of the original model for *Head of a Laughing Child*. Roubiliac was a friend of Nicholas Sprimont, the owner and founder of the Chelsea porcelain factory, and evidence suggests Roubiliac considered using Chelsea porcelain for a major sculptural commission in the first few months of the factory's opening. Additionally, the quality of modelling and the style of the *Head*, which combines Italianate, French and German influences, all point to Roubiliac as the author of the work. This is supported by documentary evidence revealing Roubiliac's roots and training in both France and Dresden, where he acquired extensive knowledge of Ancient Roman and Baroque sculpture.

Roubiliac would have sculpted the head in clay approximately 20 per cent bigger than the resulting porcelain figure. From this model, multi-part plaster moulds were taken at the Chelsea porcelain factory and then used to cast several versions of the head in porcelain. These were then carefully dried in a process that saw them shrink considerably. The porcelain heads were then glazed and fired at a high temperature.

Only one other porcelain example of Roubiliac's *Head of a Laughing Child* is known to exist. Discovered in 1938, it has been in the Ashmolean Museum's collection since 1965. The Ashmolean sculpture is decorated with polychrome enamel, unlike the V&A's monochrome white example. In 2012 the two *Heads* were brought together for comparison, when experts from across the world confirmed that they were both cast from the same mould at the Chelsea porcelain factory. The plain white sculpture is more aesthetically pleasing, and its firing seems to have been more successful than that of the polychrome version.

Reino Liefkes, Head of Ceramics at the V&A, said: "Roubiliac's *Head of a Laughing Child* is one of the most exciting discoveries in ceramics for many years. This vivacious sculpture is one of the most fluently modelled examples of English sculptural porcelain ever produced and I'm thrilled it joins our world-renowned Ceramics collection. The sculpture is now on show in the V&A's British Galleries as the centrepiece of a display tracing the earliest developments in English porcelain. It can be seen alongside other highlights including Roubiliac's porcelain figure of the painter William Hogarth's infamous dog, *Trump*."

Roubiliac's Head of a Laughing Child is the latest major acquisition to join the V&A's unrivalled Ceramics collection, and follows *Matching Pair* (2017), a set of two ceramic vases by British artist Grayson Perry capturing the huge social and political rift caused by Brexit.

Encyclopaedic and global in scope, the V&A's Ceramics collection encompasses the history of fine ceramic production from 2500 BC to the present day, with strengths in international contemporary studio ceramics, European porcelain and pottery from 1500 onwards, and ceramics from China, Japan and the Middle East.

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Notes to editors

About the V&A

The V&A is the world's leading museum of art, design and performance, with collections unrivalled in their scope and diversity. It was established to make works of art available to all and to inspire British designers and manufacturers. Today, the V&A's collections, which span over 5000 years of human creativity in virtually every medium and from many parts of the world, continue to intrigue, inspire and inform.

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About the V&A's Ceramics collections

The V&A's Ceramics collections are unrivalled anywhere in the world. Encyclopaedic and global in scope, they encompass the history of fine ceramic production from about 2500 BC to the present day. The collections are particularly strong in international contemporary studio ceramics, European porcelain and pottery from 1500 onwards, and ceramics from China, Japan and the Middle East. Highlights include the collections of Italian Renaissance maiolica, Chinese porcelain, Dutch Delft, British and European porcelain, 19th-century art pottery and exhibition pieces, and tiles.

About 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, 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 151,000 members who receive the National Art Pass and enjoy free entry to over 240 museums, galleries and historic places across the UK, as well as 50% off entry to major exhibitions and subscription to Art Quarterly magazine. In addition to grant-giving, Art Fund's support for museums includes Art Fund Museum of the Year (won by St Fagans National Museum of History in 2019) and a range of digital platforms.

Find out more about Art Fund and the National Art Pass at www.artfund.org

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