

Museum to display its most expensive exhibit



A truly magnificent object, a Byzantine sardonyx bowl mounted on a 16th century gold stand, known as a tazza, has been acquired for the nation by National Museums Scotland. It is the most valuable single object to enter the national collections. The main photograph shows the tazza with Godfrey Evans, Principal Curator of European Applied Arts looking on.

From the estate of the late Edmund de Rothschild, the Hamilton-Rothschild tazza has been allocated to National Museums Scotland under the Acceptance in Lieu scheme, which allows donors to leave major works of art to the nation in lieu of inheritance tax. It was one of six outstanding items from the Hamilton Palace collection sold to Alfred de Rothschild shortly before the sale of Scotland's greatest collection in 1882.

The exceptionally large, Byzantine sardonyx bowl was acquired by Alexander, 10th Duke of Hamilton (1767-1852) while he was British ambassador in Russia in 1807-8. He bought the bowl in the belief that it was the 'Bénétier de Charlemagne' (the holy water stoup of the Emperor Charlemagne, the founder of the Holy Roman Empire), however, this is legend rather than fact. In 1812 the Duke purchased an enamelled gold foot, which came from a massive gold monstrance that King Philip II of Spain had presented to the Monastery of the Escorial in the mid sixteenth century. He subsequently united the two parts creating the tazza.

✘ Sir Angus Grossart, Chairman of National Museums Scotland commented,

“The Hamilton-Rothschild tazza is the single most important acquisition that National Museums Scotland has made in many decades. Acquiring this wonderful work of art demonstrates our enhanced international ambitions for our collections and underlines our aspirations. We have a strategic vision for our future potential and are committed to build upon major acquisitions.”

This unique object is an important addition to the already significant and internationally important European decorative art collections. It will go on temporary display at the National Museum of Scotland immediately before being permanently displayed in one of four major new permanent art and design galleries which are currently being developed.

The tazza was used for the baptisms of both of the Duke’s children, William, the future 11th Duke of Hamilton, and Susan, in 1811 and 1814. Its use reflected the 10th Duke’s deeply held belief in the high status of the House of Hamilton, as premier peers of Scotland, the holders of three dukedoms and the true successors to the Stuart kings of Scotland. This amazing two-part piece was the most highly insured item in Hamilton Palace during the first half of the nineteenth century. The tazza was displayed in the renowned 1862 loan exhibition at what is now the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

Dr Gordon Rintoul, Director of National Museums Scotland said,

"We are delighted to have acquired this remarkable object for the national collections. It greatly enhances our already significant international collections of European art and design. We have recently welcomed over 2 million visitors through the doors of the transformed National Museum of Scotland and I know that this wonderful object will be a huge draw for thousands more and will be a key focal point for further new galleries which we are planning."

Culture Secretary Fiona Hyslop, who earlier this month signed the legal direction allocating the tazza to National Museums Scotland, said:

"I am delighted that such a unique work of art is now available for the public to see in Scotland, thanks to the Acceptance in Lieu scheme. It is most appropriate that the National Museums can display this item, with its Scottish connections dating from the Duke of Hamilton's time as Ambassador to St Petersburg in the early 19th century, alongside their fabulous summer exhibition on Catherine the Great, in co-operation with the State Hermitage Museum."



You can read this story on your phone when visiting the Museum by using the [Wikitude App](#) which you can download to your phone. While in the area around the Museum, you then search for The Edinburgh Reporter and will find all of our articles which are geotagged with that location including this one. You can also use it across other areas in Edinburgh where we have 'tagged' the content and will find many of our other articles.

