

Monday 7th March 2011

Generous donations allow the British Museum to acquire historic ivories from ancient Assyria

Today the British Museum announces a major new archaeological acquisition, made possible by generous support from donors including the British Museum Friends, the Art Fund and the National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF). Grants totalling £1,170,000 have been donated to the British Museum to help save the Nimrud Ivories, the finest collection of carved, decorative ivories excavated in the Middle East. The majority of these funds have been raised with the support of the British Museum Friends and a six month appeal to members which saw over 1,800 members donate.

Some of these precious pieces of elephant ivory are nearly 3,000 years old and were excavated from Nimrud in modern day Iraq in the mid-20th century. These objects represent an important addition to the museum's Middle East collection and form its largest acquisition since the Second World War. The British Museum already holds many objects in other materials from Nimrud, including the famous Assyrian reliefs, so the addition of the ivories will mean that the whole Nimrud collection can be seen together.

The ivories were excavated by the British School of Archaeology in Iraq, now the British Institute for the Study of Iraq (BISI), between 1949 and 1963, during what was arguably the most important British archaeological venture ever undertaken in the Middle East. It was led by Sir Max Mallowan, one of the UK's most celebrated archaeologists. His wife, Agatha Christie, was also part of the excavation team and wrote several of her novels while in Nimrud. In accordance with the practice at the time, the ivories were given to BISI as part of their share of the finds.

This collection tells a unique story about the way materials were used and traded in the Ancient Near East in the early first millennium BC, as well as highlighting the intimate involvement which Britain had with Nimrud. It represents a vital, and currently under-explored, resource for understanding the religion, society, economics and craft traditions of the Assyrian Empire. Since 1963 the ivories have been in storage and not accessible to the public.

The collection is comprised of nearly 1,000 numbered items, as well as a further 5,000 fragments or unnumbered pieces. These beautifully carved ivories, dating from the 9th-7th centuries BC, were mostly made in Syrian and Phoenician cities near the Mediterranean coast and were brought to Assyria in ancient times as booty or tribute. They formed the decorative elements of furniture, containers, chariots and horse trappings, many originally covered with gold foil and inlaid with stones. A large number are carved with intricate figural decoration of animals and humans, as well as floral and geometric motifs. One example shows a rearing winged griffin, with its paw resting on a lotus flower in Egyptian style. Another piece was probably made in Assyria and has incised decoration showing a frieze of wild goats on either side of a palmette.

The funding will cover the value of one third of the collection of ivories. BISI has very generously agreed to give another third to the British Museum's collection as a gift. Some of the pieces will be on permanent display in the museum, while others will be available for travelling exhibitions. A collection of about 65 choice pieces, which forms the final third of the collection, remains in the possession of BISI and it is hoped that in the future these can be returned to Iraq.

David Norgrove, Chairman of the British Museum Friends said: "I am delighted that this remarkable collection has now been acquired by the British Museum. This would not have been possible without the huge generosity of the British Museum Friends. The response in just six months has been overwhelming and on behalf of the Museum I want to thank most warmly all the many people who contributed. This is another example of just how important the Museum's members are to its work."

Stephen Deuchar, director of the Art Fund, said: “This collection of ancient ivories is truly inspiring. They’re the fruit of many years of painstaking excavation, research and conservation, and it’s only right that they should now be housed in a public collection for everyone to admire and learn from. The Art Fund’s core purpose is to help bring inspiring works, such as these, to the public and we’re fully behind this major acquisition for the British Museum.”

Carole Souter, Chief Executive, NHMF said: “It is wonderful to see these ivories saved for the nation – they are precisely the type of precious heritage that the National Heritage Memorial Fund was set up to safeguard.”

John Curtis, Keeper of the Middle East collections at the British Museum commented: “Nimrud is one of the most important sites in the Ancient Near East, and the carved ivories found there are amongst the finest products recovered from an archaeological excavation. These ivories tell us a great deal about the art and history of the Middle East in the early 1st millennium BC, and now they will be available for everybody to see and study. I am hugely grateful to BISI, the British Museum Friends, the Art Fund and the NHMF, for enabling us to purchase this collection”.

For further information or images please contact the British Museum Press Office on 020 7323 8583 / 8394 or communications@britishmuseum.org

For Art Fund press enquiries please contact the Press Office on 020 7225 4888.

For NHMF press enquiries please contact Natasha Ley or Alison Scott, NHMF Press Office, on:

(020) 7591 6143 / (020) 7591 6032 or natashal@hlf.org.uk / alisons@hlf.org.uk

Out of hours mobile: 07973 613820. www.nhmf.org.uk

NOTES TO EDITORS

The acquisition

The purchase price for the ivories was £1,170,000. Funds were provided from the following sources:

British Museum Friends - £725,000

The Art Fund - £200,000

National Heritage Memorial Fund - £150,000

The Headley Trust - £20,000

British Museum -£75,000

The British Museum Friends

The fundraising campaign to secure the Nimrud Ivories received significant support through generous member donations from the British Museum Friends, who ran a public appeal to members in order to raise the remaining required funds. The British Museum Friends (BMF) has been supporting the work of the British Museum since 1968. Members provide vital funding which allows the Museum to acquire and preserve objects in the collection. In return for their annual subscription fee of £48 a year, members receive a range of benefits that bring them closer to the collection that they help to support. Through various appeals, Members also provide additional donations that fund essential research programmes, conservation, and new technologies throughout the Museum and across the globe. In June 2010 the BMF launched an appeal to help acquire the Nimrud Ivories and received an overwhelming response. With the help of generous Member donations the museum reached its target and helped secure this magnificent collection of ivories. For more information about membership visit www.britishmuseum.org/membership

The Art Fund

The Art Fund is the national fundraising charity for works of art and plays a major part in enriching the range and quality of art on public display in the UK. It campaigns, fundraises and gives money to museums and galleries to buy and show art, and offers many ways of enjoying it through its events and membership scheme. Under its programme of charitable activity, initiatives include sponsoring the UK tour of the ARTIST ROOMS collection so that it reaches several million people across the UK each year, and fundraising: two recently successful campaigns include bringing in £6 million to save the Staffordshire Hoard for the

West Midlands and Pieter Brueghel the Younger's *The Procession to Calvary* for Nostell Priory, in partnership with the National Trust. Over the past year, the Art Fund has helped get an additional £15 million worth of art into public collections and has placed around 500 gifts of art in museums and galleries. The Art Fund is funded entirely by its art-loving and museum-going members and supporters who believe that great art should be for everyone to enjoy. Find out more at www.artfund.org. Press contact | 020 7225 4888 | media@artfund.org

The Art Fund has recently announced that the British Museum is in the running for the Art Fund Prize – the UK's largest arts prize that annually awards £100,000 in recognition of 'Museum of the Year'. Rewarding excellence and innovation in museums and galleries across the UK for a project completed or undertaken in 2010, the British Museum has been nominated for A History of the World. Following a short list of four museums to be announced on 19 May, the £100,000 cash prize will be awarded to the 'Museum of the Year' at a ceremony on 15 June.

The National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF)

The National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF) is 31 years old. It was set up to save the most outstanding parts of our national heritage in memory of those who have given their lives for the UK. It currently receives £10million annual grant-in-aid from the Government. It is due to receive £20million between 2011-15. The Nimrud Ivories join a diverse range of well over 1,000 iconic objects and places which have been safeguarded by the NHMF to the tune of over £300million. These include:

- The Coenwulf Coin
- The Macclesfield Psalter
- The Mappa Mundi
- The Mary Rose
- Flying Scotsman
- The last surviving World War II destroyer, HMS Cavalier
- Sir Walter Scott manuscripts
- Antonio Canova's 'The Three Graces'
- The personal archive of Siegfried Sassoon, WWI soldier, author and poet
- Skokholm Island, site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in Pembrokeshire