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FEATURES

National Trust to reveal Ham House's hidden portrait of Mary, Queen of Scots, for its 125th anniversary

Thanks to a recent donation of £3 million, the National Trust is finally able to begin conservation on a concealed portrait of Mary Stuart originally discovered at Ham House in 2017. The visage of Scotland's last Catholic Queen was painted over with a new likeness just two years after her formal execution

by MAYA ASHA MCDONALD

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FRONT EXTERIOR OF HAM HOUSE IN 2016 WITH COADE STONE STATUE OF FATHER THAMES, BY JOHN BACON THE ELDER, IN THE FOREGROUND

COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL TRUST

For nearly 350 years, a portrait of the 16th-century aristocrat Sir John Maitland of Thirlestane (1543-1595) hung in a dark corner in the Long Gallery at Ham House. To the astonishment of art historians, this innocuous portrait of a somewhat forgotten figure — Maitland, who was the Lord Chancellor of Scotland under King James VI — was concealing a centuries-lost portrait of Mary Stuart, colloquially known as Mary, Queen of Scots (1542 – 1587).





PORTRAIT OF JOHN MAITLAND FROM HAM HOUSE BEING PREPARED FOR WORK AT THE CONSERVATION STUDIO IN KENT

INSTAGRAM: @NATIONALTRUST

Thanks to a recent donation of £3 million from The Royal Oak Foundation — an American charity founded in 1973 by the National Trust to inspire support from US benefactors — conservators now have the means to finally uncover the mysterious royal portrait in greater detail. A splendid way to celebrate the Trust's 125th anniversary.



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Angelina Jolie is selling Sir Winston Churchill's only wartime painting at Christie's

‘We are enormously grateful to The Royal Oak Foundation for this incredibly generous gift,’ shares Dr Tarnya Cooper, the Trust’s Curation and Conservation Director. ‘This funding will provide some of the critical investment we need to care for our world-class collection... and will enable us to tackle many significant and high-profile objects.’





AN X-RAY VIEW OF ADRIAN VANSON'S *SIR JOHN MAITLAND, 1ST LORD MAITLAND OF THIRLESTANE* (1589), SHOWING AN UNDERLYING PORTRAIT

PHOTOGRAPH BY CAROLINE RAE / COURTESY OF THE COURTAULD INSTITUTE AND THE NATIONAL TRUST

The visage of Mary, Queen of Scots, is undoubtedly first on said list of notable works in need of further historical investigation, particularly due to its arcane origins. Why was the portrait never completed? Who commissioned it? And, perhaps most perplexingly, why was it ultimately painted over and not simply destroyed?



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According to David Taylor, Curator of Pictures and Sculpture at the National Trust, the answers may lie in the overarching timeline. Since Mary was beheaded on 8 February 1587 — just two years before the inscribed date on the overlying portrait of Maitland — it's reasonable to infer that her execution may be the reason why her likeness was abandoned by the artist.

‘The unfinished portrait of Mary, Queen of Scots, shows that portraits of the Queen were being copied and presumably displayed in Scotland around the time of her execution,’ notes Taylor. ‘A highly contentious and potentially dangerous thing to be seen doing.’



SAOIRSE RONAN AS MARY STUART IN THE 2018 FILM *MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS*

LIAM DANIEL / FOCUS FEATURES

Despite the enduring fascination with the fabled beauty of Scotland's last Catholic

TATLER



revealed in the Trust's rendering will surely illuminate the all too fragile image we have of the fiery-haired Mary Stuart.

The sizeable endowment offers a heartening boon to the National Trust's financial affairs, after having suffered losses approaching £200 million due to the pandemic last year. Much of the funds will go towards cutting-edge work — like the further unearthing of Mary Stuart's features — at the Trust's conservation studio at the palatial Knole House in Kent.





KNOLE HOUSE, THE FORMER ARCHBISHOP'S PALACE, SITUATED WITHIN KNOLE PARK IN WEST KENT

COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL TRUST

Conservation of Ham House's hidden portrait is likely to begin in March 2021. Once the studio at Knole has re-opened to the public following the end of Covid restrictions, visitors are invited to experience the work in person and meet the steadfast gaze of Mary, Queen of Scots. A priceless piece of history protected by chance through the ages.

Please click [here](#) to learn more about the National Trust's expansive art collection and its mission to safeguard the heritage of England, Wales and Northern Ireland.



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