

Ayuba Suleiman Diallo Appeal

News Release

Wednesday 7 July 2010

GALLERY LAUNCHES APPEAL TO SECURE FIRST BRITISH PORTRAIT OF A BLACK AFRICAN MUSLIM AND FREED SLAVE

National Portrait Gallery needs £100,000 to acquire first British oil painting of a freed slave, never seen in public

The National Portrait Gallery today launches, with the support of the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and the Art Fund, an appeal to acquire for the nation the earliest known British oil painting of a freed slave, and the first portrait that honours a named African subject as an individual and an equal.

Never before seen in public, and currently on temporary display at the Gallery, this portrait of Ayuba Suleiman Diallo (c.1701-73) (known when he was in England as Job ben Solomon), shows the sitter painted in 1733 in his traditional dress wearing his copy of the Qur'an around his neck.

The portrait, from a private collection, was sold at auction in December, is now under a temporary Ministerial export bar following a recommendation by the Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest, administered by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA). The Gallery needs to have raised £554,937.50 to secure this important and compelling painting for future generations by 25 August 2010. Art Fund members have kick-started the campaign with a £100,000 grant and the Heritage Lottery Fund has pledged £333,000 towards the acquisition and a project to cover costs for its conservation, display, interpretation and regional tour to Leicester, Liverpool and the North East Museums Hub. In addition to the funds the Gallery is able to contribute to the purchase, it is now launching a campaign to raise £100,000 to complete the target.

Among the appeal's supporters are writers and broadcasters Bonnie Greer and Gus Casely-Hayford; writer and actor Kwame Kwei-Armah; Baroness Lola Young; artist Faisal Abdu'Allah, and *Kids Company* founder Camila Batmanghelidjh.

Broadcaster and National Portrait Gallery Trustee, Zeinab Badawi, attending the launch of the Appeal, says: 'This portrait is a rare example of a painting of an eighteenth-century African in Britain. This portrait would be a vital and powerful addition to the Collection at the National Portrait Gallery for its representation of Britain's diverse cultural heritage.'

A high status African from a prosperous family of Muslim religious clerics, Ayuba Suleiman Diallo was born in the Gambia. At the age of 29 he was captured as a slave and transported to work on a plantation in America. After being imprisoned for trying to escape, he met the lawyer Thomas Bluett who became aware of Diallo's high birth, intellect and education and took an interest in him, arranging to bring him to England in 1734. After his arrival, he mixed with high society and had a lasting impact on Britain's understanding of African culture, identity and religion.

During this time, Diallo was received with great enthusiasm by aristocrats and scholars including the Duke of Portland and Sir Hans Sloane, whom he helped with Arabic translations and his interest in the Qur'an. Sloane also arranged for Diallo to be presented at the Court of George II and later to be elected a member of the Gentleman's Society at Spalding. His supporters additionally arranged for him to sit for this portrait, which is also the earliest known painting by the artist William Hoare of Bath. The conflict for the sitter is recorded in a contemporary account which not only indicates the affection in which Diallo was held but sheds light on the practice of portraiture in England and other cultures:

'Job's Aversion to Pictures of all Sorts, was exceeding great; insomuch, that it was with great Difficulty that he could be brought to sit for his own. We assured him that we never worshipped any Picture, and that we wanted his for no other End but to keep us in mind of him. He at last consented to have it drawn; which was done by Mr Hoare.' (Thomas Bluett, *Memoirs*, p.50)

The artist has responded sensitively to Diallo's personality by depicting him, at the sitter's own request, in his traditional dress and carrying his copy of the Qur'an around his neck. The painting has not previously been exhibited in public, although it was engraved in 1734 and a version was published again in 1750.

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