

Press Release:

8 September 2006

UK's oldest rocking horse is saved for nation by V&A Museum of Childhood

A 17th century rocking horse which could have been commissioned as a gift for Charles I is to be unveiled as the V&A Museum of Childhood's latest acquisition. Purchased from a private collector, it will go on public display in the Museum's new mezzanine galleries when the Museum reopens to the public on 9 December. The reopening follows an extensive and ambitious £4.7m transformation by Caruso St. John architects.



Made in softwood and elm, the rocking horse pre-dates the earliest example in the Museum's collection of 20 rocking horses by 200 years, and is believed to be the oldest in existence in the UK. It has been dated to 1610. Di Lees, Director of the V&A Museum of Childhood said:

"This is probably the most important acquisition we've made at the Museum to date, and comes at an extremely exciting time as we prepare for our reopening this December. I'm delighted that we've played a part in saving such an intriguing British object for the Nation and look forward to seeing it on display in our new galleries."

In 1610, Charles I was ten years old. The second son of James VI and I and Anne of Denmark, he was a delicate child with well-documented poor health, walking and speech difficulties. The household accounts list the making of a type of wheelchair for his use and Sir Robert and Lady Carey, his guardians between 1605 and 1611, arranged remedial treatment for him.

There is apparently no contemporary record of a rocking horse for Charles, but intriguingly, a plaque attached to the base records that this horse was 'Purchased on June 18th 1606 at Cheshunt House, Hertfordshire'. If the horse belonged to any of the royal children, it may have been kept at Theobalds Palace, which is less than two miles away. Theobalds was a favourite residence of James VI and I, particularly for hunting, and it was there that he died and Charles was proclaimed king. In 1650, towards the end of the English Civil Wars, Theobalds was sold and largely demolished for rebuilding in the early 18th century. It is very likely that items from the palace found their way into the other large houses in the area, of which Cheshunt Great House was one.

Noreen Marshall, Curator at the Museum of Childhood has surveyed the horse's history and said:

"It is frankly amazing that this horse has survived at all. Like so many historical toys it could so easily have been destroyed by woodworm, thrown away, or put on a bonfire. Children's toys have not always been highly regarded as important objects and an association with Charles I could have put it at even higher risk, especially as a consequence of the Civil War."

Although it is impossible to prove the object's association with Charles I, there has been well-intentioned speculation throughout its history that it was a gift or purchase intended to help his weak legs recover from rickets. If indeed the horse belonged to Charles, it would probably date from 1605-08 as by 1610 he was ten years of age and had made significant improvements with his mobility.

Even if the horse's exact provenance remains unclear, it is believed to be one of the first English rocking horses and it is undoubtedly an extremely rare object of childhood material of its age and singularity.

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For further information and images please call Benjamin Ward at Brunswick Arts on 020 7936 1297 email bward@brunswickgroup.com NOTES TO EDITORS:

The Rocking Horse was purchased by the Museum from a private collector through Bunny Campione, Campione Fine Art, with help from the V&A Acquisitions Fund.

The V&A Museum of Childhood, Cambridge Heath Road, London E2 9PA. Admission free.
Nearest tube: Bethnal Green. Open: 10.00 – 17.45. 24 hour information: 020 8980 2415
Switchboard: 020 8983 5200. www.museumofchildhood.org.uk

The Museum has been closed for major redevelopment since the end of October 2005 and is scheduled to reopen to the public on 9 December 2006, completing an extensive £4.7m transformation by **Caruso St. John** architects. Alongside a stunning new entrance and 85m² gallery for community projects, the ambitious redevelopments will completely restore the 130-year-old building to its former Victorian glory, update the galleries and displays, expand educational spaces and make the Museum fully accessible to all visitors. Further information can be found online at www.museumofchildhood.org.uk

The Museum will reopen with the acclaimed '**Happy Birthday Miffy! A Celebration of the Work of Dick Bruna**' exhibition, currently touring the UK. www.miffy.com

The Museum was officially opened in 1872. However it wasn't until 1974 that the Museum was officially dedicated to the subject of childhood. The V&A's collections of children's costume,

books, nursery items, art and furniture were relocated and redisplayed in Bethnal Green, alongside the Museum's existing toy collection.

The Museum of Childhood is part of the V&A and houses a world famous collection of dolls and dolls' houses, games, puppets, toys, children's costume and furniture. The Museum explores the history of childhood around the world – from the sixteenth century to the present day.

Caruso St John Architects was established as a practice in 1990, and has since gained an international reputation for excellence in designing contemporary projects in the public realm. The practice is best known for the New Art Gallery in Walsall, a commission won in an international competition in 1995. In 2004, the agency completed the new Gagosian Gallery in Kings Cross, and are working in Nottingham on the new Centre for Contemporary Art, due to open in 2008. Their sensitivity to the installation of a wide range of art has also led to invitations to design exhibitions at a number of leading institutions, including the Hayward Gallery, Tate Britain, Tate Modern and the Cartier Foundation in Paris. Caruso St John is based in a former factory close to the V&A Museum of Childhood in east London.

www.carusostjohn.com

Diane Lees is Director of the V&A Museum of Childhood at Bethnal Green, with the specific brief to transform the Museum and create a sustainable future for this East End site, she also chairs the V&A's UK Steering Group. Beginning as an historic buildings researcher and moving into exhibitions, education and interpretation, she has worked on some of the most challenging and exciting projects in the country, including the rescue and relocation of a hat block manufacturers workshop in central Manchester and the recovery and display of the Mary Rose ship in Portsmouth Harbour. She project managed the creation of the UK standard for the recording of information about museum collections (SPECTRUM) and was responsible for the creation of the only museum of law in the Country (the multi-award winning Galleries of Justice in Nottingham). She is a trustee of the Story Museum in Oxford, a trustee of Discover in East London and Vice Chair of the Association of Independent Museums and has just retired as the Institutional Vice President of the Museums Association.