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MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON, RETURNS 14th-CENTURY EMBROIDERY TO THE MUSEO DIOCESANO TRIDENTINO IN TRENT, ITALY

Museo Diocesano plans Holiday Celebration to Unveil Panel Depicting Trent's Patron Saint



Entombment of Saint Vigilius. 1390–1391

BOSTON, MA (December 17, 2010)—The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA), has announced that it has returned to the Museo Diocesano Tridentino (Diocesan Museum of Trent, Italy) an embroidered panel, the *Entombment of Saint Vigilius*, from around 1390–1391. Commissioned by George of Liechtenstein on the occasion of his appointment as bishop prince of Trent in 1390, the embroidery depicts the entombment of Saint Vigilius (b. about 353–d. 405), the third bishop and patron saint of Trent, and the delivery of

the news of his martyrdom to the pope and Emperor Theodosius. The process of returning the panel to the Museo Diocesano began when the MFA learned that the work was part of the *Saint Vigilius* series of embroidered panels owned by the Museo Diocesano Tridentino. In celebration of its return, the Museo Diocesano will unveil the embroidery at a holiday celebration in Trent on Monday evening, December 20, when the work will be included in the exhibition *Guided by a Star: The Long Journey of the Magi*.

“The MFA is pleased, especially in this season of gift giving, to be able to return this exquisite embroidered panel to its rightful owner,” said Malcolm Rogers, Ann and Graham Gund Director of the Museum. “This work is of great cultural significance to the people of Trent, and after a separation of almost 70 years, it is finally going home.”

The MFA purchased the embroidery in 1946 from an Italian art dealer in New York without knowledge of its subject matter or provenance. Prior to the acquisition, curatorial staff inquired about its history and were told only that its previous owner had inherited it along with a large collection of other antique objects. The Museum had no additional information about its provenance until 2008, when Dr. Evelin Wetter of the Abegg-Stiftung (Riggisberg, Switzerland) contacted the MFA, indicating that the panel was once part of the *Saint Vigilius* series from the Museo Diocesano Tridentino. Curatorial research by the MFA confirmed that the embroidery belonged to that series. In June 2008, the MFA contacted the Museo Diocesano to initiate discussions about its return, which concluded in April 2010 with the signing of an agreement by the MFA, the Archdiocese of Trent, and the Museo Diocesano. The transfer of the work from Boston to Trent in November 2010 has allowed for the reconstruction of the narrative cycle of the life of Saint Vigilius. This set of embroideries is particularly important to the Trent region for its historic subject matter and its artistic rarity. The resolution came about thanks to the excellent relationship between the two museums, which are both dedicated to preserving, caring for, and educating the public about the works of art in their collections.

In a statement made marking the return of the panel, Monsignor Iginio Rogger, Director of the Museo Diocesano Tridentino, said: “As far as I remember, after the collection of the Museo Diocesano had been moved to the Cathedral of Trento, the embroidery series was kept in the sacristy, hidden in a drawer. The series is not only beautiful, but it bears exceptional relevance to the history of Trento’s piety since it is the very first representation of the story of St. Vigil, the city’s patron saint. Therefore, from the very beginning, I considered a personal mission of mine to find a new and adequate housing for such significant works of art, as well as for the rest of the museum’s collection. This was finally possible in 1963, when I managed to reopen the Museo Diocesano in its actual residence in the Palazzo Pretorio, the ancient bishop’s residence of Trento, which is attached to the Cathedral. As you can imagine, I was devastated to realize that in the meantime one of the pieces belonging to our most precious embroidery series had disappeared. I am deeply grateful to the MFA for returning the missing piece to the Church of Trento. It is an extremely generous gesture which means a lot to the whole local community.”

Measuring approximately 14” x 20”, the embroidery features colorful silk and metal-wrapped threads on linen. Depicting the entombment of Saint Vigilius, it is part of a cycle of at least six embroidered panels illustrating episodes from the saint’s life, which were created in a Bohemian workshop and sewn onto two blue velvet deacons’ dalmatics, along with a chasuble, that were part of the sumptuous consecration

vestments of George of Liechtenstein. Since their creation in the 14th century, some of the panels have been lost. By 1903, only five remained.

In the early 20th century, the Cathedral of Saint Vigilius deposited the orphrey and the five embroideries that remained from the original cycle in the Museo Diocesano Tridentino, established in 1903 in the northern Italian city of Trent, the site of the Council of Trent, the 16th-century ecumenical conclave (1545–1563) of the Roman Catholic Church. The embroidered pieces were inventoried and assigned the numbers 10 through 15, and brief descriptions and images of the embroideries were published in the museum's 1908 catalogue. After the Museo Diocesano's original location in the Theological Seminary was closed and the artworks it contained were moved to several different sites, the embroideries were placed once again in the cathedral sacristy. There, presumably between 1939 and 1944, all trace was lost of the panel showing the burial of Vigilius and the announcement of his death. (When the Diocesan museum was reopened in its present location in Palazzo Pretorio in 1963, the museum was able to display only the orphrey and the other four embroideries, which are still part of the permanent collection.)

To mark the return of the long-lost embroidery, the Museo Diocesano will host a festive holiday celebration in Trent on December 20, to be attended by the Archbishop of the Cathedral of Saint Vigilius, local officials, and members of the public, who received invitations heralding:

“A gift that comes from afar....A few days before Christmas, the show *Guided by a Star: The Long Journey of the Magi* will host a gift of gold, silver....and silk, from the west!”

In 2011, the Museo Diocesano will mount a special exhibition that will reunite the reacquired panel with the corresponding four extant panels of the Saint Vigilius series.

The MFA has been a leader within the museum community in sharing objects in its collection, and their provenance, worldwide on its website, www.mfa.org. In 1998, the Museum began the systematic review of the provenance of its collection, with the goal of identifying objects that may have been improperly sold or traded during the Nazi era and World War II (1933–1945). In 2000, the MFA launched on its website information and images pertaining to several works of art whose Nazi-era provenance was unclear, with the intention of identifying objects that may have been lost between 1933 and 1945 and never returned to their rightful owners. The Museum updates this website regularly with new provenance research discoveries. Currently, information about more than 345,000 objects is available at: www.mfa.org/collections.