

Fitzwilliam Museum opens The Idea of Italy

July 2026

Opening this summer, ***The Idea of Italy*** in Gallery 7 continues the Fitzwilliam Museum's major programme of gallery redisplays. ***The Idea of Italy*** is informed by [a collaborative research project between the University of Cambridge and the University of St Andrews](#) funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), part of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI).

Through new interpretation of works from the Museum's collection, it reconsiders how the story of Renaissance Italy has traditionally been told and understood. Through paintings, sculpture, ceramics, glass, and metalwork, the redisplay explores Italy not as an isolated cultural entity, but as a place shaped by global exchange, migration, trade, diplomacy, religion and tourism. ***The Idea of Italy*** reveals how artistic production in Italy was deeply connected to Northern Europe, the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia. This interconnection between people and place made Italy a site of extraordinary creative activity.

Dr Luke Syson, Director and Marlay Curator of the Fitzwilliam Museum said,

"The extraordinary quality of the works brought together in this project is truly remarkable. They include some of the finest paintings by Titian, Veronese, Canaletto and Poussin to be found anywhere in Britain. Their artistic brilliance has long been recognised, yet the contexts in which they were made, collected and understood have remained surprisingly under-explored.

Several of these masterpieces have rarely, if ever, been seen outside Cambridge because of the terms of Richard Fitzwilliam's bequest. Among them is Titian's last completed painting for Philip II of Spain—a work of extraordinary power that confronts one of the most horrifying subjects in Western art."

Dr Juliet Carey, Senior Curator of Historic and Modern Paintings and Drawings said,

*"Museums have the opportunity to revisit familiar collections and ask new questions of them. ***The Idea of Italy*** invites us to look again at what we think we know about the Renaissance. Rather than presenting Italy as an isolated centre of artistic achievement, the redisplay reveals a culture shaped by movement of people and materials across continents. By bringing these histories to the foreground, we hope visitors will see familiar masterpieces in new ways, discover surprising and beautiful works of art they have not seen before and recognise that the Renaissance was never the story of a single nation or culture, but one of profound global interconnectedness."*

The Italian collections at the Fitzwilliam Museum are globally renowned ranging from the early Renaissance to the 18th century, and feature masterpieces by Titian, Tintoretto, Veronese, Palma Vecchio, Canaletto, Guido Reni, Guercino, and Salvator Rosa. Displayed alongside are rare applied arts, including works from a premier collection of over 500 pieces of **Italian Maiolica** dating from the medieval period through the Renaissance, and the finest Italian bronzes and metalwork.

By foregrounding histories of migration, exchange, collecting, and cultural encounter, ***The Idea of Italy*** reflects the Fitzwilliam Museum's vision of opening up the past to transform our future, inviting visitors to encounter Renaissance art through fresh perspectives that inspire critical thinking, about the interconnected histories behind works previously seen as purely 'Italian'.

The idea of the Renaissance – cultural rebirth – began to form in the 1300s and went on to be one of Italy's major exports. By looking again at the ancient past, new art was born. Later, in the 1800s, as modern nation-states began to form in Europe, political boundaries changed the way art was understood, and it became linked to new national identities. Art made in Italy was proclaimed 'Italian' and the interrelations that created it were obscured. By reconnecting these works of art with the networks that shaped them, ***The Idea of Italy*** considers how 'Italian' art was understood in the past and how it is understood today. This approach to looking at history thematically invites a dialogue of artworks across time and place and offers new perspectives on familiar narratives of Western art history.

At the start of the redisplay is **Taddeo Zuccari's *Adoration of the Kings from the 1550s***, which encapsulates many of the gallery's key themes. Through the biblical story of the Magi travelling to pay tribute to the infant Christ, the painting foregrounds the movement of people across borders, while the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh evoke global trade and the circulation of precious materials. The inclusion of Balthazar, the Black Magus, raises questions of identity and visibility in Renaissance art. The painting is displayed alongside an empty Venetian Renaissance frame decorated with Islamic-inspired patterns, the frame highlights Venice's artistic and commercial exchange with centres of the Islamic world. Presented without a painting, it invites visitors to reconsider objects, makers, labour, and influences often placed at the margins of art history.

The section *Reimagining Antiquity* explores how the histories and myths of ancient Greece and Rome were appropriated and commercialised from the sixteenth century onwards. Ancient sculpture, mythology, and architecture became sources of inspiration for artists and collectors. **Highlights include a marble Roman sarcophagus carved in antiquity** and partially modified during the Renaissance, physically embodying processes of reshaping the classical past.

Throughout the gallery, mythological paintings explore how artists used gesture and light to construct ideas of political, spiritual, and emotional power. **Works by Titian, Tintoretto, Salvator Rosa, Guido Reni, and Palma il Giovane explore how storytelling in Renaissance art shaped understandings of beauty, violence, devotion, gender, and authority. Titian's *Rape of Lucretia* (1571), Tintoretto's *Adoration of the Shepherds from the 1540s*, and Salvator Rosa's *Human Fragility* (1656) consider how female figures were used to embody moral, political, and theological meaning — as victims, symbols, deities, and allegorical figures. Storytelling itself becomes a central subject during the Renaissance. The artworks reveal how artists constructed meaning by compressing, and reimagining narrative sources from mythology, and history.**

Italy's cities are considered as places of encounter, spectacle, and commerce showing how painters represented urban space not simply as an architectural backdrop but as a site of diplomacy, trade, and tourism. **Canaletto's paired views of Venice *St Mark's, Venice and Interior Court of the Doge's Palace* (both 1756)** reveal how the city became a carefully constructed image for Grand Tour collectors, transforming Venice into a commodity — an image to be 'owned'. Pilgrim flasks, pharmacy jars, glass vessels and devotional objects further reveal networks of pilgrimage, trade, and exchange, connecting Italy to the wider world.

Works of art made in Italy depended upon resources and bear witness to encounters with people and materials from across the world. The redisplay asks what role imported goods, borrowed technologies, and migrant workers played across Italy, and how spaces such as artists' workshops and places of worship shaped the dynamics between them. Pigments like cochineal from the Americas and lapis lazuli from Central Asia, metals imported from Germany, and ceramic techniques inspired by Islamic Spain all contributed to Renaissance art. Displays of Iznik ceramics, Paduan imitations, and Islamic and Italian medicine jars reveal interconnections between motifs and technologies across the Mediterranean.

This redisplay is a result of [‘Italian Renaissance Objects and Spaces of Encounter’](#), a collaborative project between the University of Cambridge and the University of St Andrews funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), part of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)

Notes to Editors

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Fitzwilliam Museum, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RB

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About the Fitzwilliam Museum

The Fitzwilliam Museum is home to one of the world’s most remarkable university art collections. We care for works of art and material culture primarily from Europe, North Africa and Asia that connect people across cultures and time. Since 1816 we’ve been a place for learning and discovery. Today, we use art, objects, spaces and experiences to inspire curiosity, reflection and creativity—opening up the past to transform our futures. As an internationally recognised centre for research and conservation, we work with partners across the world to explore how collections can be better understood, cared for and shared. www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk