
The Generous Georgian: Dr Richard Mead

26 September 2014 - 4 January 2015



The story of an eminent physician and patron of the arts who helped create the Foundling Hospital

For the last major exhibition of the Foundling Museum's 10th anniversary year, the focus turns to the life and work of Dr Richard Mead (1673-1754), one of the most eminent physicians, patrons, collectors and philanthropists of his day, and a significant figure in the early history of the Foundling Hospital.

A leading expert on poisons, scurvy, smallpox and public health, Mead's patients included Queen Anne, George II, Sir Isaac Newton and the painter Antoine Watteau. Mead was no stranger to daring acts and fierce controversies, with stories of drinking snake venom in his investigations into the effects of various poisons, and fighting a duel to defend his theory on smallpox treatment. He also possessed a deep-seated passion for the arts, demonstrated in a lifetime's patronage of painters such as Allan Ramsay and a revered collection of masterpieces that included works by Dürer, Holbein, Rembrandt, Poussin and Canaletto.

Smallpox was endemic in Georgian England, and killed an estimated 400,000 Europeans throughout the eighteenth century. Though vaccination against smallpox was developed by Edward Jenner at the end of the century, inoculation was promoted decades earlier. Dr Mead was an ardent and effective advocate of this procedure, which saved the lives of many, including foundlings. Of the 247 children who were inoculated at the Foundling Hospital, by 1756 only one had died of the disease.

THE FOUNDLING MUSEUM

Exploring Mead's diverse contributions to Georgian society - the collector, the philanthropist and the physician - this exhibition reunites key objects from Mead's life and collection, such as the ancient bronze Arundel Head (2nd Century BC) and Allan Ramsay's half-length portrait of Mead, evidence of his significance in London's cultural landscape.

Items from the Foundling Museum archive, such as the minutes from the very first Governors' meeting, and the logs of daily life at the Foundling Hospital in its first year, are also on display to illustrate Mead's relationship with the Hospital and the important role he played in its early history. Mead dedicated considerable time and energy to the Hospital, encouraging his noble clients to support the charity, serving as a Governor and giving his clinical expertise *pro bono*. His contribution went even further, to attending sick children and advising on nurses' salaries and what medicines to keep in stock.

His home on Great Ormond Street backed onto the Foundling Hospital grounds, and housed his magnificent collection of paintings, sculptures, antiquities, coins and a library of over 10,000 books. Painters and scholars were given access to Mead's renowned collection which, in a time before public galleries, offered visitors a rare chance to view artistic masterpieces from around the world.

Mead's generosity in every aspect of his life meant his family were burdened with huge debts following his death. Perhaps anticipating this, Mead's will ordered for the sale of thousands of objects from his incredible collection - in an auction lasting 56 days! Through a number of key objects, we highlight a once-legendary collection which, compared to that of his contemporary and founder of the British Museum, Sir Hans Sloane, is not so well known today.

This exhibition celebrates the energy, learning and wide interests of a truly generous Georgian who, according to his contemporary the writer Samuel Johnson, "*lived more in the broad sunshine of life than almost any man*".

The Generous Georgian: Dr Richard Mead is supported by the Wellcome Trust, the City of London Corporation, the Royal College of Physicians and Verita.

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Visitor Information

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Open: Tuesday – Saturday, 10:00 – 17:00 and Sunday, 11:00 – 17:00, closed on Mondays

Admission: £8.25 (including Gift Aid), concessions £5.50 (including Gift Aid), National Trust members half price, children, Foundling Friends and Art Fund members free

Notes to Editors

The Foundling Museum explores the history of the Foundling Hospital, the UK's first children's charity and first public art gallery, and through a dynamic programme of events and exhibitions celebrates the ways in which artists of all disciplines have helped improve children's lives for over 270 years.

The Foundling Hospital, which continues today as the children's charity Coram, was established in 1739 by the philanthropist Captain Thomas Coram, as 'a hospital for the maintenance and education of exposed and deserted young children'. Instrumental in helping Coram realise his vision were the artist William Hogarth, who encouraged all the leading artists of the day to donate work, and the composer George Frideric Handel, who gave annual benefit concerts of the Messiah. In doing so, they created London's first public art gallery and set the template for the way that the arts could support philanthropy.

Coram has been creating better chances for children since 1739. They help children and young people today through their pioneering work in adoption, parenting support, housing support, alcohol and drug education, creative therapies and championing legal rights in the UK and overseas.
www.coram.org.uk
