



ATHENA ARTS PRESENTS THE FIRST OF THEIR 'LIVING PORTRAITS' SERIES



Charles Allingham, James Belcher, Bare-knuckle Champion of England, c. 1800, Oil on canvas, image courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery

The Athena Arts Foundation was launched in June 2021 with the aim of harnessing digital technology to bring pre-modern art to a wider audience. Its main platform, a hub with information about exhibitions, podcasts and other resources worldwide, is already attracting attention. Next week sees the launch of 'Living Portraits', a new initiative to bring historical portraits to a younger audience. This collaboration with the National Portrait Gallery (NPG) and immersive story-telling specialists Megaverse, uses innovative technology to allow the subject of the painting to literally come alive and tell the viewer their life story.

The first of these, focuses on the portrait of the legendary 19th century bare-knuckle champion, [James 'Jem' Belcher](#) from the Collection of the National Portrait Gallery. In the short film, the Bristolian Belcher recalls the triumphs of his prize fighting career, his eyes, mouth and body moving subtly as he speaks. The monologue was scripted by Edem Kelman, a young writer and director whose recent short film 'Princess' was longlisted for Best Short Film at BIFA 2020. The

image itself was painted in around 1800 by Charles Allingham, a little-known British painter who was born around 1778 and died in 1850. The official launch of the project will take place on the 30th November at the National Youth Theatre, whose young actors are playing the subjects of the portraits included in the series. The partners are now seeking funding to make similar films on other portraits around the world and to develop new formats for digital and in-gallery viewing.

Denise Vogelsang, Director of Communications and Digital at the National Portrait Gallery says, *'We are delighted to be working with the Athena Art Foundation, Megaverse, the Colnaghi Foundation and the National Youth Theatre on this exciting project which literally brings to life this 19th century portrait using cutting-edge technology and enables us to share Jem Belcher's fascinating story with new audiences.'*

As Dr. Nicola Jennings of Athena Arts Foundation says, *'In working with Megaverse and using a script writer as gifted as Edem Kelman, we have been able to bring this intriguing portrait from the National Portrait Gallery's collection to life in a way that the written word alone could never do. It's designed to appeal to younger audiences enabling them not just to appreciate the painting, but to understand something of the subject and the history of the times in which it was painted. Many people look at this painting, not knowing anything about Belcher's fame or about the popularity of bare-knuckle fighting as a sport of high society during the 19th century.'*

Other highlights created by the Athena Arts Foundation include the Art2Live series of 5 x 1-minute films about art and mental health for Instagram Reels and TikTok, directed by YouTuber and influencer Luke Cutforth, whose first feature film just won an award at Raindance 2021. Written by the young writer Rafe Jennings, [the first in the series](#) (on Hieronymus Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights) received nearly 100,000 views. The Foundation is also co-producing the new podcast series 'What are Museums For?' with the Fitzwilliam Museum and Colnaghi Foundation, in which presenters Luke Syson (Fitzwilliam Museum Director) and Nicola Jennings (Athena Art Foundation Director), invite a range of cultural figures – from curators, researchers, activists and writers – to share their thoughts on the role of museums in the 21st century and how they can become truly inclusive spaces. Luke Syson says, *'Often taken for granted, museums globally now face enormous challenges. What, and who, fundamentally are they for? How should collections of art, science and material culture, historic and contemporary, address today's most urgent issues? Is that their role at all? Nicola and I are looking for answers - and we've been delighted to talk to colleagues from across the museum sector and beyond to tease out these discussions. Our conversations have been truly illuminating.'*

Athena has also recently produced the latest issue of [Colnaghi Studies Journal](#), with Athena co-founders Irene Brooke and Nicola Jennings continuing to edit this journal (which they set up for Colnaghi Foundation in 2017) for the next two years.

For press information, please contact Albany Arts Communications:

Mark Inglefield
mark@albanyartscommunications.com
t: +44 (0) 20 78 79 88 95; m: + 44 (0) 75 84 19 95 00

Esme Wright
esmee@albanyartscommunications.com
t: +44 (0) 20 78 79 88 95; m: +44 (0) 75 31 99 59 35

Notes to Editors:

About Jem Belcher's 'Living Portrait'

Jem Belcher's Living Portrait is the first in a series of short films in which the subjects of historical paintings reveal themselves through real-time motion capture and storytelling. Developed by Athena Art Foundation, Megaverse and Colnaghi Foundation in association with the National Portrait Gallery, it will be launched on 30th November at the National Youth Theatre whose actors are playing the subjects portrayed in the portraits. Digital technology has enabled us to retain each artwork's painterly surface, replicating the experience of viewing the original painting at the same time as hearing from the subject. With themes such as identity and marginalisation, the objective of the series is to engage audiences online and in-gallery with little-known figures in collections of historic art. Jem Belcher's Living Portrait introduces us to this popular 19th century bareknuckle boxer and butcher whose portrait forms part of the National Portrait Gallery's Collection. Belcher's monologue was written by Edem Kelman, a young writer and director whose recent short film Princess was longlisted Best Short Film at BIFA 2020.

About Athena Arts Foundation

Athena's founders are Dr Nicola Jennings, Loie De Vore, Dr Irene Brooke and Amanda Bradley Petitgas. Nicola is an Associate Lecturer at London's Courtauld Institute of Art where she teaches on the art of Medieval and Early Modern Spain. She was until recently Director of the Colnaghi Foundation, and previously worked at London's National Gallery and as a director and producer of broadcast documentaries.

Loie is a respected New-York based gallerist, collector, and board member of several US arts organisations including the American Friends of the Louvre. Loie was until recently running the Colnaghi Foundation in the USA. Irene is an Associate Lecturer at the Courtauld Institute where she teaches an MA on the art of Renaissance Venice, a topic on which she has published extensively. She is also the principal Editor of Colnaghi Studies Journal and previously worked in the department of American Painting and Sculpture at Houston Museum of Fine Arts.

Amanda is Trustee and Exhibitions Chair of the Stanley Spencer Gallery. She previously worked at The National Trust, as well as at London's National Gallery and at the University of Cambridge. She has published extensively on Sixteenth Century Venice, Rubens and the history of collecting.

www.athenaartfoundation.org



[@athenaartfoundation](https://www.instagram.com/athenaartfoundation)

About the National Portrait Gallery

The National Portrait Gallery was founded in 1856 to encourage the appreciation and understanding of the people who have made and are making British history and culture. Today it promotes engagement with portraiture to a wide-ranging public by conserving, growing and sharing the world's largest collection of portraits. The Gallery in St Martin's Place, London is currently closed until spring 2023, while essential building works take place on the Inspiring People redevelopment project, which will transform the Gallery, including a complete refurbishment of the building and a new learning centre. During the closure period, the Gallery will continue to share its Collection through its digital channels and a series of nationwide partnerships and collaborations.

www.npg.org.uk

The Fitzwilliam Museum

Founded in 1816, the Fitzwilliam Museum is the principal museum of the University of Cambridge and lead partner for the University of Cambridge Museums (UCM) Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation funded programme. It houses over half a million objects from ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman artefacts, to medieval illuminated manuscripts, paintings from the Renaissance to the 21st century, world class prints and drawings, and outstanding collections of coins, Asian arts, ceramics and other applied arts. The Fitzwilliam is an internationally recognised institute of learning, research and conservation.

www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk



[@FitzMuseum_UK](https://twitter.com/FitzMuseum_UK)



[@fitzmuseum_uk](https://www.instagram.com/fitzmuseum_uk)



[@fitzwilliammuseum](https://www.facebook.com/fitzwilliammuseum)