Relief - Caesar Invading Britain

Object: Relief
Place of origin: Rome (made)
Date: 1796 (made)
Artist/Maker: Deare, John, born 1759 - died 1798 (sculptor)
Credit Line: Purchase funded by the Vladimir Caruana and Ivan Booth Bequest
Museum number: A.10:1, 2-2011
Gallery location: Sculpture, Room 22, The Dorothy and Michael Hintze Galleries, case WS []

Public access description
The British sculptor John Deare (1759-98), who was a native of Liverpool, spent much of his career in Rome. It was there that he carved this relief for John Penn (1760-1834), a grandson of William Penn of Pennsylvania. The relief was installed above a fireplace, also carved by Deare, in Penn's Buckinghamshire house, Stoke Park. The unusual and virtuoso composition shows the invading Romans being repelled by heroic native British forces on the shore. In the centre, the helmeted figure of Julius Caesar stands commandingly on a flat-bottomed boat, armed with a shield and spear, his cloak billowing behind him in the wind. Behind him one of his soldiers, carved in low relief, aims an arrow at the Britons coming in to attack from the right. One of these, a long-haired figure, wearing only a loincloth, strides forth, his mouth open, shouting no doubt a battle cry, having leapt from his chariot, the wheel of which is armed with a knife blade. Three other bare-chested Britons fight in the water, whilst two others can be seen charging in from behind. In the shallows a dead centurion clutches a standard, which three of his fellow soldiers are wresting from a Briton who is attempting to seize it. Another Roman soldier is about to fire a stone from his sling, while a slaughtered Roman lies nearby in the water. The long hair and semi-nudity of the natives contrast with the more sober military demeanour of the helmeted Romans. To the left, two Roman soldiers are to be seen from the rear in a smaller boat, holding up their shields to defend themselves from the attack of the Britons, grasping shields and spears, and peering down at the invaders from their vantage point above on the cliff top. In the background at the centre right in low relief sorrowing bearded Druids with upraised arms bewail the scene.

John Penn was a British patriot and at the same time a supporter of the American Revolution. He would have sympathised with the plight of native forces struggling to combat a dominant imperial power. During the 1790s fears of French invasion of Britain were also apparent, and the subject of this relief may reflect those concerns. The Latin inscription, in bronze letters set into red marble, set below the relief, comes from Julius Caesar's own account of the invasion. It refers to a brief moment when the Britons managed to repulse the Roman invaders.

Descriptive line
Relief, marble, with inscription, 'Caesar Invading Britain', by John Deare (1759-1798), Rome, 1796.

Physical description
Large rectangular marble relief depicting the scene of invading Romans being repelled by native British forces on the shore. The Latin inscription below consists of metal letters (some modern replacements) set into a red marble panel, identified by James Elliott (marble supplier working with South Bucks County Council in 2012) as Rouge Griotte.

The Latin inscription, shown below the relief, comes from Julius Caesar's own account of the invasion

Dimensions
Height: 13 cm Inscription panel, Width: 269.5 cm Inscription panel, Depth: 5 cm Inscription panel, Height: 87.5 cm Main marble relief, Width: 164 cm Main marble relief, Depth: 17 cm Main marble relief The depth varies, and this is an approximate measurement.

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Object history note
The unusual and virtuoso composition shows the invading Romans being repelled by a heroic native British forces on the shore. The poses of the figures recall ancient, renaissance and contemporary works of art. The figure of Caesar is inspired by Alexander and Bucephalus, one of the Dioscuri on the Quirinal Hill. The Briton leaping from his chariot is derived from the Borghese Gladiator, and recalls too the figure of Bacchus in the Bacchus and Ariadne by Titian (1488/90-1576), which Deare could have seen in Rome. The virtuoso use of low relief for the battle may have been inspired by the skirmishes depicted on Trajan’s Column in Rome. In addition the mourning Druids in low relief in the background recall the bas relief figures of Donatello (c. 1386-1466), seen in his schiacciato marble reliefs, such as the Ascension with Christ giving the Keys to St Peter at the V&A, or the bronze figures executed in the backgrounds of the reliefs on his pulpits in the church of San Lorenzo, Florence. The low relief marble of Thetis and her nympha rising from the sea to console Achilles for the Loss of Patroclus of 1777-8 by Deare’s older contemporary, Thomas Banks (1735-1805), now also in the V&A, provides another striking parallel, and may well have been known to Deare before it left Rome. Perhaps Banks’s Caractacus before Claudius for Stowe, Buckinghamshire of 1773/4-77 similarly inspired Deare, since it too depicts a subject from Roman history, this time derived from Tacitus, showing Britons heroically confronting imperial invaders.
URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1241433/caesar-invading-britain-relief-deare-john/