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Sotheby's London To Offer A Previously Unknown Unique Antico Sculpture and the Largest 18th Century Ormolu Mounted Vase In Existence From The Collection of the Duke of Bedford at Woburn Abbey



Auctions: Old Master Sculpture & Important Furniture, Silver and Ceramics, Tuesday 8th December 2009

Exhibition: Friday 4th – Tuesday 8th December 2009, Sotheby's New Bond Street

SOTHEBY'S London is delighted to announce the sale of three highly important pieces from the collection of the Duke of Bedford at Woburn Abbey will represent the highlights of both the Old Master Sculpture and the Important Furniture, Silver & Ceramics sales on Tuesday 8th December 2009. The first of the three treasures to be sold from the Woburn Abbey collection on the instructions of the trustees of the Bedford Estates is a newly discovered unique gilded and silvered bronze figure of a *Seated Nymph* by Pier Jacopo Alari-Bonacolsi, called Antico (est. £1.5-2.5 million). This exquisite bronze was made in the early 16th century and is a seminal example of the jewel-like finish identified with Antico's best work. A further two treasures from the Duke's collection will be offered: an enormous gilt-bronze mounted Chinese blue porcelain vase, Louis XV, circa 1765, which is the largest known to exist in any museum or private collection and formerly part of the Elysée Palace collection (est. £600,000 to £1 million), in addition to a pair of gilt bronze mounted and granite tripods, Louis XVI circa 1775 (est. £400,000-600,000).

Speaking of the sale at Sotheby's, the Duke of Bedford comments: "The collection of antiques that has been open to the public at Woburn Abbey since 1955 is a part of the Bedford heritage that I am particularly proud, and the sale of these very special pieces from the collection will enable reinvestment into the collection and estate and their future preservation and evolution. To this end, it is extremely exciting that a new appreciation of the Antico sculpture has come to light from the experts in the field."

Mario Tavella, Sotheby's Deputy Chairman Europe, comments: "It is a great honour to offer property from one of the foremost stately homes in England. Representing the Woburn Abbey collection with three such exceptional pieces as the newly attributed Antico and the remarkably rare vase - whose provenance and size make the piece both outstanding and unique - provides a once-in-a-lifetime saleroom opportunity that Sotheby's is tremendously excited about."

PREVIOUSLY UNKNOWN UNIQUE ANTICO



The re-appearance of this beautiful bronze in one of the foremost stately homes in England adds a significant new chapter to the history of this 'most perfect creation' by Antico (whose works are represented in the world's greatest international museum collections, including the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, Le Louvre, Paris and the Metropolitan Museum, New York), establishing it as the only Antico with a certain provenance in a major British collection apart from those of Charles I, which all left England in the 17th century.

The exquisite bronze sculpture (est. £1.5-2.5 million), which was acquired by the Dukes of Bedford probably during the late 18th or early 19th century, has only recently been identified as one of the sculptor's most successful models. Although Antico's *Seated Nymph* is known in a dozen bronzes produced by his workshop and by his followers, the Bedford *Nymph* is one of only two known

autograph casts. Notable in the modelling on the Bedford Antico is the *Nymph's* hair ornament, the tiara or diadem replacing the classical knot of hair, which is unique to this cast. The very fine quality of the drapery, hair and anatomy combined with the characteristic use of gilding and silvering leave no doubt that this is an autograph Antico made during the early 16th century. It is believed that this *Nymph* was made for Gianfrancesco or Ludovico Gonzaga or possibly Isabella d'Este, - Marchesa of Mantua and a leading cultural and political figure of the Italian Renaissance - in 1503 to place in her *Grotta* opposite another extremely well-known model by Antico, the 1501 'Spinario'.

The little *Seated Nymph* is thought to have been modelled after an antique and headless antique marble known as the 'Sandalbinder' now in the Uffizi, Florence and of which another version with fawn is in the Vatican Museum. Writing of another version of Antico's *Seated Nymph* in the definitive catalogue on Antico, Nicholas Penny concluded that 'Antico

himself seems never to have made another version of this figure, which perhaps his most perfect creation and of all his bronzes the one which seems most to be composed in the round'.

ANTICO THE SCULPTOR & THE COMMISSION FOR THIS EXCEPTIONAL SCULPTURE

Pier Jacopo Alari Bonacolsi, called Antico by his contemporaries for the refined interpretation of the Antique they recognised in his work, was a 16th century North Italian sculptor, known for his finely-detailed small bronzes *all'Antica* - classicising, often with gilded details, and silver-inlaid eyes, a refinement that is found in some classical and Hellenistic Greek bronzes.

Born in Mantua around 1460, Antico trained as a goldsmith and by 1479 he was producing medals for patrons of the highest social standing in the brilliant court at Mantua - where one of Renaissance Italy's finest collections of Roman sculptures and Antiquities was to be found. His bronzes were remarkable for their extremely fine facture, meticulously cast and finely cleaned and finished. His black patination is characteristic of his craftsmanship and he was the first sculptor to realise the value of casting replicas of his bronzes by preserving his refined wax originals.

His illustrious patrons included Isabella d'Este, who married Francesco II Gonzaga of the ruling family of Mantua, which presided over one of the most brilliant humanistic high renaissance courts in Europe and flourished in the Arts, music and literature. Isabella d'Este's letters to Antico include requests for casts of models. In 1500 Isabella sent her then sculptor, Gian Cristophero Romano, to Antico to ask him to design a sculptural decoration for a doorcase. Antico, who was working on models for statuettes for the Bishop at the time, declined until the following year, when he cast one of the most well known of former models, the Spinario, for her. This she placed over one of the doors in the Castello San Giorgio and in 1503, she asked the Bishop to order Antico to make a pendant to it to place over the opposite door. It is likely, from the description, and now that there is a second fine version, that the sculpture to be offered by Sotheby's was the model referred to.

THE LARGEST GILT-BRONZE MOUNTED CHINESE VASE KNOWN TO EXIST



A further remarkable treasure from the Woburn Abbey collection to be offered is a magnificent vase of exceptional scale and quality that represents the largest recorded 18th century ormolu mounted vase. The gilt-bronze-mounted Chinese blue porcelain vase and cover, Louis XV, dating to circa 1765 (est. £600,000 - 1,000,000), originally formed part of a garniture of three in the collection at the Elysée Palace, now the official residence of the French President.

The eagle handles and the symmetrical form reflect the *Goût Grec* style, while the scroll form of the base still shows Baroque influences. *Goût Grec* is the style applied to the earliest expression of the neo-classical style in

France. It refers specifically to the decorative arts and architecture of the 1750s to the late 1760s. The enthusiasm for this type of exotic porcelain originally commenced with the various '*Compagnie des Indes*' which from the 17th century onwards traded with the Orient in all manner of luxurious Oriental ware and which so inspired the Parisian *Marchands Merciers*, who were driven to supply their illustrious clientele with the latest fashion and novelties such as gilt-bronze-mounted objects. These pieces remained the pinnacle of fashion for much of the second half of the 18th century.

It was Nicolas Beaujon, banker to the French Court and one of the richest men in France, who bought the palace in 1773 when he needed a suitably sumptuous 'country house' (for the city of Paris didn't yet extend this far) to house his fabulous collection of great masters paintings and works of art - which included such masterpieces as Holbein's 'The Ambassadors' (now in the National Gallery London) and Frans Hals' 'Bohemian' now in the collection of the Louvre. There he played a crucial role in financing the government of Louis XV, in particular lending enormous sums during the Seven Year's War which enabled the navy to function. On Beaujon's death an inventory was carried out and the vase, and two others which then accompanied it, were described from their appearance down to their placement in the palace alongside to other large porcelain vases.

A MAGNIFICENT PAIR OF LARGE GILT-BRONZE-MOUNTED ATHÉNIENNES



Few papers survive relating to the collection of the 5th and 6th Dukes as they had them destroyed and it is not therefore possible to determine which Duke was responsible for bringing the magnificent pair of large gilt-bronze-mounted athéniennes into the collection (est. £400,000 - 600,000). These athéniennes, circa 1775, typify the sophisticated taste of the second half of the 18th century and early 19th century, and since the 6th Duke was known to have purchased items from the marchand Lignereux in 1803 it is possible that the present lot was acquired by him from this source.

One of the earliest examples of an athénienne may have been supplied to Madame du Barry (1743-1793) at Louveciennes in 1774, and a carved giltwood athénienne after the design by Eberts is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. A pair of similar form now in the collection of H.M. Queen and originally part of the collection of George IV supplied to him when Prince of Wales for Carlton House, possibly by Dominique Daquerre and which bear affinities to the work of Pierre Gouthière and Francois Rémond. Additionally, a pair of very similar athéniennes in green granite and decorated with lion's masks, by repute formed part of the collection of the celebrated French collector Jean-Baptiste de Machault d'Arnouville, one of the most important men of Louis XV's reign.

***Estimates do not include buyer's premium**

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