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8 April 2006

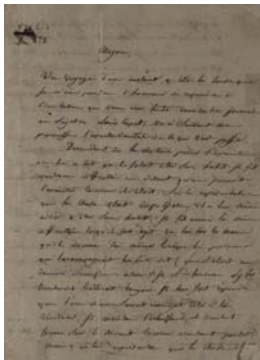
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LOUIS XVI'S LAST WORDS – REDISCOVERED EXECUTIONER'S ACCOUNT TO BE OFFERED AT CHRISTIE'S

Valuable Printed Books and Manuscripts
7 June 2006



London – Christie's announce that they will offer the most authoritative contemporary account of the execution of King Louis XVI of France at the auction of *Valuable Printed Books and Manuscripts* on 7 June. This manuscript narrative of the King of France's execution was written by Charles Henri Sanson, the chief executioner of Paris during the French Revolution, and is believed to have passed through several generations of a private European family before resurfacing. It is expected to realise £80,000-120,000.

On 21 January 1793, the French Republican government sent King Louis XVI to the guillotine. Stripped of all his titles and indicted under his family name as citoyen Louis Capet, he was sent to the scaffold to be guillotined by the chief executioner of Paris, Charles Henri Sanson. Following the execution, differing stories began to circulate regarding the former Sovereign's last moments; exaggerations and manipulations were rife, biased according to political allegiances. An inaccurate article published in the revolutionary journal *Thermomètre du jour* shortly afterwards prompted Sanson to write a full account to the journal's editor on 20 February 1793 in order to clarify the events.

Sanson's letter begins by promising '*l'exacte vérité de ce qui c'est passé*' [*the exact truth of what occurred*]. He recounts that the King arrived at the place of execution in a horse and carriage, mounted the scaffold where he reluctantly offered his hands to be tied and asked if the drums would continue beating. Louis then turned to the crowd and exclaimed '*Peuple je meurs innocent*' [*People, I die innocent*]. Sanson's account continues by recording the last words of the former King of France:

...ensuite se retournant vers nous, il nous dit: "Messieurs, je suis innocent de tout ce dont on m'inculpe. Je souhaite que mon sang puisse cimenter le bonheur des français." Violla Citoyen ses dernières et ses véritables paroles [...then turning towards us, he told us: "Gentlemen, I am innocent of everything of which I am accused. I wish that my blood may be able to cement the happiness of the French." There, Citizen, are his last and true words.]

Charles Henri Sanson (1740-1806) assumed the hereditary role of *exécuteur des hautes oeuvres de Paris* in 1778. He became an unwilling instrument of the Revolution - his term as public executioner witnessed both the advent of the guillotine and the French Revolution; indeed, it is claimed that he oversaw the execution of 2,918 people before passing the responsibility to his son, Henri, in April 1793. The clearest evidence of his divided sentiments is revealed in the last paragraph of his letter to the *Thermomètre du jour*. Here he recalls the final moments before the blade fell on the neck of Louis XVI:

...et pour rendre hommage à la vérité, il a soutenu tout cela avec un sang froid et une fermeté qui nous a tous étonnés. Je reste très convaincu qu'il avait puisé cette fermeté dans les principes de la religion dont personne plus que lui ne paraissait pénétrée ny persuadé. [...and to pay homage to the truth, he withstood all that with a composure and a steadiness that astonished us all. I remain very convinced that he had drawn this steadiness from the principles of religion, of which none appeared more deeply affected and persuaded than he.]

After its publication, this letter was quickly recognized as the only authoritative, contemporary eyewitness account of the monarch's death. François-René, vicomte de Chateaubriand (1768-1848) refers to Sanson's letter in the second edition of his *Essai historique, politique et moral, sur les révolutions anciennes et modernes* (Paris, 1826). Having been given access to this original manuscript, he says that '*je tiens encore dans ce moment même, ce papier sur lequel s'est traînée la main sanglante de Sanson, cette main qui a osé toucher à la tête de mon roi, qui a fait tomber cette tête sacrée*' [I am holding in my hand at this very moment that paper upon which was trained the bloody hand of Sanson, that hand which had dared to touch the head of my King, which had caused that sacred head to fall.]

King Louis XVI of France (1754-1793) was the third son of Dauphin Louis and Marie Joséphe of Saxony, and grandson and successor of King Louis XV. In 1770 he married the Austrian archduchess Marie Antoinette and was crowned King of France in 1774. A shy, dull and portly individual, his character was



unsuited to the volatile political situation that was brewing in France and he was soon found himself facing revolution. On 21 June 1791 Louis attempted to flee Paris for the Austrian Empire (some accounts claim that he was captured after trying to make a purchase in a shop, the clerk recognizing the King from his image on the coinage). He was returned to Paris and placed under informal house-arrest before being officially arrested in August 1792. The National Assembly declared France a Republic the following month; in

December Louis was tried and convicted of High Treason before the Legislative Assembly, which voted by 361 votes to 288 that the King should be put to the guillotine. His execution on 21 January 1793 marked France's transition from a monarchy to a Republic and is rightly considered a defining moment of the Revolution.

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Images available on request

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Notes to editors:

- A full transcript of the letter is available on request

- The sale of *Valuable Printed Books and Manuscripts* will be on public view at Christie's, King Street, between 30 May and 8 June 2006

- Christie's have been selling Books and Manuscripts since 1766. One of the earliest auctions held by Christie's was the sale of Samuel Johnson's library in 1785. The international department now offers regular sales of books and manuscripts in New York, London, Paris and Rome. The world auction record for a manuscript was established when the Codex Hammer by Leonardo da Vinci was sold at Christie's New York in November 1999 for \$30,802,500 / £19,263,602