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SUNKEN TREASURES

The fort San Sebastian Wreck to be offered at Christie's Amsterdam

The Fort San Sebastian Wreck

A 16th Century Portugese Porcelain Wreck off the Island of Mozambique

Wednesday 19 May 2004 at 7pm



A diver from Arqueonautas Worldwide S.A.



*Gold nuggets from the Fort San Sebastian wreck
Estimates ranging from € 350 to € 4.000*

Amsterdam - On May 19th 2004 the small but precious cargo of the Fort San Sebastian Wreck, a Portuguese galleon of the second half of the 16th Century - Portugal's golden age - will be auctioned at Christie's Amsterdam. The sale provides an opportunity for collector's worldwide to acquire rare pieces of Ming porcelain and gold nuggets.

Arqueonautas Worldwide S.A., a renowned company in the field of maritime archaeology, active in protecting the submerged cultural heritage, has been appointed to survey, evaluate and recover the most important, endangered historical wrecks of Mozambique. The remaining wood structure of the Fort San Sebastian Wreck –the first of a series of shipwrecks in urgent need of protective intervention - had been discovered directly in front of the Fort of San Sebastian at the 'Ilha de Moçambique'.

Although it was known to have been looted at least twice in recent decades it is still considered to be of outstanding historical and cultural significance.

In May 2001 a team of Arqueonautas divers discovered a pile of ballast stones. During the following weeks the first pieces of blue and white Ming porcelain, gold nuggets, spices and two bronze cannons were revealed deeply buried beneath eight tons of rock. Not only could the porcelain be dated on stylistic grounds, but a 'moon-hare' dish was discovered bearing a cyclical date corresponding to the year 1553. A large part of the porcelain aboard this wreck was from the late Ming emperor Wanli (1573-1619). The designs on the porcelain from the cargo may be divided into three types: human, animal and floral. This placed the date of the Fort San Sebastian wreck and its cargo at the absolute peak of Portuguese maritime greatness.

It could be said that those were the initial days in which porcelain trade was developed. This was probably the greatest non-organic trade the world had ever seen, and which would make blue and white the most successful colour combination in the entire history of ceramic art. It became highly sought-after; Chinese emperors, kings and queens of England, princes of Europe and sultans of Arabia would all show a strong interest for this type of ceramics in centuries to come.

Although less than 1500 pieces of porcelain and 12.000 grams of gold were recovered from the Fort of San Sebastian wreck, the project ran virtually non-stop for over two years to allow for the painstaking scientific recording of this significant find. As initially agreed with the Government of the republic of Mozambique, the nation has retained all the 'unique' Ming and gold artefacts and all those of special archaeological or art-historical importance, as well as the best representative selection of everything else (this was chosen by an independent, government-appointed internationally renown porcelain expert). As a consequence, the National Maritime Museum of 'Ilha de Moçambique' now possesses the finest collection of export porcelain with a provenance in the entire Indian Ocean basin.

Christie's Amsterdam is entrusted with auctioning part of the cargo from the Fort San Sebastian Wreck because of its long tradition of auctioning art treasures from shipwrecks, like the extraordinary Nanking, Vung Tau and Diana cargo.

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*Images available on request
Visit Christie's on the web at www.christies.com*

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Notes to Editors:

We are proud to present a part of this cargo which has been excavated in a highly professional manner under guidance of Mensun Bound, Research Fellow in Marine Archeology, Oxford