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LELY MASTERPIECE TO BE OFFERED AT CHRISTIE'S IN JULY



Important Old Master and British Pictures **Thursday, 5 July 2007**

King Street – Christie's announce that they will offer at auction a masterpiece by Sir Peter Lely (1618-1680) traditionally considered to depict a favoured mistress of King Charles II, and thought to have been a work owned by the King and kept in the Royal bedchamber at the Palace of Whitehall. *Portrait of a young lady and child, probably Barbara Villiers, Countess of Castlemaine and Duchess of Cleveland (1640-1709)* by Sir Peter Lely, the finest painter of the Restoration and official artist to Charles II, is being offered at the auction of *Important Old Master and British Pictures* on 5 July by the Trustees of the Denys Eyre Bower Bequest and is expected to realise £1,500,000-2,000,000.

The present work is a masterpiece by Sir Peter Lely and one of the most overtly sensuous portraits to have been painted in 17th Century England. Traditionally believed to depict Nell Gwyn (1651-1787) with her son Charles Beauclerk, 1st Duke of St Albans, it may well be the picture described as “*Madam Gwyn's naked portrait, with a cupid*”, protected by a “*sliding piece*” designed by Hendrik Danckerts which was recorded in King James II's inventory of 1688, three years after the death of Charles II. ‘*Pretty witty Nell*’ as Samuel Pepys called her, was the most popular of King Charles II's several mistresses.

While no other potential candidate is known for the picture recorded in the 1688 inventory, factors associated with the sitter's features, colouring and age, suggest that it is more likely to be Barbara Villiers, Countess of Castlemaine and Duchess of Cleveland (1640-1709), who preceded Nell Gwyn as the favoured Royal mistress and who dominated Court and the public imagination during the first ten years of the King's

reign. The *sliding piece* mentioned in the inventory appears to refer to a secret panel in the Royal bedchamber. The private manner in which such a work would have been kept may account for the possible confusion over the identity of the sitter when referred to in the inventory of 1688. Historically, the present work has been considered to portray one of Charles II's most notable mistresses; when it was acquired at auction in London in 1950, it was catalogued as a portrait of Barbara Villiers, and it was exhibited as a portrait of Nell Gwyn at the National Portrait Gallery's *The Masque of Beauty* in 1972.

Sir Peter Lely (1618-1680) was born in Holland and moved to England in the early 1640s. He was the natural successor to Sir Anthony van Dyck (1599-1641) and quickly found success portraying both Charles I and also Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector of England, who famously asked to be portrayed in a true likeness – '*warts and all*'. In 1661, Lely was appointed Principal Painter to King Charles II and the following years heralded a new artistic age with the pleasure-loving court of King Charles II at its epicentre.

The painting is being offered at auction by The Trustees of Denys Eyre Bower Bequest following discussion with and the consent of the Charity Commission. The late Denys Bower was a prolific collector; in 1955 he acquired Chiddingstone Castle, a magnificent house set near the National Trust-owned Chiddingstone village in Kent, and filled the property with his extensive and eclectic collection of art and antiques. When Bower died in 1977, he bequeathed the Castle and its collections to the National Trust who declined the gift due to the lack of an endowment fund which made it financially unviable. Since 1985, the Castle has been run by an independent charitable trust. The sale of this picture is a last resort measure in order to prevent the closure and sale of the Castle and all proceeds will be invested in re-opening the Castle to the public and establishing an endowment fund in order to provide a future for the Castle and its Collections.

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Images available on request
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Notes to editors:

- *Important Old Master and British Pictures* will be on public view at Christie's, King Street, from 30 June to 5 July 2007. See www.christies.com for further details.

- Christie's *International Old Master Department* realised an annual sales total of £146 million / \$264.3 million / €213.2 million in 2006. This built on the success of 2005 and reaffirms Christie's position as market leaders in both the Old Master Picture and Old Master Drawing categories, increasing market share against the nearest competitors to 54.5% for the Old Master Category as a whole.

- Christie's has an unrivalled expertise in the field of Old Master Pictures, and hold major auctions of Important Old Masters twice a year in both London and New York. Christie's also hold regular sales of Old Master Pictures in the more regional markets of France, Italy, Holland, Spain and Christie's South Kensington.

- In July 2007 Christie's will host a week of auctions dedicated to classical collecting categories and including an impressive selection of old master paintings and drawings, European furniture, sculpture, tapestries and important clocks. All works of art will be on public view before going under the hammer between 3 and 6 July. See www.christies.com for further details.