

For Immediate Release

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THE MILLION DOLLAR MOUTHFUL

- The oldest complete set of silver cutlery in existence to be offered at Christie's

Important Silver

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King Street – A rediscovered and immensely rare set of knives, spoons and forks, thought to be the oldest complete set of silver cutlery in the world, is estimated to realize between £300,000 and £500,000 when offered at auction in December. The German *basse-taille* enamelled silver and parcel-gilt service, which appeared during a routine Christie's valuation in Europe, comprises a set of twelve knives, twelve spoons, and twelve sweetmeat forks, as well as three slightly earlier salt-cellars. The service, dated 1615, was made and decorated by the Augsburg goldsmith David Altenstetter, who has long been recognized as one of the finest enamellers of the Renaissance.

Anthony Phillips, International Director of the Silver Department at Christie's: *'This extraordinarily early complete banqueting service appears to be a unique survival . It is quite simply one of the most important and beautiful German Renaissance works of art in silver ever to appear at auction. Over the last few years, the silver department has been fortunate to have made a number of astonishing discoveries in the area of German silver, but nothing comes close to this in terms of artistic and socio-historical importance, not to mention sheer beauty. Until now, the earliest sets of table silver have generally been considered to date from the late 17th century. Every individual piece of the Altenstetter Service is a stunning work of art by a goldsmith who was praised by his contemporaries as one of the greatest enamellers of his day.'*

The Altenstetter Service is an intricately worked and very beautiful set of 17th century cutlery in exceptional condition, enamelled in bright, translucent colors. The twelve table-knives have tapered handles with silver-gilt molded borders, the tops decorated with cherub's bust and scrolls to front and back. The face and reverse of each knife handle are enamelled with an extraordinary variety of scenes including a trotting horse, a monkey with bagpipes, a dancing bear and a winged dragon holding a snail with its claw. Each of the twelve knives is signed with Altenstetter's initials with one dated 1615. Fewer than half a dozen examples of his signed works are known to survive today, including those in the Kunsthistorische Museum, Vienna and the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum in Munich.

The spoons and forks are decorated with running scrolls, geometric ornament and foliage, and are struck with a maker's mark only recently ascribed to Altenstetter, an attribution surely confirmed by

their appearance in the same set with his signed work. The three salt-cellars, made by a different Augsburg maker *circa* 1595, are almost certainly also enamelled by Altenstetter, this time with foliage and a variety of subjects, including exotic birds, winged dragons and leaping stags. The service comes complete with a late 18th century brass-mounted, velvet-lined leather case which has contributed to its exceptional state of preservation.

The service descended to the present owners among the contents of a castle formerly owned by the von Münch family. In the 18th century Christian I von Münch (1690-1751) was an extremely successful Augsburg banker. Letters discovered by Christie's in the Wittelsbach family archives reveal that in 1743-1744, Duke Charles Albert, who became Holy Roman Emperor in 1742 as Charles VII, was pawning silver to von Münch to help pay for military expenses during the War of the Austrian Succession. It is highly probable that the service was acquired by von Münch in this way and, if so, it is a possibility that the service was originally owned by Duke Maximilian I of Bavaria.

David Altenstetter was born in Colmar in 1547. He became a master of the Augsburg goldsmith's guild in 1573, and a warden from 1587 to 1595. His talent as a goldsmith and enameller earned him great respect, and his patrons included Rudolph II of Prague, who had the mountings for a clock, his pistol and powder flask, and possibly his crown, enamelled by the German. Philipp Hainhofer, a contemporary of Altenstetter and art dealer in Augsburg, remarked upon the death of the artist: *'how many times I warned him that his art, by which the enamel does not spring out from the metal, has been mastered by no one else and he would take it to his grave.'*

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Notes to Editors:

- Christie's hold regular sales dedicated to Silver at salerooms around the world, including London, New York, Paris and Amsterdam. Christie's have held significant market share of the Silver market for the last 6 years, and realized over £19.1 million worldwide in the first 7 months of 2005, with close to half of this figure sold in London.

- There is little evidence to illustrate how a service was used during the 16th century. A painting of the 1590s in the Polish National Museum, Warsaw titled *The Banquet of the Hapsburg Monarchs* suggests that a service like that made by Altenstetter would have been used by the grandest of nobility at small, intimate dinners.