

For Immediate Release
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**JOHN WEBBER'S PORTRAIT OF THE CAPTIVE
TAHITIAN PRINCESS POETUA, FROM THE
COLLECTION OF THE DESCENDANTS OF THE LAST
QUEEN OF TAHITI**

**A LOST MASTERPIECE FROM COOK'S THIRD VOYAGE
TO BE SOLD AT CHRISTIE'S IN DECEMBER 2008**



'On the island of Otaheite where Love is the Cheif occupation, the favourite, nay, the Sole Luxury of the inhabitants; both the bodies & the souls of the women are modeld into the most upmost perfection.'

Sir Joseph Banks, 1769

'At about this time, Webber produced what is undoubtedly his most serene painting, perhaps the most arrestingly beautiful portrait that any Cook artist produced.'

Discoveries, The Voyages of Captain Cook
by N. Thomas

Important Old Master and British Pictures Evening Sale

Exhibition: 29 November to 2 December 2008 at Christie's, 8 King Street, London

Auction: 2 December 2008 at 7pm, Christie's, 8 King Street, London

London – Christie's announce that they will offer a little known and highly important portrait of a Tahitian Princess at the auction of *Important Old Master and British Pictures* on 2 December 2008 in London. Consigned by the descendants of the last Queen of Tahiti, *Poedua, daughter of Oreo, chief of Ulaietea, one of the Society Isles* by John Webber, R.A. (1751-1793) is the least known of three recorded versions of the portrait by Webber (the other two versions are in the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich and the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra). This is the first great portrait of a woman of the Pacific and the prototype for all the portrayals of the fabled women of the south seas that would follow, a subject most famously portrayed just over a century later in Gauguin's celebrated Tahitian paintings. The portrait has been unseen to the public for over 200 years and will be on public exhibition at Christie's London from 29 November to 2 December. It is expected to realise £800,000 to £1,200,000.

Captain Cook's Third Voyage saw the great explorer venture through the Pacific islands before searching for a North West passage which would take him from the Pacific to the Atlantic Ocean. From 3 November to 7 December 1777, Cook's ships were moored at Raiatea, one of the myriad of Tahitian islands.

The stay in the Society Islands ahead of the voyage north into icy waters proved challenging as Cook faced the problem of desertion, as the sailors were tempted by the attractions of life in the islands which promised, according to one of the crew, Alexander Home, '*Exactly the paradise of Mahomed in Every thing but Immortality*'. Marine officer John Harrison was the first to try and flee the mission; according to the ship's cooper, he '*deserted from his duty into the Country in order to continue through female attachment & expectation of an easy Life*'. Harrison was recovered and was given two dozen lashes, and Cook spoke to his men assuring them that his authority '*would bring them back dead or alive.*' However, on 23 November, two of the crew from *Discovery* fled to the islands with a Tahitian in a canoe and early efforts to bring them back to the ship failed. Cook resorted to a tried and tested solution of taking hostage tribal chiefs. On 26 November, chief Oreo visited *Resolution* with his son Teura, daughter Poetua and son-in-law Moetua and they were duly held captive in order that the deserting sailors would be returned. The confinement of the beautiful princess Poetua on Captain Clerke's *Discovery* caused outrage among her people, as Clerke described in his journal:

The News of their Confinement of course was blaz'd instantaneously throughout the Isle; old Oreo was half mad, and within an hour afterwards we had a most numerous Congregation of Women under the Stern, cutting their heads with Sharks Teeth and lamenting the Fate of the Prisoners, in so melancholy a bowl, as render'd the Ship whilst it lasted, which was 2 or 3 Hours, a most wretched Habitation.

The deserters were returned on 29 November at which time the hostages were released. It is during the time of her confinement that Poetua is thought to have sat for Webber.

The present work, little known, and the only one dated, comes from the collection of Princess Ariimanihinihi Takau Pomare (1887-1976), youngest daughter of Queen Marautaroa I (1860-1934), the last Queen of Tahiti, from whom it descended to her only daughter Princess Marautaroa Monique Salmon-Pomare (d.1999), the late mother of the present owners. The portrait's early history is unknown, but it may have been taken to Tahiti by Alexander Salmon (1822-1866), a London banker who travelled to the islands in the 1840s and married into the Tahitian Royal Family. Dated 1785, it is possible that this portrait is the version which was exhibited at The Royal Academy in 1785, where it presented the exotic beauty of the Pacific women to the European audience for the first time. It has since been unseen to the public for over 200 years and will be on public exhibition at Christie's London from 29 November to 2 December.

Images available on request
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About Christie's

Christie's is the world's leading art business with global art sales in 2007 that totaled £3.1 billion/\$6.3 billion. This marks the highest total in company and in art auction history. For the first half of 2008, art sales totaled £1.8 billion / \$3.5 billion. Christie's is a name and place that speaks of extraordinary art, unparalleled service and expertise, as well as international glamour. Founded in 1766 by James Christie, Christie's conducted the greatest auctions of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, and today remains a popular showcase for the unique and the beautiful. Christie's offers over 600 sales annually in over 80 categories, including all areas of fine and decorative arts, jewellery, photographs, collectibles, wine, and more. Prices range from \$200 to over \$80 million. Christie's has 85 offices in 43 countries and 14 salerooms around the world including in London, New York, Los Angeles, Paris, Geneva, Milan, Amsterdam, Tel Aviv, Dubai, Hong Kong and Zurich. Most recently, Christie's has led the market with expanded initiatives in emerging and new markets such as Russia, China, India and the United Arab Emirates, with successful sales and exhibitions in Beijing, Mumbai and Dubai.