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CHRISTIE'S TO OFFER THE BADMINTON CABINET

The Most Important Piece of European Furniture At Auction in December

The Badminton Cabinet
Important European Furniture and Sculpture
9 December 2004

London – The Badminton Cabinet will be sold by Christie's in London on 9 December 2004.

“The reappearance of the Badminton Cabinet at Christie's is immensely exciting”, said Charles Cator, Chairman of Christie's UK and International Head of the Furniture Department. *“It is a very famous and unique masterpiece, much loved and admired, and it is an honour to be entrusted again with its sale.”*

Executed in ebony, gilt-bronze and *pietra dura*, The Badminton Cabinet was commissioned by Henry Somerset, 3rd Duke of Beaufort, from the Grand Ducal workshops (Opificio delle pietre dure) in Florence in 1726 under the supervision of the Foggini family. Unsurpassed in its richness and splendour, the Badminton Cabinet is bold testimony to the young Duke of Beaufort's genius. The Duke was only nineteen at the time of the commission, so he made one of the grandest acts of patronage of the 18th century before he had even come of age. The object he ordered can be regarded more as an architectural monument than a piece of furniture, combining architecture, sculpture and painting in *pietra dure* and resulting in a unique masterpiece.

Standing 386 cm high and 232.5 cm wide (151 ½ inches by 91 ¼ inches), this monumental Cabinet is undoubtedly the greatest Florentine work of art of its time. It is also perhaps the most important work of the decorative arts to have been commissioned by a British patron in three hundred years. It is a triumph of the very best craftsmanship, a unique object that utilizes a broad combination of materials and forms. The Cabinet also incorporates an amazing wealth of materials, from lapis lazuli, agate and Sicilian red and green jasper, to chalcedony (*calcedonio di Volterra*), amethyst quartz as well as other superb hardstones.

As this Cabinet was the largest piece of furniture produced in the Grand Ducal Workshops in the Baroque period, there was an enormous amount of work inherent in its realisation. It is estimated that no less than thirty craftsmen would have been involved in creating the cabinet, realising every minute detail, over a five or six year period. These would have included, according to the working practices of the Grand Ducal Workshops (*Galleria dei lavori*), hardstone cutters, cabinet-makers, bronze casters and gilders, as well as those artists who executed models for the statuettes of the Four Seasons placed at the angles of the upper corners. It would have also included a special craftsman to oversee the unusual addition of a clock.

Born in 1707, Henry Somerset succeeded his father in 1714 when he was only seven. His great-grandfather, the 1st Duke, had rebuilt Badminton between 1664 and 1691, transforming the rambling 15th and 16th century house into an Inigo Jones/Palladian style mansion more suited to his princely way of life.

The 2nd Duke, who succeeded his grandfather in 1699, made few changes and it was his son, the 3rd Duke, on his return from Italy, who instigated the major remodelling of Badminton. The young Duke had set off on the Grand Tour in 1725, accompanied by William Philips, his tutor, friend and artist advisor. Sadly Philip's friendship later proved to be false and on their return in 1727 he tried to misappropriate some of Beaufort's Italian works of art. The Duke had made extensive acquisitions in Rome but it was the commissioning of the Badminton Cabinet that far surpassed all other purchases.

The Cabinet was shipped from Leghorn (Livorno) to England in 1732. The original shipping papers still exist in the archive at Badminton, as do contemporaneous drawings of the Cabinet. These were discovered by Her Majesty Queen Mary who lived at Badminton during World War II as the guest of her niece, the wife of the 10th Duke. The Cabinet remained at Badminton until 1990.

“The record breaking sale at Christie’s of the Badminton Cabinet on 5 July 1990 brought a special kind of magic to the art world, similar to the sensation caused by the sale of Van Gogh’s Sunflowers three years earlier. It was probably one of the most, if not the most, exciting moments in my thirty years at Christie’s,” continued Charles Cator, International Head of the Furniture Department and Chairman of Christie’s UK.

The remarkable result when it was sold by the Trustees of the Beaufort family to the Barbara Piasecka Johnson Collection for £8,580,000 (\$15,178,020) established a record auction price for a piece of furniture and for any item of the applied arts. The record still stands and may only be broken when the Cabinet returns to Christie’s in December.

A further work from the Collection of Barbara Piasecka Johnson, *Still-life with Cardoon and Francolin* by Juan Sánchez Cotán (Orgaz 1560- 1627 Granada) will be offered at Christie’s in the sale of *Old Master Pictures* on 8 December (estimate on request). Sánchez Cotán was one of the earliest still-life painters in Europe and the present picture is datable to *circa* 1600. His still lifes are extraordinary both for their rarity, as his career was short and he produced so few still-life paintings, and for their astonishing illusionism. Part of their undoubted power derives from the compositional device of setting the brightly-lit fruit and other objects against a neutral window ledge and dark background.

Although Sánchez Cotán is also known to have painted portraits and religious subjects, his small group of still lifes is his greatest achievement and has been described as a “unique phenomenon in the history of art”. They certainly seem to have no precedent and only the work of Caravaggio in this field, at around the same time, comes close to the realistic depiction of fruit, vegetables and other objects that must have astonished contemporaries around 1600, as they still do today.

In 1603, at the age of forty-three, Sánchez Cotán abandoned a successful career in Toledo to become a lay brother of the Carthusian order at the Cartuja (or Charterhouse) in Granada. Just after his departure an inventory was drawn up of the works in his studio on 13 August 1603, and this included twelve still-life paintings. Only six autograph still lifes by the artist have been identified to date, including the present picture. Of these, four are in major museums and one is in a private collection in Spain. The current picture is the only one that can be offered on the international market, and its appearance at auction in December will ignite significant interest from collectors and institutions around the world.

