

# CHRISTIE'S

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## NICOLAS POUSSIN'S

### *HANNIBAL CROSSING THE ALPS ON AN ELEPHANT*

TO BE OFFERED AT CHRISTIE'S LONDON ON 2 JULY 2013

One of the earliest and best documented masterpieces by the artist  
Expected to realise £ 3 million to £5 million



*Hannibal Crossing the Alps on an Elephant* by Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665)

Oil on canvas, 39¼ x 53¼ in. | 99.6 x 135.2 cm

Estimate: £3 million to £5 million

**London** – Christie's will offer *Hannibal Crossing the Alps on an Elephant* by Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665) at the *Old Master & British Paintings Evening Auction* on Tuesday 2 July 2013. This unconventional and unforgettable image of Hannibal, the legendary Carthaginian general, directing an historic invasion of Italy on the back of a war elephant, is one of the earliest and best documented masterpieces executed by Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665), one of the greatest and most influential artists in European art history, after his arrival in Rome in the mid-1620s. Offered at auction for the first time and presenting exceptional provenance - having originally been in the collection of Poussin's greatest patron Cassiano dal Pozzo (1588-1657) and later joining that of Rubin Lipchitz, the brother of the celebrated Cubist sculptor Jacques Lipchitz (1891-1973) - this work has been in the same collection for over 30 years. Little known until it reappeared in the great Poussin exhibition in Rouen in 1961, this painting has since become familiar to the public through extended loans to the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard University, Vassar College, and The Frick Collection in New York. It is expected to realise £3 million to £5 million on 2 July.

**Georgina Wilsenach, Head of Old Master & British Paintings at Christie's London:** *"The powerful allure of this early work by Poussin is evidenced in the painting's impressive provenance – from the artist's greatest patron, Cassiano dal Pozzo, to the brother of the Cubist master Jacques Lipchitz, Rubin. Today's collectors and institutions will, in turn, appreciate this rare opportunity to acquire a work of this quality and calibre which has been on loan, in recent years, to the Fogg Museum at Harvard University, Vassar College and The Frick Collection."*

A rarely illustrated episode of Ancient Roman history famously recounted by Livy, it depicts the brilliant military strategist and hero of the Second Punic War astride the great African beast, leading the massing troops --several of them similarly mounted on elephants-- on the long journey from Iberia, over the Pyrenees and the Alps, into northern Italy. With a force consisting of 38,000 infantry, 8000 cavalry and 37 elephants, Hannibal's army was the greatest fighting force ever assembled, and the 218 BC alpine invasion – crossing within sight of the Matterhorn – would forever transform the Mediterranean world.

Although not commissioned, the painting was acquired immediately after its execution by the man who would become Poussin's most loyal and enlightened patron, Cassiano dal Pozzo (1588-1657), a scholar and intellectual who was the father of modern archaeology, and served as secretary to Cardinal Francesco Barberini. Artist and patron had met soon after the 30-year-old painter had arrived in Rome from his native France in 1624. Unfortunately for Poussin, Cardinal Barberini and Cassiano were dispatched to Paris on a papal legation some months later and did not return to Rome until 17 December 1625, during which time the artist fell seriously ill and, unable to work, found himself penniless. He lived hand-to-mouth, moving household several times and selling his pictures for whatever he could get for them. Poussin's severe financial difficulties ended quickly and definitively with the repatriation of his generous new clients: immediately upon their return from Paris, Cassiano purchased the present *Hannibal Crossing the Alps on an Elephant*, and the Cardinal commissioned the *Sack and Destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem by Titus* (Israel Museum, Jerusalem), a painting only recently rediscovered.

In an undated letter, almost certainly from December 1625, Poussin wrote to Cassiano, explaining his illness and desperate financial state, and mentioning that he had made a drawing of an elephant (from life) that he intended to send to his friend. Poussin also noted that he had used the drawing as a study for a painting that he had made of an elephant with Hannibal mounted upon it. Upon receiving the letter, Cassiano bought the painting of *Hannibal Crossing the Alps on an Elephant* from the artist for the extravagant sum of 40 *scudi*, an excessive amount that was tactfully offered by the collector to help his friend out of his plight.

Poussin knew well of Cassiano's intense interest in both antiquity and the natural sciences, and had himself contributed drawings to the collector's so-called 'Museo Cartaceo' (or 'Paper Museum'), a vast collection of drawings and prints that Cassiano acquired over many years recording a wide variety of plant and animal life - - both exotic and familiar-- famous antiquities, classical monuments and costumes of the ancient world. Undoubtedly, Poussin's gift of the elephant drawing to Cassiano was intended for the 'Museo Cartaceo' and, probably, the painting of *Hannibal Crossing the Alps on an Elephant* was made in the hope that the antiquarian would be induced into buying it.

Cassiano and his younger brother, Carlo Antonio, went on to acquire almost 50 paintings by Poussin, many of them among the artist's greatest masterpieces, including the celebrated first series of *Seven Sacraments*. The present *Hannibal Crossing the Alps on an Elephant* bears an inscription in Latin on the reverse of the original

canvas in lettering that appears on many of the paintings from the dal Pozzo collection; in this case, the inscription identifies the subject of the composition, asserts that the elephant was drawn from life, and records its author as “NIC.POUSSIN.PINX”. The painting was recorded in inventories of the dal Pozzo collection until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, at which time it was probably sold.

Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665) is recognised as one of the greatest and most influential artists in European art history. Born in France, he moved to Italy in the 1620s where he spent most of his life championing a renaissance in Classical painting at a time when Baroque was the most common style. Having moved to Rome, Poussin soon found wealthy patrons and established an impressive reputation. In 1640 he was summoned by Louis XIII and returned to France as First Painter in Ordinary to the King. He executed a number of prestigious works but quickly grew tired of the jealousy inferred on him by competing artists, returning to Rome in 1643 where he remained until his death.

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*\*Estimates do not include buyer's premium. Sales totals are hammer price plus buyer's premium and do not reflect costs, financing fees or application of buyer's or seller's credits.*

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