

# CHRISTIE'S

PRESS RELEASE | King Street | 17 June 2014  
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## £5 MILLION HOLMAN HUNT MASTERPIECE TO LEAD CHRISTIE'S LONDON SALE

*"...a picture of the century, to be mentioned hereafter  
whenever the history of the art of England is written."*

Cosmo Monkhouse, contemporary critic, 1886



**King Street, London** – One of the best known and loved Pre-Raphaelite masterpieces by a founder member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, William Holman Hunt (1827-1910) depicting the tragic heroine of John Keats' epic poem *Isabella and the Pot of Basil* will lead the sale of Victorian, Pre-Raphaelite and British Impressionist Art at Christie's on 17 June 2014. It is sold to benefit the Delaware Art Museum in America and is estimated at £5,000,000-8,000,000.

The composition was acknowledged to be his greatest secular masterpiece and in 1886 Cosmo Monkhouse, a contemporary art critic, described it as a *"picture of the century, to be mentioned*

*hereafter whenever the history of the art of England is written*". Aside from works by the artist not in or promised to public collections, it is one of the very few works by Holman Hunt likely to come for public sale.

Holman Hunt was working on two versions of this subject in the year following his beloved wife's untimely death from tuberculosis a few months after the birth of their son. At the time the family were living in Florence, Italy. The poignancy of the depiction of the young woman mourning her lover by an artist absorbed by his own grief, is evident within the richly decorated image. The altar cloth draped across the prie-dieu in the painting is embroidered with the biblical phrase *love is strong as death*, the same quotation carved on the side of the monument he designed for his late wife.

The picture depicts the part of the story after Isabella's brothers have murdered her lover Lorenzo and she has disinterred the corpse, decapitated it with the help of her nurse, and buried the head in a pot of basil. Hunt pours all his emotion into the portrayal of Isabella:

And she forgot the stars, the moon, and sun,  
And she forgot the blue above the trees,  
And she forgot the dells where waters run,  
And she forgot the chilly autumn breeze;  
She had no knowledge when the day was done,  
And the new morn she saw not: but in peace  
Hung over her sweet Basil evermore,  
And moisten'd it with tears unto the core.

A large version of the work is in the Laing Art Gallery in Newcastle. This, the 53rd verse of John Keats's poem, was printed on the ticket of admission to its unveiling there in 1868. Both versions were bought by the art dealer Ernest Gambart for 1,800 guineas (equivalent to £1.4 million today). It was later sold to the American railroad magnate John Taylor Johnston which is when it made its way across to the United States.

Peter Brown, International Head of the department, commented: "Christie's is honoured to be entrusted with the sale of one of the greatest Pre-Raphaelite masterpieces ever to come to market. Holman Hunt's works are suffused with emotion – this one particularly so as it became for him when he was painting it, a pean of love for his late wife. His pictures are always utterly compelling visual representations of the stories they relate, but very few are not in or bequeathed to public collections. It is, to echo Cosmo Monkhouse, one of the pictures of the century, and it is immensely exciting to see it England after nearly 150 years abroad. It was one of the first Pre-Raphaelite works to enter an American collection."

**PRESS CONTACT:**

Emma Cunningham | 0207 389 3664 | [ecunningham@christies.com](mailto:ecunningham@christies.com)

**The complete e-Catalogue will be available to view online from June 2014 at**  
[www.christies.com/calendar](http://www.christies.com/calendar)

**Christie's**

Christie's, the world's leading art business, had global auction and private sales in 2013 that totalled £4.5 billion/ \$7.1 billion, making it the highest annual total in Christie's history. 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 has since conducted the greatest and most celebrated auctions through the centuries providing a popular showcase for the unique and the beautiful. Christie's offers around 450 auctions 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 \$100 million. Christie's also has a long and successful history conducting private sales for its clients in all categories, with emphasis on Post-War & Contemporary, Impressionist & Modern, Old Masters and Jewellery. Private sales totalled £760.5 million (\$1.19 billion) in 2013, an increase of 20% on the previous year.

Christie's has a global presence with 53 offices in 32 countries and 12 salerooms around the world including in London, New York, Paris, Geneva, Milan, Amsterdam, Dubai, Zürich, Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Mumbai. More recently, Christie's has led the market with expanded initiatives in growth markets such as Russia, China, India and the United Arab Emirates, with successful sales and exhibitions in Beijing, Mumbai and Dubai.

\*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.

*High resolution images and further information available on request*

**FOLLOW CHRISTIE'S ON:**



**WWW.CHRISTIES.COM**

Prices do not include buyers' premium