



When truth is luckier than fiction

A Scottish heirloom turns out to be far more valuable than the family thought



Fig 1: French 14th-century casket with ivory panels. £1,455,000

MOTHER may well know best, but it is not always best to give full credence to family traditions or folk memories. Sometimes, they gain lustre and romance down the generations, but, occasionally, the truth is more impressive than what has been passed down. That was the case for the lucky vendors of what turned out to be the most expensive lot ever sold at a Scottish auction when offered on May 20 at Lyon & Turnbull in Edinburgh.

Auchmedden Castle on the Buchan coast was demolished in the late 18th century after it passed from the Baird family, which had held it since 1535, to the Aberdeen Gordons, although the land was later sold to an apparently unrelated Baird family. The last of the first Bairds, so to speak, William, who was deprived of the estate because he had been 'out' in the '45, was a keen family historian and it may have been he who promoted an erroneous family story that passed down to his

daughters' descendants, together with many Baird possessions. One of the daughters married into the Frasers of Tornaveen and Findrack, another family with Jacobite connections, and was an ancestress of the eccentric and artistic Bedfordshire Fraser clan.

This is a long way of saying that, for many generations at Tornaveen House, there was a French Gothic casket of carved ivory panels, measuring 4½in high by 5in by 10in (Fig 1). It was believed in the family, perhaps on the say-so of William, to have been made by an early-17th-century Thomas Baird (remarkably, one of 32 children), who had become a friar at Besançon in Burgundy.

He may well have acquired it and passed it back to the family, but he certainly did not carve it, although he is said to have been good with his hands, so perhaps it was he who fitted the brass brackets, straps and handle. The panels, however, date from about 1330, and were probably carved in Paris. The side panels illustrate

stories of Tristan and Iseult and the Grail Quest, whereas those forming the lid show wild men storming the Castle of Love, a very 14th-century subject. Only eight comparable complete

caskets are currently known, most in major museums. The bidding opened at £50,000 and, after 10 tense minutes, the price was taken to £1,455,000. The vendors are indeed lucky that ►

Pick of the week

I am grateful to David Waller for telling me about his recent purchase of a silver teapot in a sale held by Trevanion of Whitchurch, Shropshire. It came with a page from COUNTRY LIFE, February 20, 1958, five months after my revered predecessor Frank Davis launched his 'Talking about Salerooms' column.

He wrote: 'There are silver tea-pots and silver tea-pots, and when one of them changes hands for several thousand pounds—as happens not infrequently... half the population is convinced that its own grandmother's tea-pot is worth four figures, and the other half is liable to believe that nothing desirable can be obtained for less than three.' He went on to record that he had recently bought for a friend 'a wholly charming tea-pot with a no less charming stand' marked 1787, for £36—perhaps equivalent to £700 today. It was not a rarity, nor was the smith fashionable (another lot, 50 years older, sold for £600): 'Rarity and age have more to do with cash than aesthetic quality, but it was not 17 times as good.' The £36 cheque made out to Davis was still with the pot when Mr Waller secured it for £1,104.50, which he happily compares with the £6,500 price tag on a 'posh pot' currently with a leading silver dealer.



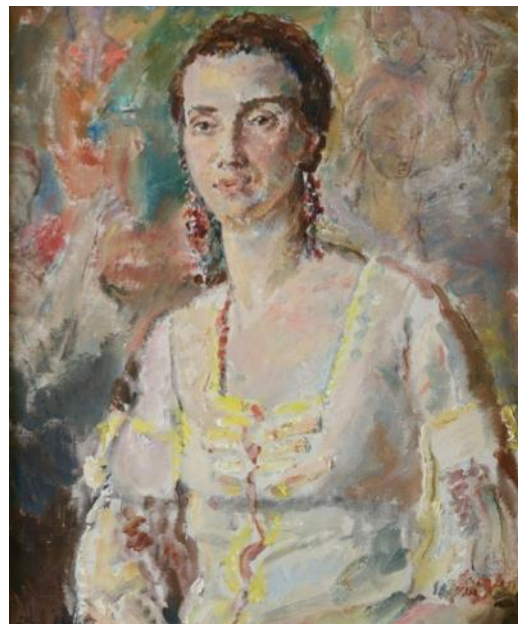


Fig 2 left: Landscape by van Goyen. £62,500. Fig 3 right: Portrait by Dame Ethel Walker. £13,650



Fig 4 above: Worcester service. £37,500. Fig 5 below: Quentin Bell lampshades. £24,700 for 12



no one else guessed the true history before Lyon & Turnbull's researchers got to work.

Two days earlier, the auctioneers had offered more items formerly at Taymouth Castle, until 1922 the seat of the Earls and Marquesses of Breadalbane. The title has been dormant since 1995 and the recent history of the castle has been troubled. The high point was in 1842, when Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort paid their first visit to the Highlands. The 2nd Marquess entertained them, in his words, 'as if a great chieftain in olden feudal times was receiving his sovereign'.

For the occasion, he commissioned a Worcester porcelain breakfast service of more than 280 pieces decorated with heather sprigs and the family coronet (*Fig 4*). It would seem that there were breakages during the festivities: in 1843, 53 replacements were ordered from Worcester. The service sold for £37,500. A 12½in by 17½in landscape with figures working by a tumble-down cottage (*Fig 2*) by Jan Jansz. van Goyen (1596–1656), which once hung in the castle dining room, reached £62,500.

Sally Hunter has had a distinguished career as a gallery owner in St Ives, Cornwall, and then

Motcomb Street in Belgravia, latterly dealing by appointment. Her field is 20th-century and Modern British art and, over the years, she and her late husband, the insurance underwriter Ian Posgate, built up their own collection of work by painters and designers she showed, the latter including Quentin Bell and Enid Marx. Twelve lampshades painted by Bell (*Fig 5*) sold for £24,700.

She was brought up near Woodbridge in Suffolk, so East Anglian landscapes were prominent. However, for 30 years, the couple lived in a Victorian house on the outskirts of Henley-on-Thames in Oxfordshire. The mid-May sale of their collection at Sworders saw numerous auction records

for individual artists, including £13,650 for a 24in by 20in half-length portrait of a lady (*Fig 3*) by Dame Ethel Walker (1861–1951).

The couple shared not only their Modern British enthusiasm, but also a love of Indian art and artefacts, which they bought both when on travels and from the London trade. In the sale were 23 lots of good Anglo-Indian ornithological watercolours, which made a total of £189,410, and a number of late-18th- and early-19th-century similar watercolours by Calcutta 'Company School' artists. An 18½in by 13in pair of the latter showing India Tree Pies (*Fig 6*) sold for £33,800. ↪

Next week Virtually there



Fig 6: 'Company School' watercolours of India Tree Pies. £33,800