

Pictures from the Fraser Album to go on sale in London



PICTURES FROM A TREASURE TROVE OF INDIAN PICTURES COMMISSIONED BY SCOTTISH BROTHERS IN THE 18TH CENTURY FOR SALE AT BONHAMS IN LONDON

Bonhams will sell three stunning images from The Fraser Album, discovered amongst the papers of this Scottish family in 1979, at its next auction of Indian and Islamic art on 8 April 2014 in London.

The Album consists of more than ninety watercolours of breathtaking quality, which provide an extraordinary portrait of life in and around Delhi in the early 19th Century. This was an area which was relatively unknown to the British at that date, with Mughal control ceded to them only in 1803 and the Emperor nominally in power.

James Baillie Fraser (1783-1856) and his brother William (1784-1835) came from Inverness. William went to India aged 16 as a trainee political officer in the East India Company while James arrived a year later, taking a commercial position in Calcutta. James, a talented artist himself, published collections of views of the Himalayas and of Calcutta.



When James joined William in Delhi in 1815 the two brothers commissioned local artists to depict servants, tradesmen and figures from the irregular military units, some of which were employed by the British, including Gurkha soldiers and the colourfully-attired troopers of bodies such as Skinner's Horse.

More than one artist was employed on the paintings which go to make up the album. The best examples are usually attributed to Ghulam Ali Khan, but it is likely that the rest were produced by other members of his family. The works date between 1815 and 1820.

The two lots in the present sale capture the richness of ceremonial life in Delhi, and are also representative of the British fascination with types of transport and servants which appears in other more typical examples of Company School painting

The first image is of an elephant and driver, probably from the Mughal Emperor's stable, with a hunting howdah equipped with a rifle, bows and a pistol, from Delhi or Northern India, 1815-19. Estimate £20,000-30,000

The second Fraser Album image is of the bullock-drawn carriage of Prince Mirza Babur, Delhi or Northern India, 1815-19. Estimate £20,000-30,000.



The inscriptions read: 'The special chariot of the son of the spiritual preceptor of the horizons (Murshidzada-i afaq), Mirza Babur Bahadur'. The honorific title refers to Mirza Babur's father, the Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah II, in his role as a Sufi spiritual leader.

'Zana, bullock-cart driver, Ahir Jadubansi [of the cowherd caste of the Yadava race, descendants of Shri Krishna], inhabitant of Delhi'.

The third image is that of a cotton-carder at work, attributed to the artist Ghulam 'Ali Khan (fl. 1817-55) Delhi, circa 1820. Estimate £20,000-30,000. This detailed and technically accurate painting shows a captured moment from daily life. The action depicted is in fact strictly referred to as 'bowing', running the taut string of the bow across the pile of fibres

to fluff up the cotton.

Another important painting in this Bonhams sale of Indian and Islamic art is from the Impey Album, by the artist Bhawani Das: a Great Indian Fruit Bat, or Flying Fox (*Pteropus giganteus*) Calcutta, circa 1778-82. The Great Indian Fruit Bat, or Flying Fox, has a wingspan of 1.5 metres, well captured in this painting.

This is a pen and ink, watercolour with gum arabic, heightened with bodycolour, on watermarked paper, inscribed at lower left In the Collection of Lady Impey at Calcutta/Painted by [in Persian in nasta'liq script, Bhawani Das] Native of Patna, Estimate £80,000-120,000.

Sir Elijah Impey was the East India Company's Chief Justice of Bengal from 1774 to 1782. He was a well-known patron of Indian artists, but his wife, Mary, Lady Impey, who joined him in Calcutta in 1777, was particularly interested in the flora and fauna of the surrounding area, creating her own menagerie. She then commissioned studies of animals and plants from various artists from the nearby city of Patna, the most senior of whom were the Muslim Shaykh Zayn-al-Din, and the Hindus Ram Das and Bhawani Das, the painter of the present lot. The precision of these artists' technique, which stemmed from the Mughal tradition, appealed to British patrons, and the technique and the subject-matter have become known as 'Company School'. The series commissioned by Lady Impey (as well as others in a similar style by unknown artists) are particularly striking because of their large size, using sheets of English watermarked paper. There were 326 works in the original series, which were brought back to England with the Impeys in 1783, and were sold at Phillips (now Bonhams) in London in 1810.