

Hume's letters sold at auction for the first time

A collection of rare letters written over 250 years ago by the Scottish philosopher David Hume to one of his closest friends has fetched over £100,000 after emerging for the first time at auction.

The six handwritten letters were sent by Edinburgh-born Hume between 1763 and 1770 to his friend William Mure of Caldwell, MP for Renfrewshire, Baron of the Scottish Exchequer and Rector of Glasgow University.

They included updates on the progress of Mure's sons at school in London and Hume's own thoughts on education.

Hume also writes fierce criticism of the boys' tutor, named Graffigni, branding him in one of the letters "an empty, conceited fellow, full of chimeras and pretensions".

The philosopher is known to have criticised Graffigni and his methods so much to his face that the teacher eventually left the school.

The rediscovered cache of letters went under the hammer at Bonhams auctioneers in London, where they were bought by an unknown collector for £102,000.

Matthew Haley, Managing Director of Bonhams Knightsbridge,

said: "Hume took a very keen interest in education and, in particular, the education of his close friend William Mure's sons.

"In these letters Hume reports back about how Mure's sons are doing. He is doing his best to maintain the standards of education and he clearly doesn't approve of the way the boys are being taught.

"He writes a character assassination of the boys' tutor and expresses his own ideas on the teaching of subjects like French and Latin.

"He comes up with ideas like 'the French language is very useful, and if not acquired when young, never is thoroughly learned'."

"We were very excited to handle these letters. We had a lot of interest and we are very pleased with the result, which reflects the letters' rarity and importance."

Hume, originally David Home, was born in 1711 in a tenement on the Lawnmarket in Edinburgh.

He was educated by private tutors until attending Edinburgh University from the age of 11, which nurtured his passion for "the new ideas of science, philosophy and literature".

Hume became one of the most influential thinkers at the heart of the Scottish Enlightenment. He has been described as the "most important philosopher ever to have written in English".

One of Hume's complaints about Graffigni was his method of teaching Latin.

He writes to lawyer and politician Mure: "I find that your sons are not taught any Latin grammar – they are only instructed in the sense of single detached words... I doubt a dead language can ever be learnt in this manner without grammar."

Hume referred to Mure after his death as "irreplaceable... the oldest and best friend I had in the world".

Hume and Mure both died in 1776, and much of their correspondence has been lost.

Dear Baron

I am sorry that I should come
to you, by telling you, that I cannot propose to
Whate. I am engaged in the
human life: For the taking a Wife is the
by being present I have already prevented two
falling into; and I shall be apprehensive of
Distance. I must therefore renounce the
Autumn, which I assure I do with
the young Ladies. Please tell
even before I start, that it is his
never meet with any such Accident as
Edinburgh.

I believe you know, before you left London, that
to Dr Smith of Oxford, desiring him to look out for a young Man
to Graffigni: He sent up one, whom he recommended strongly, and
Man of Sense and Knowledge; but he could not come to any
Graffigni, because he desired six Weeks or two Months Vacation
Degree in the University which Graffigni refused. The young
it would be impossible for Graffigni to find any body fit for
Conditions; I saw no one of whom I should lay a plan to be
life, and give up every other Pretension. However the
Graffigni without either a French or Latin Master;
for some time.

But this is not the worst Circumstance. I believe
D'Alembert disclaimed all sort of Acquaintance with
a Letter from Helvetius doing like his Looks & Behaviour
at Lord Hertford's Desire. I imagine is very useful; and
as he had given a good opinion in them

Dear Baron

As I am not sure where you are nor whether this
I hope to speak to you with reserve, both of
own. Of the latter, I shall only say, that, notwithstanding
I am entirely reconciled to my present Situation, who are the Persons that recommended Graffigni, since it now appears, that
I am to accompany to France. The Prospect of Inconvenience in your boys remaining left that time: For they are really well
the Embassy is rather very distant, nor is it intended in French, and will now go on in Latin. Graffigni's Concepts, tho' they appear to
will certainly, before our Departure, obtain a Settlement in French, and will now go on in Latin. Graffigni's Concepts, tho' they appear to
any Events will improve my Fortunes; and is a great advantage to these two celebrated Philosophers. Lord Hertford intends to inform Lord
ship and regard. I have consulted Elliot, etc. of the Incident.

I wrote Mrs Mure's and ostensible letter, which however a
nothing but Truth: Lord Hertford is not decided, but intends to ask of Lord H.
who are the Persons that recommended Graffigni, since it now appears, that
as he had apprehended: We shall then make further Enquiries
Inconvenience in your boys remaining left that time: For they are really well
thing that concerns Health and Exercise: They seem to be improving in English and
in French, and will now go on in Latin. Graffigni's Concepts, tho' they appear to
can do them no hurt. I fancy it was only Vanity, which engaged her
to these two celebrated Philosophers. Lord Hertford intends to inform Lord
of the Incident.

We are still in Confusion: The Report is, that the Grenvilles, the Rockinghams
and the Bedfords have entered into a sworn Confederacy to adhere to each other,
and that Bute be banished from his Majesty's Person and Council, for ever, and all his
Friends turned out of all Offices, as a Pledge of his Majesty's entire Submission. I
am certain, that my Principal, who has great Credit and Authority with the King, is
the most moderate Man of the whole. From the present Aspect of things (which
is very changeable) he is the most likely Person of the present Ministry to remain
in power, and even to gain Ground.

You may easily conceive my Satisfaction on Hamilton's Victory: This Incident puts
you in entire Security, whatever becomes of the Decision here. But I shall