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.

I believe you know be fore you left London that to Dr Smith of Cafor, dising here to look our for a young Man Dar Barrow to Grafigni : He send up one, whom he recommended trongly, and a I am sorry that I show come man of Sense and Sunwledge; but he can not come to any of Letter, by lelling you that I count proposed to a Graffigni because he down no Weeks or two months Vacation you letter, by lelling you that I count proposed to a Graffigni the University which for this months Vacation you Letter, by letting you, that I cannot for a house, "Degrees in the Uneversity which Gospigni nefus). The young for going them, Winter. I am angage in the Wife is the forst a wood he' impossible for Grafigner to find any body for for Edin burgh letter, by an sagan in the set hulling is the forst of word he impossible for Grafigner to Find any body for for the Edin burg Winter. 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I moment 'newood a helter from Pletectures doing the his Looks of the have conned never meet will very such Recours as the at Low Relfort Desire. 9 iguage is very useful ; and Edinburgh . as he had given a good goven I is the Canqu Dar Baron as I am not our where you are nor whether this as I am not in a when with reserve, we have nothing but Grath : Low the ford an osten ble letter which however a an not in more heith reserver, that, no with rothing but Grath : Low the ford so not decided, but intends to ach of Low I. The part to you half only any that, ideates who are the Porrors that recommended Graffigne, since it now agree a the of the latter, since with to may prevent different forms none of them, as he had apprechas in the since it now agree at they to preak to you will reverse, but of the the preating of the latter, when a great between the form and he had apprechended . We shall them make that a short and of the man apprechended . 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