

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.

