

Indian mother of pearl from Penicuik sold at auction

Rare 17th century Indian mother of pearl vessels found on the Penicuik Estate attract international interest at London auction.

A collection of gleaming vessels made from mother-of-pearl seashells discovered at Penicuik Estate near Edinburgh were the star of Lyon & Turnbull's Islamic & Indian Art auction in London this month and sold for more than £75,000.

Penicuik Estate has been owned by the Clerk family since 1654. Once a hub of the Scottish Enlightenment, today the Estate's Palladian architecture ranks as some of the finest and most original in Scotland.

Merchant John Clerk (1611-1674), who had made his fortune in Paris, purchased the Estate in 1654 with the existing house Newbiggin from the heirs of Margaret Scott, the Countess of Eglinton. In 1647 John Clerk had married Mary Gray, fourth daughter of Sir William Gray of Pittendrum by whom he had five sons and five daughters. He married for a second time in 1670 to Elizabeth Johnston, and upon his death he was succeeded by his eldest son, John Clerk, who became the 1st Baronet in 1679.

Lyon and Turnbull explain that "mother-of-pearl was prized by the Portuguese settlers in Gujarat for its luminous and lustrous qualities, and they consequently commissioned craftsmen to decorate furniture, arms and armour, and whole dinner services with it, amongst other things.

“At first, 19th century art historians believed these types of mother-of-pearl vessels were European due to their shape. However, a recorded example listed in an inventory dated to 1586 in the Dresden Green Vaults, shows that vessels of this style are known to have been brought to Europe as early as the 16th century. They were especially cherished by European nobility who exhibited them in their ‘*kunstkammer*’.

“Similar scallop-edged dishes along with other shaped vessels decorated in mother-of-pearl are to be found in the Victoria & Albert Museum and in The British Museum.”

Around 80% of the auction items sold for a total of £385,000 in London in just 104 lots, confirmed the strength of the Arts of India & the Islamic world.

Kristina Sanne, Head of Sale, said: “The auction was a small select offering, featuring works of art and paintings of high quality that proved to be of great interest to private bidders, museums and institutions from no fewer than 15 countries around the globe.”

