Museum Shows $225 'Bargain'



The New York Times (by Robert Walker)

John G. Phillips, left, the Metropolitan's curator of Western European Arts, and James J. Rorimer, museum director, with the bust the museum bought last Friday for $225.

Metropolitan to Test Bust To Determine Its Sculptor

By GRACE GLUECK

The Metropolitan Museum of Art took a closer look yesterday at the $225 bargain it snapped up at a Parke-Bernet auction last week. It tapped the sculpture with tools and studied it with magnifying lenses. Then it pronounced itself delighted.

The bargain, whose value is put by some experts at around $500,000, is a 26-inch bust of a woman that may have been done by Andrea del Verrocchio or by his pupil, Leonardo da Vinci. It was bought by the Metropolitan on Friday at an auction of art objects owned by Mrs. A. Hamilton Rice of New York.

"When it arrived here this morning, we were overjoyed that it was what it had seemed," James J. Rorimer, director of the Metropolitan, said at a crowded press conference in his office. "It is an original work of art, not a plaster cast. The modeling is very fine, and the solidity of the piece indicates that it may be terra cotta."

Mr. Rorimer refused to put a price on the statue, but said, "I'm convinced that it is of the period, and is of great value."

The bust, which stood on a round oak table in Mr. Rorimer's office, seemed brown and dingy at first glance. But traces of gilt and polychrome paint could be seen, and the face was enlivened by faintly flushed cheeks. "She doesn't need restoring," Mr. Rorimer said. "But she'll look better when we clean off some of that city grime."

'Handsome Florentine Lady'

The half-length statue portrays what Mr. Rorimer described as "a handsome Florentine lady," who holds at her breast a sprig of primroses. She wears light summer apparel, tied at the waist by a multicolored sash. Her hair, parted in the middle, is covered by a cloth.

With the air of a pleased cat that had swallowed a large canary, Mr. Rorimer told of some of the behind the scenes preparation that led to the museum's winning bid at the auction.

"We had known about the statue for many years as part of Mrs. Rice's collection," he said. "About two weeks ago, Mr. Phillips [John G. Phillips, the museum's curator of Western European Arts], saw it on display at Parke-Bernet. He immediately telephoned me, and I rushed over."

Mr. Rorimer said that he was examining the piece with a hand lens, when he noticed a man nearby watching him curiously. "I quickly re-focused the lens on a tapestry behind it," he related. "A couple of people who walked by said, 'Not much of a bust, it is?' I said 'I'm sorry you feel that way.'"

The museum assigned its associate curator of Western European Arts, Carl C. Dauterman, to bid at the afternoon auction. "We didn't try to keep things quiet," Mr. Rorimer said.

The museum will study the bust for some time before it places it on public display.

Mr. Rorimer added:

"We have authenticated it already for its period. We have had it under the microscope and ultra-violet rays. We will probably argue for centuries whether it is by Verrocchio or da Vinci, or from their studio."

Parke-Bernet Disagrees

Parke-Bernet, the auctioneer, apparently does not see eye-to-eye with Mr. Rorimer about the value of the sculpture. Yesterday afternoon, the concern issued a statement reiterating views expressed earlier by Peter Wilson, the gallery's chairman.

"The museum has purchased an interesting work of art," Parke-Bernet said. "Reproductions of the greatest sculptures of the Renaissance were made in quantity, and if this one proves to have come from the workshop of Verocchio, Mr. Rorimer and his curator are to be congratulated on being the only connoisseurs to recognize the fact before the auction."

It is the normal practice of the gallery's auctioneers, if a work is highly valued, to start the bidding on a high level. John Marion, who conducted the Friday sale, opened the bidding at $150.

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