

Unique 300 year old scientific drawings at risk of leaving the UK

- Work contains hand painted early depictions of newly introduced plant specimens from all over the world

An export bar has been placed on a group of 18th century albums containing what experts claim are amongst the finest examples of botanical drawing in existence.

The works, 'The Natural History of Carolina, Florida and the Bahama Islands' and 'A Commonplace Book' are valued at £2,500,000 and were completed in the mid 1700s. They are at risk of being lost abroad unless a UK buyer can be found.

The two volumes of Mark Catesby's 'The Natural History of Carolina, Florida and the Bahama Islands' are a first edition set published in 1731 and 1743 . They were owned by Peter Collinson and contain printed text and hand-coloured etched plates, depicting indigenous plants, birds and animals. Unique to this edition, the high-quality illustrations include an additional frontispiece, illustrations and watercolours by William Bartram and Georg Ehret – the most renowned botanical watercolourist of his time. Catesby presented these volumes to Peter Collinson, a critical figure in British natural history, in gratitude for his support.

Another volume also at risk of export is Peter Collinson's own 'Commonplace Book' which includes 75 original drawings and prints by Catesby, William Bartram, Georg Ehret, and the 'father of British ornithology' George Edwards. The work includes exceptional early depictions of botanical and zoological subjects from across the globe, some of which were in the collection of Sir Hans Sloane and later formed the basis of the collections of the British Museum.

The group of works are of immense significance for the understanding of British culture at the time, including contemporary approaches to the history of science and horticulture, and collecting, illustrating and recording the natural world.

Arts Minister Helen Whately said:

The intricate drawings in this collection offer us a special insight into how new discoveries and images of plants and animals in far off lands were shared before the advent of modern technology.

This collection is a hugely important resource for future generations and I hope that a buyer can be found so these works can be saved for the nation.

The Minister's decision follows the advice of the Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest (RCEWA). The RCEWA made its recommendation on the grounds of the collection's historical importance and outstanding significance for the study of the history of science and the natural world in 18th century Britain.

The Committee noted that the fact that the volumes have remained together since Collinson's ownership of them, says much about their remarkable historical importance and the way in which they document a period of huge expansion in global knowledge and understanding.

Committee Member Peter Barber said:

Peter Collinson was a key member of the circle around Sir Hans Sloane the founder of the British Museum, British Library and Natural History Museum. He was himself a figure of European importance and the patron of Mark Catesby, whose Natural History was the most important work of natural history produced in early eighteenth-century Britain.

This is Collinson's own presentation copy and has additional watercolour drawings by some of the most distinguished botanical artists of the time as well as proof states of some of Catesby's prints. Further watercolours in Collinson's commonplace book complement and enhance the importance of the printed volumes. They constitute the defining icons of the group of people responsible for some of the greatest and most enduring cultural achievements of British civilisation. Among the later enthusiasts for botany and zoology who owned the volumes was Edward Lear's first and most important patron.

The volumes have not previously been easily accessible for research. Retention in this country could lead further light to be shed on relationships within Sir Hans Sloane's circle.

The decision on the export licence application for the albums will be deferred until 16 April 2020. This may be extended until 16 August 2020 if a serious intention to raise funds to purchase it is made at the recommended price of £2,500,000 .

Offers from public bodies for less than the recommended price through the private treaty sale arrangements, where appropriate, may also be considered. Such purchases frequently offer substantial financial benefits to a public institution wishing to acquire.

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Notes to Editors

Mark Catesby (1683 – 1749) was one of the first naturalists to explore south-eastern North America at a time when it was still part of the British colonies. He is acknowledged as a key player in the development of early 18th century plant exchange and was part of an active network of scientists, explorers, gardeners and horticulturalists that included Peter Collinson.

Peter Collinson (1694 – 1768) is another critical figure in British natural history. A patron, gardener and plant collector, Collinson was integral to the international exchange of scientific ideas in the mid-18th century.

1. Organisations or individuals interested in purchasing the albums should contact the RCEWA on 0845 300 6200.
2. Details of the albums are as follows: Two volume set of Mark Catesby's The Natural History of Carolina, Florida and the Bahama Islands by Mark Catesby, London 1731 and 1743. 2 large folios (529 x 363 mm); Good condition.
3. Provenance: Mark Catesby to Peter Collinson (1694-1768) and then by descent to his grandson Charles Streynsham Collinson. Purchased by Alymer Bourke Lambert in 1834 and then by Edward Stanley Smith, 13th Earl of Derby in 1842. Thence by descent to the present owner.
4. The Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest is an independent body, serviced by The Arts Council, which advises the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport on whether a cultural object, intended for export, is of national importance under specified criteria.
5. The Arts Council champions, develops and invests in artistic and cultural experiences that enrich people's lives. It supports a range of activities across the arts, museums and libraries – from theatre to digital art, reading to dance, music to literature, and crafts to collections. <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk>

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