

MACKINNON

FINE FURNITURE



A George II Walnut Armchair

England, *circa* 1750-1760

This superb armchair, with its distinctive leg pattern, relates very closely to a suite of seat furniture supplied to the 2nd Earl Poulett (d. 1764) for Hinton House, Somerset. Several leading London craftsmen were involved in the commission for Hinton, probably working under the direction of the architect Matthew Brettingham. These included Matthias Lock, Giles Grendey and Thomas Chippendale. However, the suite is most commonly associated with the work of William Vile (d.1767) and John Cobb (d.1778), later Royal cabinet-makers to George III, who formed a powerful syndicate with William Hallett (d.1781) in St. Martin's Lane from 1753.

Both Vile and Hallett were born in Somerset and, through family connections there, may well have been introduced to Earl Poulett and become involved with the refurbishment of Hinton.

An armchair of identical pattern and presumably the pair to the present lot was with Frank Partridge & Son, illustrated in *Connoisseur*, June 1949.

The Royal cabinetmakers Vile and Cobb and their precise links with William Hallett have been the subject of much speculation and research but the documentary evidence is fragmentary at best. A letter from William Vile to George Selwyn, dated the 10th of August 1749, refers to Hallett as Vile's "master" but positive proof of an apprenticeship has not been found as of yet. What is beyond any doubt is that when Vile and John Cobb began their partnership, they turned in some way to Hallett for financial backing. Due to the survival of Vile's bank account, held in the archives of the Royal Bank of Scotland as his firm banked with Drummonds, it is possible to trace payments between the two men and these are large and numerous. According to the British and Irish Furniture Makers Online project, from 1756 Vile and Cobb were paying around £150-£300 to Hallett on a near monthly basis. By this stage Hallett had officially retired from business a very wealthy man and one of the small group of cabinetmakers to have advanced his social situation as a result of success in the trade. He was able to "become a gentleman" and purchased the extensive Cannons estate-including the shell of the marvellous house-first built for the Duke of Chandos between 1713 and 1724. Hallett was also wealthy and successful enough to be painted by Thomas Gainsborough and Francis Hayman.

It is perhaps unsurprising given the close links between the two firms that furniture produced by the various members of the St Martins Lane Syndicate is difficult to attribute precisely. Quite when Hallett ceased his involvement as an active designer and craftsman and Vile and Cobb took over remains unknown. What is clear is that the work created by these different iterations of a firm that probably continued to use many of the same master carvers and polishers etc. is all defined by a meticulous eye for detail, the most refined use of carving and the employment of only the finest timbers. Although the fellow St Martins Lane workshop of Thomas Chippendale may have the greater name recognition amongst the general public, Hallett, Vile and Cobb produced furniture of identical quality and, unlike Chippendale, were involved in countless Royal commissions.

Amongst the great commissions carried out by the Syndicate are the celebrated seat furniture for St Giles House in Dorset-the Gainsborough armchairs with carved detail of exquisite quality, work at Rousham, Holkham and Badminton carried out by Hallett and, in addition to the work for the Royal family, Vile and Cobb worked at Croome Court, Boynton Hall, Uppark, Corsham Court, Audley End and Petworth to name but a few of the most famous houses at which they worked.

After the retirement of Hallett and the death of Vile, John Cobb continued to run the workshop and introduced several styles of furniture which are still closely connected with his name today. "French Hepplewhite" furniture with delicate inlay-such as particularly well-observed curvaceous writing tables (there is a fine example at Spencer House in London) was one of the trademarks of the firm during this period as was seat furniture with a over all gadrooned pattern that is now accepted as having been first designed by Cobb at this time.

The workshops in St Martins Lane produced every sort of fashionable furniture from c.1740-1775 and the quality of their productions was almost universally high. Pieces attributed to the firm are as desirable now as they were when they were first made and are sought out by major collectors worldwide.

Possibly by the St. Martin's Lane Syndicate

An extremely fine George II walnut library armchair of very generous proportions, with a serpentine shaped upholstered back, the arm-rests and straight-fronted similarly upholstered, all in a brass-nailed damask, the walnut arm-supports slightly channelled, with superb acanthus carved cabriole legs with scrolled feet to the front, with leather castors, the back legs outswept.

The walnut with particularly fine colour and patina throughout.

Height: 3' 4¹/₂" in (102 cm)

Width: 2' 7¹/₂" in (79 cm)

Depth: 2' 7¹/₂" in (79 cm)

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