

MACKINNON FINE FURNITURE



THE DUKE OF NORFOLK'S CARLTON HOUSE DESK

England, *circa* 1790 - 1800

In the newspaper review of the sale of the furnishings of Norfolk House in 1938, the author writes: 'There was exceptionally keen bidding for an old English mahogany Carlton House writing table, which after a modest opening bid finally fell at 260 guineas (purchased by H. M. Lee).'

As hereditary Earls Marshal of England, in the 18th century, the Norfolk family was close to the Royal family despite being the premier Catholic family of England and therefore excluded by law from any political office. The 9th Duke was a particular friend of George II's son and heir, Frederic, Prince of Wales. Their principal seats being Arundel Castle in Sussex and until its demolition in 1938, Norfolk House in St. James's Square in London.

Norfolk House was rebuilt for Edward, 9th Duke of Norfolk, between 1748 and 1756 when the interior decoration was finally completed with a grand reception being held. Horace Walpole commented: 'All the earth was there....you never saw such a scene of magnificence and taste'. It was designed by the architect Matthew Brettingham on a site in St. James's, London. The exterior of the house was a simple Palladian design, but the interior was remarkable for containing the first extensive display of fashionable French inspired rococo decoration. Arthur Oswald, writing in *Country Life* in 1937, described the interior as 'one of considerable grandeur, with a suite of rooms decorated with a lavishness that suggests comparisons with the departed glories of Chesterfield House'. The celebrated painted and gilded Music Room, with its carved monkey adornments, has been reassembled in the Victoria & Albert Museum in London. Our desk formed part of the furnishings of the State Dressing Room. The room adjoined the State bedroom and the ballroom and was described by Oswald as being 'hung with gold damask, with a coved ceiling enriched with gilt rococo ornament'.

The contents of Norfolk House were sold at Christie's in February 1938, and the building was

subsequently demolished. This desk was lot 162 on that day.

This desk relates closely to a desk, or writing table as it was called then, which originally stood in George IV's bedroom at Carlton House, and which is now in the Royal collections at Buckingham Palace. This type of furniture, now known as a 'Carlton House Writing Table' typically has a curved back, three drawers in the frame and at least six drawers in the superstructure. Carlton House was the Pall Mall residence of George IV. In 1827, it was pulled down during the rebuilding of Buckingham House, later renamed Buckingham Palace - the columns from the portico now form part of the front of the National Gallery in London. Although there is little direct evidence that these desks had an inherent connection with the interior of Carlton House, their name seems to have been recognised as such from the latter part of the 18th century; the words 'Carlton House Table' are written on drawings for such desks in the cost books of the firm of Gillows of London and Lancaster in 1796, and 1798.

Gillow's Carlton House Tables

Although little documentation survives, an attribution to Gillows of London and Lancaster for our desk is highly likely. As mentioned above, sketches for Carlton House Tables are included in the Gillows' cost books. The Howards, the Dukes of Norfolk, being the premier Catholic family of England could well have commissioned Gillows, another Catholic family that worked for almost exclusively for the Catholic nobility and gentry of England.

The first writing desk or table which later became known as the Carlton House table was probably the satinwood example by the royal cabinet-maker John Kerr, of Pall Mall, supplied in February 1790 for the Prince Regent's London residence, Carlton House. However, the same basic design by Hepplewhite was published in *The Cabinet-Maker's London Book of Prices* and Thomas Sheraton's *The Cabinet-Maker's and Upholsterer's Drawing Book*. Nevertheless it was Gillow who first used the term '*Carlton House Table*' in June 1796, when the Lancaster branch made one for sale in London. Four further Carlton House tables were ordered between 1796 and 1797. The 1796 design was the first of three 18th century Carlton House Table drawings to appear in the Gillow archives, and others updating the design appeared in the 19th century. In June 1798 a second drawing was made, it was similar to the 1796 version except for the handle design and two additional drawers each side of the central drawer. The Coloured Sketch Book contains a third drawing based in the 1798 sketch which is annotated in pencil 'Carlton Table made for Carlton House for Prince Consort'. Gillows' version of the Carlton House table differs from Hepplewhite's design in the drawer arrangements on the desk top. Gillows' are in two steps, whereas both Hepplewhite and Sheraton arranged the side drawers in a single step.

The Duke of Norfolk's Carlton House Desk

A magnificent and historically important late 18th century George III period mahogany Carlton House Writing Table from the collections of the Dukes of Norfolk, Norfolk House. Of impressive bold scale and exceptional quality throughout. The upper tiered curved section with a pierced brass gallery above a collection of brass handled drawers, false drawers, curved doors and a secret compartment. With a leather lined writing surface which includes a ratcheted reading slide, and one long and two short

drawers in the frieze, all standing on square tapering legs ending in brass box castors. The whole veneered in the finest mahogany, the drawers with ebonised stringing. The reverse with magnificent panels of fielded mahogany.

Literature:

Partridge London, *Annual Catalogue*, 1992, pp.34-35

Listed in the auction catalogue of Norfolk House in the State Dressing Room, 7 February 1938, p. 38, lot 162

Country Life, Norfolk House, St James's Square - The Town House of the Duke of Norfolk, 25th December 1937, pp. 654 - 660

Susan E. Stuart, *Gillows of Lancaster & London 1730 - 1840*, vol.I, pp. 286 - 287

Height: 3' 6¹/₄" in (107 cm)

Width: 5' 3" in (160 cm)

Depth: 2' 8⁵/₈" in (83 cm)

Stock Number

V03.39

5 Ryder Street - St James's - London, SW1Y 6PY

Phone: +44(0)20 7839 5671 Mobile: +44(0)7725 332 665

Email: charlie@mackinnonfineart.com Web: mackinnonfineart.com

