

Bonhams, New York City

Columbus Letter Sells for \$751,500

by Jeanne Schinto
Photos courtesy Bonhams

A copy of the so-called Columbus Letter was sold by Bonhams to the William Reese Company, New Haven, Connecticut, for \$751,500 (including buyer's premium) on September 26. Estimated at \$700,000/1 million, the Italian explorer's account of his first voyage to the Americas was the top lot of the auction house's fine books and manuscripts sale in New York City.

Many editions of the letter—Columbus's report to his Spanish sponsors, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella—were published. There were 11 editions in 1493 alone. Six more were published between 1494 and 1497. Through this best-seller of its day, Europeans first learned about the remarkable journey that Columbus had made.

"All these islands are very beautiful," he wrote, "and distinguished by a diversity of scenery; they are filled with a great variety of trees of immense height, and which I believe to retain their foliage in all seasons; for when I saw them they were as verdant and luxuriant as they usually are in Spain in the month of May." As celebrators of Columbus Day should know, he landed in October.

The first edition, published in Barcelona, was in Spanish. Subsequent editions were translations. This edition, in Latin, was the second published in Basel. Swiss printer Johann Bergmann von Olpe (also known as Johann Bergmann de Olpe) issued it on April 21, 1494. Illustrated with six woodcuts, it is eight pages, four double-sided leaves.

According to American Book Prices Current, only four copies of the second Basel edition have sold at auction in the past 80 years. Copies of the only other obtainable edition, a 1493 Rome edition, have been at auction only three times in the same period. (This report will have more to say later about a certain auctioned Rome edition.) All editions are extremely rare, and no more than a total of 80 extant copies are recorded. Some of the editions survive in a single copy.

The sole surviving copy of the original 1493 Barcelona edition is in the New York Public Library. So is the only known complete copy of the 1493 Basel edition, the first with illustrations, published by Jakob Wolff.

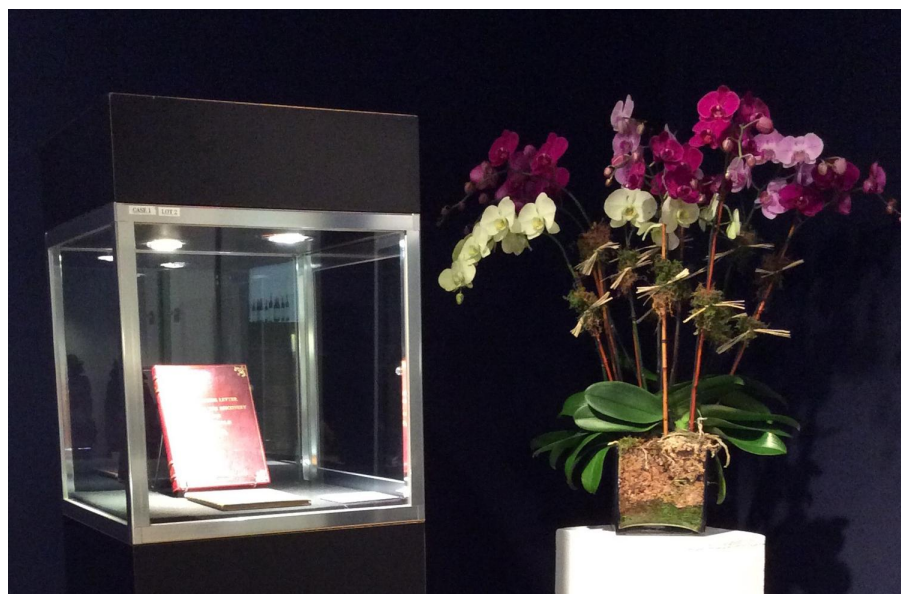
There are no known manuscripts of this letter. Those pages were most likely destroyed. For the first half-century after Gutenberg issued his Bible in 1455 and the new medium of printing began to revolutionize the world, manuscripts were routinely discarded when a work reached printed form.

The particular Columbus Letter sold at Bonhams has more than rarity going for it. What gives this copy some "added cachet" is its "deep, provable, American provenance," William Reese said in an e-mail. Distinguished book and art collector William Menzies of New York was its owner until 1876, when he sold it at auction as part of what the *New York Times* called at the time "one of the most remarkable collections ever offered for sale in this country." Bonhams' fine books and manuscripts department director Ian

Its notable provenance is a reassuring aspect, considering recently discovered thefts and forgeries.

Ehling pointed out to previewers that the lot number 442, given to it by the New York auction house Leavitt & Company, was visible in faint pencil on the book's inside front cover.

Its second verified American owner was Joseph William Drexel (1833-1888), a Philadelphia banker and philanthropist, who bequeathed most of his book collection to the Lenox Library (now part of the New York Public Library). After his death, the letter went to Drexel's wife, Lucy Wharton Drexel (1841-1912). A collector



The Columbus Letter on display at the Bonhams preview. It is in a 19th-century binding. Schinto photo.

in her own right, she had her bookplate put into it. One of the Drexels' children was Katharine Drexel (1866-1918), who married Charles Bingham Penrose (1862-1925), a pioneering gynecologist. They had two children, one of whom was the letter's next owner, Boies Penrose II (1902-1976). To this gift from his grandmother, Penrose added one of his own armorial bookplates, then pasted another on top of it, showing an image of Old East India House, the London headquarters of the East India Company.

An Anglophile, author, traveler, and collector of books, manuscripts, maps, art, and English furniture, Penrose was president of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP) and a board member of the Philadelphia Zoological Society, the Athenaeum of Philadelphia, and the Library Company of Philadelphia. He was also founder of the HSP's Boies Penrose Fund for the collecting of photographs of old Philadelphia. He should not be confused with the first Boies Penrose, even though his top bookplate leaves

off the "II." His maternal uncle, U.S. Senator Boies Penrose I (1860-1921), a Republican representing Pennsylvania, was a notorious politico. A previewer at Bonhams, noting the bookplate, was heard to sniff, incorrectly referencing the wrong man.

Even some of those who didn't confuse the two men found their familial association too close for comfort. Because of his uncle, Boies Penrose II was perpetually denied acceptance into the Walpole Society, the exclusive club for Americana collectors. (For more information, see my series of articles, "Good Fellows: The Walpole Society," Parts I-V, *M.A.D.*, November 2015-March 2016.) As Walpolean Henry Wood Erving wrote to a fellow member in 1940 when Penrose's name came up yet again for consideration: "Of course, I don't know [him] but he is the son, or nephew, or godson of a disreputable political boss. I want nothing to do with the name...."¹

The Columbus Letter was not among



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The 1494 second Basel edition of the Columbus Letter sold on the phone to William Reese for \$751,500. It is illustrated with six woodcuts attributed to a Swiss artist. They include three depictions of the New World, one of which is shown here. The same woodcuts illustrated the 1493 first Basel edition.



One of the woodcuts is a kind of fanciful New World map, giving place names to the islands, Fernanda, Hyspana, Isabella, Saluatorie, and Conceptionis Marie.



Two of Boies Penrose's bookplates were pasted into the book, one atop the other. The author of several books of his own, Penrose wrote a volume relevant to the Columbus Letter, *Travel and Discovery in the Renaissance, 1420-1620*, published in 1952 by Harvard University Press.

the items offered when half of Penrose's library was auctioned at Sotheby Parke Bernet in 1971. When he died five years later, his survivors included a daughter, a son, and grandchildren. It could be that the letter continued to descend in the family, but the name of the consignor to the Bonhams sale was not made public. Reese said he has a hunch about that person's identity. In due time, it's a good bet that he will discover it, if he hasn't already. In any case, he has now added his own estimable name to the roster. Then within a matter of days, there was one more addition. The auction was on a Thursday; by that Sunday, Reese said, he had sold the letter to a private collector.

The document's American provenance represents more than mere cachet. It supplies a needed reassurance. That's because, in the last few years, two other Columbus Letters have been discovered to have been stolen from Italian libraries, then replaced with forgeries. Each was a 1493 Rome edition and each found its way to the marketplace. One of them was the property of the Biblioteca Riccardiana in Florence. It was bought by a collector in Switzerland in 1990 and sold to an anonymous buyer for \$330,000 at Christie's in New York City in 1992, on the occasion of the 500th anniversary

of Columbus's first voyage. After the forgery was recognized in 2010, Italian authorities began an investigation. They were later aided by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Their inquiries led them to the U.S. Library of Congress, to which the letter had been bequeathed by an estate whose identity has not been revealed. The letter has since been returned to Florence.

The second stolen Columbus Letter was from the Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana, i.e., the library of the Holy See in Vatican City. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, whose reporter Joe Palazzolo broke the story on August 24, 2017, this past spring Homeland Security, acting on a tip, traced the purloined document to the household of Robert David Parsons of Atlanta, Georgia. New York City dealer Richard Lan of Martayan Lan had sold Parsons the letter in 2004 for \$875,000. Parsons, a retired actuary, died in 2014. His widow has returned the letter to the Vatican. According to press reports, Lan would not say where he got it. Nicholas Schmidle, however, in a lengthy article about a whole forest of forged and stolen documents that he published in *The New Yorker* on December 16, 2013, writes that in approximately 2004 Lan paid an Italian, Marino Massimo De Caro, the sum of

\$580,000 for a 1493 Columbus Letter.²

De Caro has since been convicted of a range of crimes, including the theft of some 1500 volumes from Biblioteca dei Girolamini, a library founded in the 16th century in Naples. For unseemly, political reasons, the library had made him its director. With accomplices he packed the books into suitcases, loaded them into vans, and drove them away at night. Some were fenced through major Italian rare-book dealers. Others were headed for a Munich auction house until the investigation that led to De Caro's arrest put a stop to it.

To put it mildly, the revelations about De Caro, along with news of crimes committed by his associates and others in

Italy, Germany, Argentina, and elsewhere, have deeply troubled the entire antiquarian book trade and its clients over the last few years. In light of these developments, a Columbus Letter that's irreproachably "right" is an indisputable prize.

For more information, contact the auction house via its website (www.bonhams.com) or phone (212) 644-9001.

1. Records, Walpole Society (U.S.), Call No.: Col. 386, Winterthur Library, box 10, folder 11, Henry Wood Erving to Chauncey Cushing Nash, July 2, 1940.
2. Schmidle's article, "A Very Rare Book," is available online (www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/12/16/a-very-rare-book).

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