LOT 71
JEAN-LOUIS-ERNEST MEISSONIER
FRENCH
1815 - 1891
SUR L'ESCALIER (THE VENETIANS)
signed with the artist's monogrammed signature EMeissonier and dated 1879 (lower left)
oil on canvas
16 3/4 by 12 1/4 in.
42.5 by 31.1 cm

ESTIMATE 30,000-40,000 USD
Lot Sold: 62,500 USD

We would like to thank Prof. Constance Hungerford for kindly confirming the authenticity of this lot and for providing additional catalogue information.
PROVENANCE
Goupil & Co., New York
John Jacob Astor III (1822-1890), New York (possibly acquired from the above before 1882)
William Waldorf Astor (1848-1919), New York (by descent from the above, his father, in 1890)
The Astor Library (later the New York Public Library), New York (from donation by the above in 1891 and sold, Parke-Bernet Galleries, New York, April 14-16, 1943, lot 191)
Private Collector (acquired at the above sale and then by descent through the family)
Acquired from the above by the present owner

EXHIBITED
Paris, Exposition Universelle, 1878, no. 621

LITERATURE
Oeuvres completes de E. Meissonier, Paris, 1881, n.p., illustrated (as Dame et Gentilhomme)
"Mrs. MacKay's Portrait: The Famous Painting by Meissonier Which Was Suppressed and Caused a Social Scandal [And] Other Masterpieces of the Dead Artist," The Illustrated American, vol. 6, no. 53, 1891, p. 7
"Paintings Given to the Astor Library," The Critic, vol. 15, no. 371, 1891, p. 77
John Denison Champlin, Cyclopedia of Painters and Paintings, New York, 1900, vol. 3, p. 236
Constance Cain Hungerford, Ernest Meissonier, Master in his Genre, Cambridge, 1999, p. 228, 263

CATALOGUE NOTE
Throughout the late nineteenth century, Meissonier's work was popular with affluent American collectors, including members of the Rockefeller, Vanderbilt, Huntington, Gould, Stanford, and Walters families. Sur l'escalier entered the collection of John Jacob Astor III and captured the attention of Edward Strahan, who described it in his Art Treasures of America as "a painting containing a female figure, a rarissimus [rare] circumstance with him. It represents a picturesque chateau staircase of the sixteenth century on which to group the personages.... Over the carved wooden baluster, a beautiful chatelaine and a gallant, in costumes of Henri II, look down as if into a court below, where a guest may be arriving” (1977 facsimile edition, p. 13). Though the present work is set in the sixteenth century, the grand entrance hall depicted is that of the artist's Paris townhouse on the Boulevard Malesherbes (Gréard, p. 374). The sumptuous surroundings of finely carved, richly stained wood are matched by the figures' dress -- each red velvet pleat, stiff white ruffled collar and embroidered silk painstakingly described. The careful placement of hands resting against the balustrade, a face lost in shadow, and a lifted foot all emphasize the figures' expectant mood as they await...
the arrival of perhaps a royal guest, as suggested by the amorial tapestries and pennant held by the lady.

Sur l'escalier was exhibited at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1878, and it is likely that Meissonier worked on it a bit further, later adding the date "1879" when it was ready to be sold. A watercolor version of the present work was executed in 1875 and in 1888, an oil composition in which the two figures are placed together at the top of the staircase. Further variations on the theme suggest the subject held a particular interest to Meissonier and his patrons. After passing to Astor's son, William Waldorf Astor, the work was given to the Astor Library, which would become incorporated into the present-day New York Public Library. After its auction in 1943 and until today, Sur l'escalier had been lost; its reemergence after nearly seventy years provides the opportunity to rediscover a work Strahan considered "interesting among the works of the magician who executed it" (Strahan, p. 13).