LOT 37
THE PROPERTY OF A PRIVATE COLLECTOR
GIOVANNI BATTISTA TIEPOLO
VENICE 1696 - 1770 MADRID
PORTRAIT OF A LADY AS FLORA
oil on canvas, unlined
88.3 x 69.9 cm.; 34 3/4 x 27 1/2 in.

ESTIMATION 2,000,000-3,000,000 GBP
Lot vendu: 2,408,750 GBP

PROVENANCE
Possibly among the series of pictures commissioned by Empress Elizabeth of Russia (1709–1762) from Giambattista Tiepolo, by 1760;
In the collection of a French noble family from at least the 19th century;
NOTE DE CATALOGUE

This is one of only a very small number of paintings of beautiful women in fancy dress by Tiepolo to have survived. Though they occupy only a tiny part of his output, these depictions of idealised feminine beauty remain among the most famous and easily recognised of all Tiepolo’s works. Painted during the artist’s last years in Venice in the late 1750s, this canvas was very probably among a series of ‘half-length figures of women done a capriccio’ recorded in a letter of 1760 as painted for the Empress Elizabeth of Russia. Completely unknown and unrecorded before its reappearance in 2008, the present canvas is without doubt the most beautiful and important Tiepolo discovery of recent years. The remarkable pristine condition of this canvas, unlined and with all of its original brushwork and impasto intact, is here revealed for the first time following its recent restoration.

In terms of quality, the Flora may be ranked at once alongside two of Tiepolo’s most celebrated works: the Woman with a parrot, today in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford (fig. 1) and the Young Woman with a mandolin in the Detroit Institute of Art (fig. 2). A third but untraced painting depicting A Woman with furs (An Allegory of Winter), which seems to use the same model as the present canvas, is known to us through a copy in pastels by the artist’s son Lorenzo Tiepolo. This forms a pair with a copy of the Ashmolean Woman with a parrot, and both are now in the El Paso Museum of Art (figs 3 and 4). The present Flora would clearly seem to be closely related to the Oxford and Detroit canvases; the paintings all share the same half-length format and idealised female subjects, if not actually the same model, and the group as a whole are immediately distinguished by the beauty of their subjects as well as their vibrant colour and expressive brushwork. By common critical consent both the Oxford and Detroit paintings are thought to date to the second half of the 1750s, and were most likely painted in Venice before Tiepolo’s departure for Spain in 1762. The present canvas would also seem to belong to these years. This was an important point in terms of Tiepolo’s development as a painter, following on from his years in Wurzburg.

Viewed together, this small group of paintings would suggest that they and the Flora were originally conceived as part of a series by Tiepolo in half-length format, and in fact all three may well relate to a particularly important commission recorded in Tiepolo’s last Venetian period. Although their precise dates have not been established, critical opinion has been unanimous in associating the Oxford and Detroit paintings with a letter from Francesco Maria Tassi to the Count Carara of Bergamo, dated 15 December 1760, in which he describes just such a set on which Tiepolo was working and which were apparently destined for the Empress Elizabeth of Russia:

‘[Tiepolo] ora sta faccendo alcune mezze figure di donne a capriccio per l’Imperatrice de Moscovia, che non si possono vedere cose più belle, più vive e più fine’ (‘Tiepolo is now working on some half-length female figures a capriccio for the Empress of Russia; one cannot imagine anything more beautiful, more vivacious or more refined’).

Although no further documentation about these pictures survives, scholarly consensus has always agreed that the Detroit and Oxford paintings are the most likely candidates for these pictures, and to them the Flora can now surely be added. Tiepolo’s activity for the court of the Russian Empress Elizabeth (1709–1762) is further documented by the survival of three etchings after lost ceiling paintings, which Giandomenico described in his catalogue of prints after his father’s work as ‘in Petroburgh’, suggesting that they may have already been delivered to Russia. Their subsequent whereabouts are, however, unrecorded. Certainly such a set of beautiful half-length female figures depicting The Seasons or The Senses might well have appealed to the Empress’s taste, for she had similarly commissioned a programme of no less than 368 ‘beauties’ for her cabinet of ‘The Muses and Graces’ at the Grand Palace in Peterhof from the resident Imperial Court painter

By whom sold (‘The Property of a French Noble Family’), London, Christies, 2 December 2008, lot 40;
Where acquired by the present owner.
Pietro Rotari (1707–1762), which remain in situ. Such a set was perfectly in keeping with contemporary courtly taste, and the Empress may perhaps have been aware of a similar set of works by Rosalba Carriera assembled by Augustus III in Saxony. Why the ‘mezze donne a capriccio’ never arrived in St. Petersburg, or conversely what happened to them if they did, has never been resolved. The earliest history of the present canvas, completely unknown until its recent rediscovery, offers no clue. Nor do the respective histories of the Detroit and Oxford canvases in the Talleyrand and Brocklebank collections. It is perhaps worth noting that a copy of the Detroit Woman with a mandolin was owned by the dealer Godefroy Brauer (1857–1923), who had acquired another work by Tiepolo in Russia, a Bust of a man holding a cask today in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lyon, which might suggest that at least the Detroit painting did arrive there.5

Quite what format the group of ‘mezze figure di donne’ originally comprised is similarly unclear. The intended series may have represented the Seasons, the Senses, imaginary or idealised portraits of Venetian courtesans, or simply a programme containing allusions to Love. The existence of Lorenzo Tiepolo’s copies of identical dimensions after the lost Woman with furs and the Oxford Woman with a parrot allow us to infer that these two works were probably conceived as pendants. Although it has been suggested that Flora and the Detroit Woman with a mandolin could be pendants, the slightly differing dimensions and the fact that the models both lean to the left would, however, seem to suggest that they were not originally a pair. The difference in facture between the Oxford and the Detroit canvases also suggests that they were conceived independently. Against this, it is worth noting that the model in the lost Woman in Furs or Allegory of Winter is unmistakably the same as that in Flora. This in turn raises the question as to whether the present painting should perhaps be more correctly considered as an Allegory of Spring. No further pastels by Lorenzo exist which could indicate that they formed part of a larger set, such as the Four Seasons, rather than a pair. As Tassi pointed out in his letter in 1760 these beautiful women were painted a capriccio or as fanciful interpretations rather than conventional likenesses. Tiepolo was not known as a portraitist in his own lifetime, and only a handful of independent likenesses (mostly posthumous) by his hand are known.6 Instead, the Flora, like her companions, reflects a well-established tradition in Venice for depicting beautiful women, which had its roots back in the sixteenth century and the work of painters such as Titian and Veronese. For Tiepolo himself, this painting undoubtedly asserted an idea of ideal feminine beauty both within the context of the Venetian tradition and that exemplified by the contemporary half-length representations of such subjects by Rosalba Carriera (1673–1757), whose pastels were collected throughout Europe. Three of the women are expensively coiffed and have one breast uncovered, seemingly referring to another Venetian cinquecento tradition – that of depicting feminine beauty in the guise of a comely courtesan. The women in all the pictures wear yellow, emblematic of the courtesan. Similarly, while the parrot in the Oxford picture was a well-known symbol of luxury, the mandolin in the Detroit canvas was also an instrument whose notes were widely interpreted as messengers of love. Here Flora may at first seem a chaster subject, but the ancient goddess of flowers was frequently associated with Venus, the goddess of love, and her own festival, the Floralia was celebrated with great licentiousness. Flora, however, appears without any jewels typical of the courtesan. Her attributes of flowers are beautifully and elegantly painted in the most refined way. Her hair is adorned with roses with delicate tendrils of leaves descending either side of her face like natural jewellery. With her left arm she gathers in her drapery further roses and other flowers, acting as combined symbols of her natural beauty and fertility. It is this context of ideal beauty and within it the possibilities that the subject afforded his mastery of colour and extraordinarily expressive brushwork that represent Tiepolo’s true interests.

Although none of Tiepolo’s ‘fancy’ figures of this period were intended as portraits, this has not prevented lengthy scholarly debate as to the possible identity of the models he employed. There is no doubt that through them Tiepolo evolved a type of idealised feminine beauty that is highly distinctive and immediately recognisable as his and his alone. Though by no means Tiepolo’s only model, the frequency with which this particular ‘type’ – beautiful, elegant and somewhat haughty in demeanour – has appeared in his work makes
her perhaps the most distinctive. For the nineteenth-century art historian Giovanni Marino Urbani de Gheltof, she reflected the legend of the mysterious and beautiful ‘Cristina’, the daughter of a gondolier, who Tiepolo was said to have regarded as both model and muse, and who accompanied him to Spain in 1762. In truth, as later critics such as Mercedes Percerutti-Garberi have concluded, this ideal ‘Cristina’ was just as, if not more, likely a member of the artist’s own family. As Percerutti-Garberi was first to observe, the distinctive features of this ‘Cristina’ resemble those of Giambattista’s youngest daughter Orsetta Tiepolo, visible in a group portrait of the Tiepolo family painted by Giandomenico Tiepolo formerly in the British Rail Pension Fund and sold in these rooms, 8 July 2015, lot 22 (fig. 5). The similar physiognomies of Orsetta and her mother Cecilia, also shown in the same portrait group, led her to suggest that it was in fact their shared features that became Tiepolo’s ideal of feminine beauty. As the Tiepolo family worked closely together it is quite possible that Cecilia may have been Giambattista’s model when she was younger and that by the time this Flora was painted, Orsetta had taken over this role. Certainly, this idealised female type seems to recur in a number of his works in many different sizes and media across a period of several years. At this date in the 1750s, for example, she appears in Tiepolo’s frescoes and canvases painted for the Residenz in Wurzburg between 1751–53, the frescoes painted for the Church of the Pietà in Venice from 1754–55, and those for the Villa Valmarana ‘Ai Nani’ near Vicenza in 1757. For Antonio Morassi, the model was rather less specific, and would ultimately become ‘idealised and almost stylised into a type’. Writing later, Michael Levey agreed that ‘It is not hard to recognise in the girls, in Angela perhaps especially, the models, or at least the types, which had served for several of Tiepolo’s women, and not solely for the ‘fancy pictures’ destined for Russia.’

2. Oil on canvas 92.1 x 74.9 cm.; Pedrocco 2002, p. 304, no. 273.
3. Pastel on canvas, 72 x 53.5 cm.; inv. nos K150 and K151. Gift of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation. F. Rusk Shapley, Complete Catalogue of the Samuel H. Kress Collection. Italian Paintings XVI-XVIII Century, London 1973, pp. 155–56, reproduced figs 296 and 297. Although their provenances differ, as they share the same dimensions scholars consider them a pair. To these has also been added a Young lady with a tricorn hat in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, but this is in a different bust-length format and style and rather different.
5. The copy was donated to the Louvre in 1921.

Fig. 1

Giambattista Tiepolo, Portrait of a young lady with a mandolin, The Detroit Institute of Arts, Gift of Anne and Henry Ford © Bridgeman Images
Fig. 2

Giambattista Tiepolo, A young lady with a parrot, Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford © Bridgeman Images

Fig. 3

Lorenzo Tiepolo, after Giambattista Tiepolo, A young woman with a macaw, El Paso Museum of Art, Gift of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation

Fig. 4


Fig. 5

Lorenzo Tiepolo, after Giambattista Tiepolo, Allegory of Winter, El Paso Museum of Art, Gift of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation