LOT 53
PROPERTY FROM A EUROPEAN PRIVATE COLLECTION
JAN SANDERS VAN HEMESSEN
HEMESSEN CIRCA 1504 - 1556 ANTWERP
VIRGIN AND CHILD BENEATH A VINE
oil on oak panel
86.5 by 68.3 cm.; 34 by 26 7/8 in.

ESTIMATE 800,000-1,200,000 GBP
Lot Sold: 782,500 GBP

PROVENANCE
With Kunsthandel Werner, Leipzig, by 1920 (here and in all the below as Jan van Hemessen);
Sale, Cologne, Lempertz, 8 December 1952, lot 1191;
Sale, Cologne, Lempertz, 17 May 1962, lot 91;
LITERATURE
M. J. Friedländer, Early Netherlandish Painting, vol. XII, no. 202 (as Jan van Hemessen);
P. Wescher, ‘Einige neue Bilder zum Werk Jan van Hemessens’, in Belvedere, 8, 1929, p. 39–41, i.h.b. p. 39, 40, reproduced p. 38 (as Jan van Hemessen);
D. Schubert, Die Gemälde des Braunschweiger Monogrammisten, Keulen 1970, p. 141–44, 177, no. 3, fig. 12 (as The Brunswick Monogrammist, circa 1525–1530);
P. Wescher, 'Jan van Hemessens und Jan van Amstel', in Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen, vol. 12, 1970, pp. 34–59, i.h.b. p. 38 (as Jan van Hemessen);
B. Wallen, Jan van Hemessen. An Antwerp painter between Reform and Counter-Reform, Ann Arbor 1983, p. 323, no. 58, fig. 84 (as a copy after Hemessen by the Brunswick Monogrammist, circa 1535).

CATALOGUE NOTE
This is an exceptionally rare early work by one of the pioneers of the High Renaissance style in northern Europe, Jan Sanders van Hemessen, a style that he would develop and shepherd through to the new naturalistic and humanizing language of the mid-century genius of Pieter Bruegel the Elder. In each of its elements it perfectly illustrates the strides made in the 1520s towards this new artistic language and it beautifully describes, perhaps better than any other work, Hemessen’s transition from a pupil of Hendrick van Cleve I and a painter in the traditional Flemish manner, to the italianate tendency that would characterise the remainder of his career in Antwerp until his death in 1556. Painted in the late 1520s on his return from a lengthy trip to Italy, the panel already demonstrates signs of the classicising elegance that he learned from his studies of Raphael and the young Bronzino, as well as the sense of form and monumentality that he would have seen and studied in the work of Michelangelo.

The general mise-en-scène of this Virgin and child, with the Virgin supporting the standing, full-frontal Christ child before a wooden structure or tree trunk adorned with vegetation, is one to which he would return time and again through the 1530s and 1540s. The conception reaches its zenith in the 1544-dated work in the Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, which shows the Madonna full length, her drapery with an impossible complexity of folds and creases, beneath a similar, heavily laden vine (fig. 2).^1 The plentiful vine, a common symbol of the Christian faith with its allusion to the wine drunk at the Last Supper, provides an unusual setting for both works and achieves a most intimate setting. The young oak sapling to the right is equally unusual, and very prominent, so much so that it may be related in some way to the commission of the painting. Similarly rendered oak leaves, with the same lighter outline so evident here, recur in the 1531-dated St. Jerome in the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon, and in the Judith and Tamar (lost) which, given the setting, female facial type, and treatment of the drapery must presumably be of roughly the same date as the St Jerome and the present Virgin and child.^2 The same, too, could be said of Christ and St. John as boys in which, besides the setting which follows the same principle as those mentioned above, employs the same heavy jaw and fulsome cheeks that we see in Christ here.^3 Besides the vine the scene is crowded with symbolism, specifically in the bitten apple held by the Virgin that reminds us of the sins Christ has been born to save, and the small Crucifix in the background that, together with the explicit vines, pre-empt the events that will befall Christ at the end of his life.

Hemessen’s evident interest in and tendency to include a variety of flora and fauna in a highly naturalistic setting is perhaps one of his most distinguishable characteristics and features prominently, without exception, in all his works of
an external setting. It is something we see time and again in the work of many of his contemporaries, such as Jan van Scorel, and coincides with the explosion of landscape painting, indeed of the establishment of landscape painting as a genre in its own right, in the 1530s.

Not the least striking aspect of this painting is the Virgin’s smoothly rendered face, painted in very light tones, that bounds forth from the dense vegetation behind. Besides its polished finish, it is of a type that we see in other females from the same date, such as the Woman playing the spinet and the Woman weighing gold, two pictures long considered to be in Hemessen’s earliest independent manner. Each have a very low-set jaw weighed down by plump cheeks, and are set off by finely delineated strands of hair, each painted or drawn as if individual threads of gold. There is clearly something of the influence of Jan Gossaert here, with whom Hemessen worked in Mechelen in the early 1520s, and we see signs of him again in the finely outlined hands set in somewhat unnatural positions, her left hand so much so it seems more a boast of his life-drawing skills than a depiction of a realistic grasp or hold (fig. 1). The panel’s extraordinary condition allows us as clear a glimpse as we could hope for of Hemessen’s idiosyncratic style at this transitional point of his career. Though he would pioneer the art of the genre scene in years to come he returned time and time again to the depiction of the Virgin and child right up to the point of his death and it is in these, viewed as a chronological group, that we see most clearly his development from a young star of the late medieval period into the maker of the Mannerist style.

Wescher (Literature, 1929), who likewise dated the panel to Hemessen’s first creative period as an independent master, considers and illustrates this as the central panel to a triptych, the wings showing Saints John the Baptist and Mary Magdalene (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Orléans). The scale of the Orléans wings however is somewhat different such that it is by no means certain the three panels originally belonged together.

We are grateful to Drs. Peter van den Brink for endorsing the attribution to Hemessen based on photographs and for suggesting a date of execution circa 1528–29.

1. Friedländer, under Literature, cat. no. 205, reproduced plate 111.
3. Ibid., cat. no. Supp. 408, reproduced plate 213.
4. Ibid., cat. nos 220 and 221, reproduced plates 118 and 119.

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Fig. 1

Jan Gossaert, Virgin and Child. Prado, Madrid, Spain / The Bridgeman Art Library

Fig. 2

Jan van Hemessen, Madonna of Humility, NM 2140. Photo © Nationalmuseum, Stockholm