LOT 215
PROPERTY OF INDEPENDENCE SEAPORT MUSEUM, PHILADELPHIA, SOLD TO ENHANCE THE CARE, PROTECTION AND PRESERVATION OF THE COLLECTION AND FUTURE ACQUISITIONS
A LARGE AND RARE PAINTING OF A MOTHER AND CHILD QING DYNASTY, CIRCA 1870

oil on canvas, an intimate scene of a beautiful young mother lying on one side nursing her infant son, her head supported on one manicured hand while her other jeweled hand rests on her child's leg, her long black hair swept back and secured by a pearl and gem studded hair ornament, a triple-ring jadeite earring falls over a soft, rounded pale pink cheek, the figure wearing a blue floral pattern diaphanous robe over a pair of sheer rose-colored and embroidered trousers, the petite feet bound within silk 'lotus' slippers, a young female attendant seated behind, both atop an elaborately mother-of-pearl and marble-inlaid hardwood luohan chuang with a brocade bolster inscribed with a poem and in the background a painting showing the bustling waterfront of Canton

Height 27 3/4 in., 70.5 cm; Width 42 3/4 in., 108.6 cm

ESTIMATE 250,000-300,000 USD

PROVENANCE
Purchased from Mr. George Fenimore Johnson in 1967, accession no. 73.18.

EXHIBITED
LITERATURE

CATALOGUE NOTE
Paintings of intimate domestic scenes of high quality and large size are rare in Chinese art. According to an article written by Crosby Forbes for the Museum of the American China Trade, 'Gift of Previously Unpublished China Trade Painting' Newsletter, vol. 3, no. 12, March 1974, the present painting was one of three known similar large scale paintings; one formerly in the Forbes House Museum, Milton, Massachusetts, now in the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts (fig. 1), and the third recorded at the time as in the possession of Samuel L. Lowe, Jr. Antiques. A fourth example, is illustrated in Anthony Lawrence, The Taipan Traders, Hong Kong, 1992, pp. 88-89 (fig. 2). Other examples, painted in a somewhat more perfunctory manner have appeared on the market after the article was written. Four paintings of the same subject were sold at Christie's South Kensington, 8th June 1999, lot 102. Another related painting of the subject of smaller dimension is in the Hardy Collection (fig. 3) and illustrated in Patrick Conner, Paintings of the China Trade, The Sze Yuan Tang Collection of Historic Paintings, Hong Kong, 2013, no.150. In addition, there exist several smaller versions of the composition dating to the late 19th and early 20th centuries painted both on canvas and glass; all of which tend to be more rudimentary. The repetition of the scene speaks to the popularity of the fine and early version as represented by the present canvas. The superb quality of the workmanship as well as the considered composition with every aspect of the space so beautifully balanced by means of light, color and texture indicates that the present painting may very well be the prototype for the others.

It is possible to date the painting by the landmarks in the waterfront scene of Canton. In the fire of 1856 the foreign factories had been destroyed again. There was a new interest in depicting the area around the steamer terminus, by a tall arched white-walled building with a clock facing the water. For another view of the scene see Patrick Conner, The Hongs of Canton, London, 2009, p. 237, pl. 8.23. The circa 1870 attribution may be further corroborated by the inclusion of the steamship depicted in the harbor. It is the USS Takiang (Big River) an oak-hulled, screw steamer built in 1862 in New York City by the shipbuilding firm of Roosevelt and Joyce and active in the China trade until 1864 when it was chartered by the British to Japan and by 1869 it was back in the United States and renamed the Peiho.

Interestingly, along with many other details, the poetic lines inscribed on the pillow vary in each version. The Peabody Essex Museum example translates as "Clouds remind him of her robes, flowers of her face: Spring breezes brush the railing, wet with dew." The lines of the present painting roughly translate as "Much like spring sunshine, this piece of jade defies value; seize the moment." The lines of both inscriptions serve to remind the purpose of this genre. Such paintings of idealized beauties represent the highest achievements of the thriving courtesan culture in Qing society. A glimpse into the mysterious and secretive woman's world was an alluring subject matter and one commissioned initially by members of a wealthy mercantile class and subsequently by Westerners who admired their exoticism.

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Fig. 1

Photograph courtesy of the Peabody Essex Museum
Fig. 2

Illustrated in Taipan Traders © Form Asia Books United, 1992, pp. 88-89

Fig. 3

The Sze Yuan Teng Collection of China Coast Paintings