LOT 214
WILLIAM HENRY FOX TALBOT
1800-1877
'THE PENCIL OF NATURE'
(London: Longman, Brown, Green, & Longmans, 1844-46), the complete set of six fascicles illustrated with 24 salt prints, 21 prints on mounts with hand-ruled borders, 20 numbered in an unidentified hand in pencil or ink on the mount, 3 loose; plate 1 a variant, circa 1846, and plate 2 a substitute. 4to, grey linen-backed boards, ink title on spine, inscribed 'Herbert Lambert from M. T. Talbot, August 1921' and 'N. D. Larkin. 1959.' in ink on the title, five-line 'Notice to the Reader' inserted behind the front end paper, a modern print of Window at Lacock Abbey tipped to the front free end paper. Bound without printed wrappers. Various sizes to 6 1/4 by 8 1/2 in. (15.9 by 21.6 cm.)

ESTIMATE 150,000-250,000 USD
Lot Sold: 275,000 USD

PROVENANCE
Collection of the photographer
By descent to Miss Matilda Talbot, the photographer's granddaughter
Gift to Herbert Lambert, 1921
CATALOGUE NOTE

Of The Pencil of Nature, pioneering curator Beaumont Newhall proclaimed, '[its] importance in the history of photography is comparable to that of the Gutenberg Bible in printing' (Da Capo, unpaginated). Issued in 6 parts (known as fascicles) between 1844 and 1846, it was the first photographically illustrated text to be commercially sold and the culmination of more than a decade of experimentation. While Talbot originally envisioned a series of 10 fascicles with a total of 50 plates, production ceased after just 24 photographs. Talbot selected images that best demonstrated photography’s uses and advantages – still life, topography, architecture, and reproduction – but photographs such as The Haystack and The Open Door approach refined artistry.

This set of The Pencil of Nature comes originally from the collection of Miss Matilda Theresa Talbot (1871-1958), the photographer’s granddaughter. As steward of the legacy for both Talbot and his residence, Lacock Abbey, Matilda went to great lengths to ensure that her grandfather’s lifework was preserved and distributed examples to institutions worldwide. The present copy is inscribed from Matilda to her longtime friend Herbert Lambert (1881-1936), a member of the Royal Photographic Society based in Bath. Lambert was instrumental in securing a copy for donation from Matilda to the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Unlike Talbot’s Sun Pictures in Scotland which was sold by subscription, the fascicles of The Pencil of Nature were publically available through booksellers and thus it is impossible to determine an exact number of copies produced. The uneven tonality of the plates in most issues of The Pencil of Nature has long been discussed and many prints likely started deteriorating immediately. Most extant fascicles are in institutional collections and there is no one ‘ideal’ copy. According to the most recent census by Talbot scholar Larry J. Schaaf (to whom this entry is indebted), only 4 other complete (or nearly complete) sets are believed to be in private collections. The present copy is listed in his census. Only a handful of fascicles have appeared at auction since 1970.