

£3m for Chinese bowl that held tennis balls

Jack Malvern

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The censer was thought a copy but it turned out to be a unique Qing artefact
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A bronze bowl that was used by a family to hold tennis balls has sold for £3.8 million after an expert identified it as an ornament designed for the Chinese emperor and his family during the early Qing dynasty.

The Swiss family that owned it had believed that it held little value after a British auction house told them it was a cheap 19th century copy. However, when a valuer for the Swiss auction house Koller Auctions saw the item she knew immediately that it was valuable.

Karl Green, head of marketing for Koller, said that the family had owned the bowl for more than 100 years since a relative brought it from China to Germany, where their ancestors lived.

considered an important item back then, which was lucky for them,” Mr Green said.

“It was also turned down by a British auction house on the basis of photographs of it. They thought it was 19th-century. So the vendors didn’t think it was worth much and were using it to store tennis balls in. It is pretty big, about the size of a punch bowl.”

The bowl had an estimated price of £40,000 but generated international interest when it was displayed in Hong Kong before the sale. “When our specialist visited the house and saw it in the entrance hall her eyes popped out,” Mr Green said. “When she did further research on it she couldn’t find anything remotely similar. It was a unique item.”

The expert concluded that it was a parcel gilt bronze censer made in about 1700. The phoenix-shaped handles and peony flower confirmed that it was intended for one of the emperor’s palaces. It sold for £3.3 million, plus fees of £500,000.

The sellers were amazed by its value, Mr Green said. “I’m not sure if they had a tennis court at home but I think they could afford to put one in now.”

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