



A Fine George III Period Mahogany Architect's Desk or Library Table in the Manner of Gillows of Lancaster and London

Description

The desk of kneehole form with a finely panelled reverse. The two long drawer fronts above the pedestals actually dummies, concealing a pull out leather lined writing slide and a series of small removable boxes, all with lids veneered in extremely figured Cuban mahogany and retaining their original axe head handles. Beneath this secretaire section are three drawers in each pedestal, all retaining their original handles in a known Gillows pattern which is often encountered on the finest examples of the firm's Carlton House writing tables, produced at around the same time. The desk stands on a moulded plinth base.

The top of the piece operates on a double ratchet system, this allowing a large amount of flexibility in terms of the precise angle at which the top is set. The top has an inset leather writing surface as well as a book support, allowing it to function both as a reading table and for use as a draughtsman's table and it is this latter use which gave rise to the practice of referring to desks of this sort as architects' desks.

The Gillows Attribution:

There are a number of elements of this piece that make a Gillows provenance extremely likely. Firstly, as stated above, is the particular handle pattern used on the drawers which is a known Gillows model. See for example a Carlton House table, stamped Gillows Lancaster, with identical handles to the present desk that was most recently sold by Christie's on the 19th of May 2021, lot 130: <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-6313383>

In addition to this, the superb quality of the timber used in this piece is entirely typical of Gillows' output. The firm imported their own timber directly, not relying on other firms to bring in materials, and this allowed them access to often superior specimens for use in their furniture. The present piece utilises finely figured timber that has been well matched and chosen for specific areas of the piece that best show off its grain structure. For example on the panel in the kneehole, a piece with strong vertical grain is chosen, likewise vertical flame is utilised on the plinth. On the drawers, which are horizontal in orientation, timber has been chosen with the grain orientated that way in order to maximise visual impact. The quality of timber has contributed to the fine surface that the piece retains with a lovely colour and patination.

The most telling sign of a Gillows provenance, however, is the highly unusual use of a fall front dummy drawer secretaire section with inbuilt removable boxes. This relates to a number of signed examples such as a desk sold at Sotheby's New York on the 11th of April 1999, lot 399, which is nearly identical to the present piece though lacking the refinement of the double ratcheted top. Similar desks are illustrated by Dr. Susan Stuart in her monograph *Gillows of Lancaster and London*, Vol. II, p.377, plate GG.28, and in the late Lindsay Boynton's *Gillow Furniture Designs 1760-1800*, plates 24 and 41. The Gillows design can be traced back to a 'bureau writing-table' with a

double ratcheted top, produced for the Earl of Shrewsbury and illustrated in the Gillows estimate books (the design reproduced in Boynton op. Cit). The most famous known example of this form was supplied to the poet and novelist Sir Walter Scott for his house in Edinburgh, later transferred to Abbotsford where it remains to this day. A Charming reference in Scott's correspondence shows that he acquired his desk in 1810, the piece being paid for by the success of his poem *The Lady of the Lake*. Scott had seen a desk at Rokeby Hall that inspired his purchase and wrote to John Robinson, later 1st Baron Rokeby, "You know I fell in love with your Library table and now that The Lady has put crowns into my purse I would willingly treat myself unto the like". Shortly afterwards his Gillows order was placed.

Aside from the celebrated Scott example, our research has discovered a number of other notable desks that form part of this important group. A *Country Life* shoot at Buckland House in Oxfordshire, published on the 22nd of May 1915, illustrated one such desk in situ in the house's library.



(Buckland House, 1915)

Similarly a fine example of this form of desk was also pictured in situ in Everingham Park, Yorkshire, by the *Country Life* team and published on the 22nd of February 1968.

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COUNTRY LIFE—FEBRUARY 22, 1968



5.—THE ENTRANCE HALL AS RECONSTITUTED WHEN THE ENTRANCE WAS RECENTLY RESTORED TO THE WEST FRONT

(Everingham Park)

Also in *Country Life*, published on the 7th of December 1961, was an advert for the late Paul Coutts, one of the leading Scottish dealers of the period. This advert featured a desk that carries the name of the Gillows apprentice who made it, William Beckett of Wray, a village very close to Lancaster. The piece is dated 1789.

We are delighted to be able to offer this fine piece and it will enhance any fine collection of English furniture.

SUPPLEMENT—42

COUNTRY LIFE—DECEMBER 7, 1961



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