

MERCER HOUSE, SAVANNAH

THE COLLECTION OF THE LATE JAMES A. WILLIAMS CONTENTS TO BE SOLD BY SOTHEBY'S NEW YORK ON OCTOBER 20

The contents of Mercer House, the most important historic home in Savannah, Georgia, will be auctioned by Sotheby's in New York this Fall. The sale of the collection will be a testament to the elegant and refined taste of the late Jim Williams, the man who saved and restored Mercer House, along with many other important properties in Savannah and the South.

The sale will take place on October 20, 2000 and will include fine English, Continental and American furniture, paintings, decorative works of art, rugs and carpets, ceramics, glass and silver. The collection is being offered for sale by Dr. Dorothy Williams Kingery, Jim Williams' sister, and is expected to make in excess of \$1.5 million.

William Stahl, Vice Chairman and Director of Sotheby's Decorative Arts Division, described the sale as: "capturing the spirit of refinement and grace within Mercer House and recalling Mr. Williams' many achievements as a pioneer in rescuing and restoring the magnificent architectural heritage of Savannah. It will be a tribute to his skills as a decorator and his passion for beautiful things."

The exhibition in Sotheby's New York galleries will attempt to recreate, as closely as possible, the arrangement of the furniture and works of art in Mercer House.

JIM WILLIAMS

Jim Williams fell in love with Savannah and began to restore his first house in 1955 at the age of 24. By the end of his career he had saved more than 50 houses in Savannah, the Georgia Coast and South Carolina. He had a passion for authenticity and for saving the original fixtures, many examples of which he stored to use in future projects. Mr. Williams described Savannah in those early days: "a neglected city, filled with architectural masterpieces, lay in suspended animation, except for a bustling crew that was busily engaged in its demolition. It was a city riddled with architectural blight..." His numerous projects include Turkey Creek, Danville, Butler House, three houses on East Congress Street, Odingsells House, Merault House and Hampton Lillibridge House as well as the Tombee Plantation on St. Helena Island and William Wigg Barnwell House in South Carolina, Habersham's House, Armstrong House and three houses at Indian Bluff, near Savannah.

Dorothy Williams Kingery documented the many achievements which her brother made in the preservation and restoration of these properties in a book published in 1999 – More Than Mercer House – Savannah's Jim Williams & His Southern Houses. Including a series of essays written by Jim Williams about the great impact that these special houses had in his life, the book describes and illustrates his work from the start to the finish of each project. Dr. Kingery is a trustee of the Telfair Museum of Art, a board member of the Flannery O'Connor Childhood Home and a member of Historic Savannah Foundation.

MERCER HOUSE

The house was designed by John S. Norris, a New York architect who worked in Savannah from 1846 until 1860. He stayed in Savannah for 14 years, becoming the most respected architect in the city. Mercer House was Norris' last project in Savannah and combines Greek, Italianate and Renaissance designs.

It was built for Hugh Mercer, a Civil War General who was the great-grandfather of the famous songwriter, Johnny Mercer of "Moon River" fame. Mercer settled in Savannah in 1835 after a military career and married the daughter of a local cotton merchant. He worked at the Planter's Bank as Cashier and during the Civil War served as a Colonel in the Confederate Army and was later promoted to Brigadier General. In 1859, Mercer bought two lots on Monterey Square, now the site of Mercer House. Soon after that he commissioned John Norris to work on designs for a house. Construction began in 1860 but was halted during the Civil War. Savannah was taken by Unionists and the town was presented to Lincoln as a Christmas present by General Sherman who burned Atlanta before his arrival in Savannah. The incomplete Mercer House was stripped and the wood used for "erecting temporary shanties" according to an 1866 account in the Savannah News and Herald.

Hugh Mercer never lived in the house, but sold it, in its unfinished state, to John R. Wilder who employed Norris' assistant to complete the house according to the original plans. It changed hands many times until Jim Williams bought it in 1969. It took him two years to restore.

The house is set back from the square with a flight of steps leading up to a portico supported by Corinthian columns framing a large double door. The front of the house is symmetrically balanced with five large arched windows, two on the ground floor either side of the doorway and three across the façade of the second floor. All but the central window open out onto wrought iron balconies. Inside 15-foot ceilings, floor-length windows, glass panels above the exterior doors and a large central dome, give a sense of light and space with views over the square and of the enclosed garden at the rear of the property.

THE COLLECTION

Many of the pieces from Mercer house had been part of Jim Williams' collection for many years. Two large Flemish tapestries, one depicting deer in a garden with hounds at their feet and the other of Diana bathing, were some of his "most treasured possessions". One hung in the hall and one in the music room. Mr. Williams once said that "as long as I live here, I'll never sell them." They are estimated at \$20/30,000 each.

In the parlor Mr. Williams kept an assortment of curiosities including Fabergé. His first purchase was made in London in 1971 when he acquired a large silver-gilt and enamel-mounted leather box, or presentation casket, bearing the Imperial coat-of-arms and the gold crowned cypher of Tsar Nicholas II. It is dated 1899 and is estimated at \$8/12,000. It was given by the Tsar to the Shah of Persia to commemorate the settlement of a long-standing border dispute. Williams put it on the jade green coffee table in the parlor where it stayed for 30 years. He also owned a large silver-gilt and enamel-mounted leather desk folio, with the initial N 11 and the corners decorated with Imperial eagles. It was made for Tsar Nicholas II and was purchased by Mr. Williams at a Sotheby Parke Bernet sale in New York in 1979. The folio is estimated at \$20/30,000 and is one of the highlights of the sale.

An American carved wooden eagle with outspread wings which was perched on a bracket in the parlor and used on the first tug boat to ply the Savannah harbor is estimated at \$3/5,000. More than 100 pieces of Chinese blue and white porcelain from the Nanking Cargo – a wreck of treasures which sank in the South China Sea in 1752 – is also included with an estimate of \$5,500/8,500. The lot comprises soup plates, plates with scallop borders and plain rims, octagonal plates and a pair of large chargers with scalloped borders. They were displayed in a breakfront cabinet in the front parlor.

Mr. Williams was particularly proud of his collection of furniture from Grenada and the West Indies. In the dining room there was a mahogany three-tier server, which Mr. Williams had found in poor condition in the countryside around the island of Grenada where it is known as a "cupping table" – referring to its use to hold cups and dishes beside the dining table. It is estimated at \$3/5,000. The guest room was dominated by a mahogany four-poster bed, handcarved in Grenada in the 19th century with foliage designs, the posts carved with spiral flutes and a nutmeg design. It is estimated at \$8/12,000. There are also several pieces of 19th century furniture from Guatemala.

Among Mr. Williams most treasured possessions was a set of nine pastel portraits which were protected from the light in an upstairs dressing room where the shutters were kept closed. They are early examples of the work of Henrietta Dering Johnston, the first professional female artist in America, who married Gideon Johnston, the Rector of Saint Philip's Church in Charleston, South Carolina. When they moved to America from his home in Ireland, it was her work that kept the family going financially as the missionary society for which he worked did not send his stipend. Her husband commented "were it not for the assistance my wife gives me for drawing pictures...I shou'd not have been able to live."

Of the nine portraits, seven are inscribed, Dublin, Ireland and are dated from 1704 to 1705. One shows John Percival, head of the Trustees for Establishing the Colony of Georgia and eight other members of his and the Southwell families. This is the only known drawing of John Percival, later the Earl of Egremont, who played such an important role in persuading George II to sign Georgia's Charter and in obtaining funding for the Colony. Mr. Williams acquired the portraits in 1980 at a sale of property from Belvedere House, Westmeath County in Ireland. Mr. Williams said: "The thought of owning nine works by America's first panelist and first woman artist kept me awake the rest of the night." The nine portraits will be sold together and are estimated at \$100/125,000.

One of the more unusual pieces in the house is a pair of legs, painted in oil and attributed to Sir Joshua Reynolds. It

was customary after the 18th century, when ceiling heights were often lowered, for a painting to be cut to fit the size of a room. The legs appear to have been a victim of this downsizing. The panel is estimated at \$1,200/1,800.

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