THE MENTMORE CZARINA TABLE

AN IMPORTANT JUGENSTIL ROSEWOOD & COROMANDEL DINING TABLE
DESIGNED BY ROBERT FIX, MADE BY PORTOIS & FIX, VIENNA, CIRCA 1900

Macassar ebony (diospyros celebica) and palisander (dalbergia nigra; Brazilian rosewood) veneered onto pine. The circular top having cross-banded concentric circles with boxwood or fruitwood stringing enclosing radiating parquetry panels above a tapering stepped frieze, over a central square section column with five square-section flying serpentine brackets, each inlaid with marquetry panels, standing on a pentagonal pedestal base, the squared-off angles mounted with pierced, stylized, copper cut-card heart detail, raised on shaped copper-mounted bracket feet; the leaves and underside of the table with remains of old labels; variously stencilled and signed in pencil: J.J.W.P.O 6 Einlage Einlegen.

**DIMENSIONS**  Height: 30 ¾” (78cm); diameter: 55” (140cm); extended: 79” (201cm).

**PROVENANCE**  Reputedly made for the 5th Earl of Rosebery’s yacht Czarina. Sold, Mentmore, Sotheby’s 20.05.77, vol. 1, lot 903.
**THE CZARINA**

The Czarina was inherited by Hannah de Rothschild, (1851-1890), from her mother Juliana in 1877. However a mystery remains, as whilst the Mentmore sale catalogue unambiguously states that this table was ‘Originally made for the 5th Earl of Rosebery’s yacht Czarina’, there is no record of a vessel of this name being registered to the de Rothschilds or to Lord Rosebery, whom Hannah married the following year, 1878.

There are no de Rothschilds listed as owners in the *Register of Yachts* for 1884 nor in the original *Lloyd's* of 1878 but, as not all the family were members of the Royal Yacht Squadron or resident in Britain, Lloyd's would not necessarily contain their names. In 1902 *Lloyd's* lists four: Baron Arthur de Rothschild, the first to be elected a member of the Squadron in 1888, who owned the large steam yacht *Eros*, followed in 1896 by Baron M. de Rothschild's *Veglia* of even greater size and Baron Ferdinand another larger still.

Research indicates that there were at least three vessels named Czarina at this period.

The first was owned by George Stucley: the Schooner-Yacht *Czarina* (210 Tons), built by Mr Camper of Gosport, published in *Hunt's Yachting Magazine*, October 1853, and described as ‘the largest sailing yacht afloat’, by the *New York Times*, 31st March 1878.

Another is recorded as being built at Gosport by Camper and Nicholson for Lord Brassey in late 1877 and sold in 1916, however, despite being a possible candidate, this appears unlikely as the Rothschild-Rosebery yacht is referred to twice as in the ownership of the family between 1777-8. *The Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 49, records the death of Juliana, Lady de Rothschild, on her yacht Czarina in Nice in 1877 and, likewise, the following year it is known that Lord & Lady Rosebery honeymooned on the Czarina in the Bay of Naples.

It is uncertain which of these vessels of that name was that acquired by the Canadian businessman Sir John Craig Eaton in 1910 who, following the outbreak of war, donated it to the RCN, which commissioned her as *HMCS Florence* in July 1915, where she spent most of her service career as a guard ship at St. John, New Brunswick patrolling the Bay of Fundy, was subsequently sold to buyers in Martinique, Florence and reportedly lost in the Caribbean in January 1917.

*Lloyd's Register of Yachts* for 1890 apparently lists two other yachts of similar name; one of which may have been Benjamin Nicholson’s largest steam yacht, the other was in the ownership of the Czar of Russia, and is referred to later.

Lot 1613 in the Mentmore sale was a pair of silver butter dishes by Henry Holland, hallmarked London 1875, in the form of a sailor’s straw hat, each inscribed ‘Czarina’ on a navy blue enamelled ribbon band, thus providing a *terminus ante quem* of 1875 for the existence, or at least the commencement, of the Rothschild-Roseberry Czarina.

The family still have several toys, a hat, a belt and a table-cloth from the Czarina however, apart from these few remaining articles, the butter dishes and this table, nothing else appears to have survived.
THE DE ROTHSCHILDS & THE 5th EARL OF ROSEBERRY

Meyer Amschel de Rothschild (1818–1874), known as Baron Meyer, took little part in the affairs of the Rothschild firm, but became widely known as a sportsman and collector of art treasures. In 1850 he married his first cousin Juliana, eldest daughter of Isaac Cohen, who died in 1877 leaving an only child Hannah, who subsequently became the richest woman in Britain upon the death of her father in 1874, inheriting Mentmore and a fortune of some £2 million.

Hannah married Archibald Philip Primrose, 5th Earl of Rosebery in 1878, one of the most celebrated figures in Britain during the final quarter of the 19th century, an influential millionaire and politician who served as the British Prime Minister from 1894-1895. His charm, wit, charisma and public popularity gave him such standing that it was said that he ‘almost eclipsed royalty’.

MENTMORE

Meyer Amschel de Rothschild (1818–1874) acquired land in Buckinghamshire, (formerly part of the Duke of Buckingham's estate), in 1851 and commenced building his mansion Mentmore, which was soon celebrated alike for its hospitality and spectacular collections.

The Rothschild Mentmore collections were one of the most exceptional in private hands, other than the collections of the Russian and British Royal families, prompting Lady Eastlake to comment: “I do not believe that the Medici were ever so lodged at the height of their glory”. Sumptuously furnished with extraordinary works of art in every field by Baron Meyer, the collection was added to considerably by his son-in-law Lord Rosebery and remained intact until the contents of Mentmore were auctioned.

THE MENTMORE SALE

Eventually in May 1977, and despite great opposition, the majority of the collection, including paintings by Gainsborough, Reynolds and Boucher, furniture by Jean Henri Riesener and Chippendale, and the finest German and Russian silver, gold and enamels, were sold in in situ by Sotheby's at the great Mentmore sale of May 25th & 26th 1977, where the catalogue introduction states ‘There can be no doubt whatever that the art collections at Mentmore were amongst the most outstanding in their kind anywhere in the world.’

This table was lot 903 on 20th May 1977 and was given an entire page, described as:

‘An Art Nouveau kingwood extending dining table with circular top, the legs and pentagonal plinth with pierced corner mounts, possibly Belgian.

Originally made for the 5th Earl of Rosebery’s yacht Czarina’.
In 1881 decorators Anton Fix (1845–1918) and Frenchman August Portois founded an interior decoration company that offered complete furnishings for houses and flats. Both had been successful at international exhibitions and could rely on contacts in France and with the Viennese Court, supplying furniture to Crown Prince Rudolph for his apartments in Prague, the Hofburg in 1881, and the Hunting Lodge at Mayerling in 1886.
The golden age of Portois & Fix was around the turn of the nineteenth-century when the company, one of the largest in Vienna, had more than 700 employees. Its furniture was exported to Germany, Russia, Turkey, Romania, Serbia, Holland, Switzerland, Italy, and Egypt, and it had branch offices in London, Paris, Berlin, Cologne, Breslau, Carlsbad, Turin, Milan, Budapest, Bucharest, Constantinople and Bombay. The firm produced furniture to their own designs, including this table by Robert Fix (1877-1945), in addition to executing those by such notable artists as Koloman Moser, Josef Hoffmann, Adolph Loos, Otto Wagner and Leopold Bauer.

Portois & Fix exhibited with great success and were awarded medals at numerous European exhibitions, including Vienna in 1900, 1901, 1902, 1903, 1904, 1906 & 1907, Antwerp 1885 & 1894, London 1902 & 1906, Trieste, 1891, Turin 1902, St Petersburg 1903 and the Paris World Fair of 1900 where they designed the entrance salon.

**THE CZARINA TABLE**

This table was made at a seminal period of transition in Austrian art: *Jugendstil* (1890-1905) Austrian *Art Nouveau*, The Vienna Secession (*Vereinigung Bildender Künstler Österreichs*) formed in 1897 by a group of Austrian artists, including Gustav Klimt, Koloman Moser, Josef Hoffmann, Joseph Maria Olbrich, Max Kurzweil, and others, and finally the *Wiener Werkstätte* (Vienna Workshop) formed in 1903 by Hoffman & Moser, an Austrian equivalent of the Arts and Crafts movement, which existed to produce objects of outstanding individuality and beauty through exceptional craftsmanship, with the motto ‘Better to work 10 days on one product than to manufacture 10 products in one day.’ Portois & Fix were one of the leading cabinet-makers who produced designs at this period for Otto Wagner, Koloman Moser, Josef Hoffman & Max Fabiani and others.

This pattern of extending dining table, designed by Robert Fix, was designed to seat 16, extending with six leaves, each measuring 58cm, to around 500cm (another, with extra leaves, is shown above). It was first exhibited at the winter exhibition at the Austrian Museum of Art and Industry in 1900, then in 1902 at the Austrian Exhibition in Earls Court, London, to great acclaim. When Portois & Fix celebrated the company’s 25th anniversary in 1906, they took part in the exhibition of Austrian arts and crafts in Sloane Square in London, which underlined the popularity of their furniture in England.
A RUSSIAN CONNECTION?
There is an intriguing underlying Russian thread, which reappears throughout the story but remains tantalisingly enigmatic: the choice of name of the de Rothschild’s yacht *Czarina*, the mystery of the 5th Earl of Rosebery’s ownership of the *Czarina* and his decision to rename another of his yachts with another Russian name, the *Zinaida*.

The following random associations may yet prove to be connected in some way.

In 1873 the Czarevich, the eldest son of the Czar of Russia, built a yacht for the use of his wife the Czarevna, and named it accordingly. *Bulmer’s Gazeteer*, 1892, part 6, states, ‘In 1873, Hull was honoured by a visit from his Imperial Highness, the Czarowitz (sic) of Russia to inspect the yacht, which was being built here for the use of the Czarevna. On the following day, July 5th, the yacht was launched in the presence of the Czarowitz, and christened the Czarevna.’ She appears in *Lloyd's Register of Yachts* for 1890 and was still in the Emperor's ownership in 1901, with *Standart*, the principal royal yacht of Russia.

On 22nd September 1896 Czar Nicholas II & the Czarina came to stay with Queen Victoria at Balmoral. The Russian Royal yacht *Standart*, sailed into Leith, where they were met by the Prince of Wales, the Duke of Connaught and Lord Rosebery, (*New York Times* 23rd September1896). Rosebery, as Prime Minister of Great Britain 1894-1895 certainly had close connections with the Russian court, notably Baron de Staal the Russian Ambassador to London. On this occasion in 1896, although no longer Prime Minister, Rosebery clearly remained *persona grata* with both the British & Russian Royal Families, as it was at his house Dalmeny Park, Edinburgh, where his friends the Prince of Wales and the Duke of Connaught met before they all formally welcomed the Czar & Czarina at Leith.

From the time of his election to the Royal Yacht Squadron in 1897 to his death in around 1929, Lord Rosebery had a small steam yacht *Zinaida* and later (1902-1916) a larger steam yacht of 350 tons named *Zaida*, (originally called *Caroline*) built by J.S. White in Cowes in 1900.

The choice of name for the former is interesting as *Zinaida* is a Russian Christian name of which, perhaps, the most famous at the time was Princess Zenaide Yousoupoff, Mother of Felix Yousoupoff, who plotted the death of Rasputin but failed to kill him.

It is not known why both the de Rothschild’s and Lord Rosebery chose to give their yachts the Imperial Russian names *Czarina & Zinaida* as neither had Russian ancestry, however the Countess of Rosebery, (private correspondence), whilst unequivocally confirming that the *Czarina* was a Rothschild vessel, has suggested that this table may have come from the *Zinaida* due to the more appropriate dates.

It, therefore, may be more than coincidence that Portois & Fix exhibited at St Petersburg in 1903, almost exactly at the time that this table was made, which leaves the story tantalisingly incomplete.
REFERENCES FOR THIS PATTERN OF TABLE
Vittorio Pica, L’Arte Decorativa all’Esposizione di Torino del 1902, Bergamo, 1903, p. 177.
Kunst und Kunstanhandwerk 1901, p. 10; 1902, pp. 185, 369 (London); pp. 412–414 (Turin).

REFERENCES FOR PORTOIS & FIX

COLLECTIONS
Examples of furniture by Portois & Fix are in numerous museum collections including, in Vienna, Museum Postsparkasse, The Albertina, The Landstraßer, MAK Museum for Applied Arts, as well as the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and The Budapest Museum.

EXHIBITIONS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
I am grateful to Maldwin Drummond, Hon. Historian, Royal Yacht Squadron, for his invaluable assistance in researching the Czarina.

I am grateful to the Countess of Rosebery for her useful suggestions for additional avenues of research.