



THE ZAIDA TABLE

AN IMPORTANT INLAID CALAMANDER AND
COPPER-MOUNTED VIENNA SECESSION TABLE
BY PORTOIS & FIX, AUSTRIA, CIRCA 1900

DESCRIPTION

The circular top veneered in calamander (diospyros spp.), cross-banded and strung in concentric circles with holly, ebony and exotic cabinet timbers, enclosing radiating parquetry panels above a tapering stepped frieze, over a central pentagonal pedestal with five square-section flying serpentine brackets, each inlaid with a stylised marquetry panel of pitch pine, the corners of the copper-mounted pentagonal plinth base decorated with pierced hearts, on notional bracket feet; the three leaves and underside of the table with remains of old labels; the leaves stencilled and signed in pencil J.J.W.P.O 6 Einlage Einlegen; in excellent original condition throughout, small marks commensurate with age and use, retaining all the original mounts and three of the six original pine extension leaves.

DIMENSIONS

Height: 30 ³/₄" (78cm); diameter: 55" (140cm); extended: 79" (201cm).

PROVENANCE

Archibald Philip Primrose (1847-1929), 5th Earl of Rosebery, 1st Earl of Midlothian, on his yacht, *Zaida*; Mentmore Towers, Buckinghamshire; thence by descent until sold Sothebys's, *Mentmore*, vol. I, 20th May 1977, lot 903.



THE TABLE

The table was made at a seminal period of transition in Austrian art, coinciding with *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, Leopold Bauer, Joseph Maria Olbrich, and Max Kurzweil; and 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.'¹



¹ <https://www.woka.com/en/lexicon/wiener-werkstaette.html>

THE DE ROTHSCILDS AND THE 5th EARL OF ROSEBERY

The 5th Earl of Rosebery, Archibald Philip Primrose, was one of the most celebrated and influential figures in Britain of the late nineteenth century, and Prime Minister from 1894-5. His charm, wit, charisma and public popularity gave him such standing that it was said he “almost eclipsed royalty”. Both he and his wife, Hannah, shared a history of very grand yachts; indeed, Hannah had grown up accompanying her father, Baron Mayer de Rothschild, on racing and yachting events. When she married the earl, they honeymooned on the extraordinarily lavish *Czarina*, one of the yachts belonging to Hannah’s mother, Baroness Mayer de Rothschild, upon whose death Hannah became the richest heiress in Britain, inheriting a vast fortune of some two million pounds as well as a mansion in Piccadilly and Mentmore Towers. The pair enjoyed an intense passion for collecting, and together they amassed one of the most extraordinary collections ever held in private hands.

MENTMORE TOWERS

Mayer Amschel de Rothschild had acquired land in Buckinghamshire – formerly part of the Duke of Buckingham's estate – in 1851, engaging the “new Christopher Wren”, Sir Joseph Paxton, whose Crystal Palace had astonished the world the year before, as his architect. Designed in the nineteenth century revival of late sixteenth and early seventeenth century Elizabethan and Jacobean styles (known as “Jacobethan”), Mentmore Towers has been described as one of the greatest houses of the Victorian era.

The Rothschild Mentmore collections were so exceptional that Lady Eastlake commented, “I do not believe that the Medici were ever so lodged at the height of their glory”.² Likewise, Henry James commented on the ‘sense of glory confronted the visitor as soon as he entered the hall’: an enormous marble chimneypiece from Rubens’ house in Amsterdam, three huge carved and gilded lanterns from the *Bucentaur*, the barge of the Doges of Venice, and a Royal *Savonnerie* carpet. Sumptuously furnished with extraordinary works of art in every field by Baron Mayer, the collection was added to considerably by his son-in-law, the 5th Earl of Rosebery, and remained intact until the contents of Mentmore were auctioned off in 1977.³



² Sotheby Parke Bernet, *Mentmore*, vol. I (London, 1977), page ix

³ Sotheby, *Mentmore* I, p. ix

THE MENTMORE SALE

On the 20th of May 1977, in spite of substantial opposition in Britain, the great majority of the collection at Mentmore Towers, including paintings by Gainsborough, Reynolds, Fragonard, and Boucher, furniture by Jean Henri Riesener, Bernard II van Risamborgh, Oeben, and Cressent, and the finest European and Russian silver, gold, amber, and ivory were sold *in situ* by Sotheby's at the great *Mentmore* sale, where Watson wrote in his catalogue introduction, 'There can be no doubt whatever that the art collections at Mentmore are amongst the most outstanding of their kind anywhere in the world.'⁴

The table, sold as lot 903, was given an entire page in the *Mentmore* catalogue, in which it was incorrectly 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*.⁵ In fact, further research proves it could only have come from another family yacht, Zaida, as Czarina had been sold in 1879, two years before Portoix & Fix was founded, and thirty-one years before the table was first exhibited.



⁴ Sotheby, *Mentmore* I, p. xiii

⁵ Sotheby, *Mentmore* I, p. 295



Ungargasse 59-61, Vienna

PORTOITS & FIX

In 1881, August Portoits (1841-95) and Anton Fix (1845–1918) founded their interior decoration company Portoits & Fix in Heumühlgasse, Vienna, offering complete furnishings for houses. Both had been individually successful at international exhibitions and could rely on contacts in France as well as 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 Portoits & Fix was at the turn of the century, coinciding with the most important period of Austrian art, combining The Vienna Secession and the *Wiener Werkstätte* (Vienna Workshop). The aim was to produce objects of outstanding individuality and beauty through exceptional craftsmanship, and only the 'best materials', regardless of financial implications. The firm produced furniture to their own designs, including this table by Robert Fix (1877-1945), in addition to executing those by Koloman Moser, Josef Hoffmann, Adolph Loos, Otto Wagner, and Leopold Bauer.

Between 1897-1901, the young architect Max Fabiani built the company's headquarters at Ungargasse 59-61, a uniform, unembellished building considered highly *avant-garde* even for the time. By 1906, the company had more than 700 employees and their furniture was exported to Germany, Russia, Turkey, Holland, Switzerland, Italy, and Egypt, with offices in London, Paris, Berlin, Cologne, Turin, Milan, Budapest, Bucharest, Breslau, Carlsbad, Constantinople, and Bombay.

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

ZAIDA

Zaida, a large steam yacht of 350 tons measuring 150 feet long by 23 feet wide, was built by J.S. White in Cowes and launched in 1900. Lord Rosebery acquired the vessel in November 1901 from a Mr Shuttleworth.

After some refitting, *Zaida* sailed from Cowes bound for Cannes in March 1902. David Couling described the interior of the lounge: 'The wood fittings were of teak, with wall-to-wall carpeting and well-upholstered chairs creating an atmosphere of opulence and comfort'.

It would have been entirely appropriate for the Earl of Rosebery to select the most up-to-date furniture from a major firm such as Portois & Fix, who first exhibited the table in Austria in 1900, the year that the yacht was commissioned, and later in 1902 at the Austrian Exhibition in Earls Court, the year that *Zaida* was transformed and launched.



W. J. Hodge, *Steam Yacht Zaida*

PUBLISHED

Payne, Christopher, *19th Century European Furniture* (Suffolk, 2013), p. 456
Sotheby's London, *Mentmore*, vol. 1, 20 July 1977, lot 903

REFERENCES FOR THIS MODEL OF TABLE

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Von Scala, A., *Kunst und Kunsthandwerk 1901* (London, 1902), p. 10, p. 185, p. 369
Wenzl-Bachmayer, Monika, *Die Firma Portois & Fix, Pariser Esprit und Wiener Moderne* (Vienna, 2008), p. 71

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Haslinger, Ingrid, *The History of the Former Imperial Purveyors* (Vienna, 1996)
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Rennhofer, Maria, *Koloman Moser - Life and Work 1868-1918* (Vienna, 2002)

REFERENCES FOR *ŽAIDA*

Couling, David, *Steam Yachts* (London, 1980), p.61
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Portsmouth Evening News, 25 August 1916
The National Probate Calendar (Index of Wills and Administration), 1858-1995
Yorkshire Evening Post, 27 March 1902

COLLECTIONS

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

EXHIBITIONS

Museum Postsparkasse, 'Parisian Esprit and Viennese Modernism. The Portois & Fix Company', Vienna, July – September 2008

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