

**A Pair of George II Mahogany Library Armchairs
Attributed to William and John Gordon**

Circa 1755

28.5 x 29.5 x 36.5 in high (72.5 x 75 x 93 cm)

Each with shaped padded back, arms and seat, covered in red silk damask, with outswept dolphin-scale carved arms headed by half-flower heads, on a scrolling, scale carved frame centered by flowerheads, on cabriole legs headed by bellflowers ending in acanthus-clasped pad feet.

The Ornament: □

These gracefully sculpted chairs, conceived in the French 'picturesque' style, have long been one of the most admired English chair patterns of the George II period. They follow Hogarth's concept of the beauty of the serpentine line, their profiles designed to match the fronts. Herbert Cescinsky wrote: '...probably one of the very finest examples of the work of the later Chippendale period in this country. This chair belonged originally to an important set of about twenty-four armchairs and a settee [sic] which were arranged in the long corridors at Ditton Park, the beautiful home of Lord Montagu of Beaulieu at Thames Ditton'. Their carved Arcadian ornament recalls the triumph of the Nature goddess Venus whose sacred dolphins that accompanied her sea-shell chariot are represented by the imbricated scales wreathing the hollow-moulded frames. A favorite motif of William Kent's, such imbrication features on his throne that was illustrated in John Vardy's *Some Designs of Mr. Inigo Jones and Mr. William Kent*, 1744 (pl. 43). Flowers were said to have sprung up at the touch of Venus's foot, and flowers embellish the chairs' frames while Roman foliage emerges from the feet. □ □

The Attribution to John Gordon:

This picturesque chair pattern is attributed to the Westminster cabinet-maker John Gordon of Swallow Street, who may have been related to the early 18th Century Edinburgh cabinet-makers of the same name. In the late 1740s Gordon adopted a chair, supported by Apollo's sacred griffin, for his shop-sign, when trading as *LANDALL & GORDON, Joyners, Cabinet, & Chair-Makers at ye Griffin & Chair in Little Argyle Street by Swallow Street*. It seems likely that he was also in partnership with William Gordon, who responded to Thomas Chippendale's 1753 advertisement for subscribers to *A New Book of Designs of Household Furniture in the GOTHIC, CHINESE and MODERN TASTE*. □ □

FRANK PARTRIDGE

The chairs' Gothic air would have suited the Scottish Castle of Blair, Atholl, Perthshire for which James Murray, 2nd Duke of Atholl (d. 1764) commissioned a suite of the same pattern which remains at Blair (see A. Coleridge, *Chippendale Furniture*, London, 1968, fig. 87 and *The Dictionary of English Furniture Makers 1660-1840*, Leeds, 1986, p. 356). Listed in 1756 as '8 Mahogany Chairs, Carv'd frames in fish scales, with a French foot & carv'd leaf upon the toe', the total cost of around £31 included a charge of £2.5.0. for 'making an addition to your Grace's [the Duchess's] needlework'. In 1749, the Duke had married Jean Drummond, who had worked the canvas upholstery in rich floral bouquets springing from Ceres's cornucopias. □ □

The same 'Atholl' pattern was chosen for this suite, comprising some twenty four armchairs and two settees, recorded in the possession of John, Lord Montagu of Beaulieu (d.1929) in the corridors of Ditton Park, Berkshire. Peter Brown, formerly at Fairfax House, York has carried out a detailed comparison between the Atholl and Ditton chairs now at Fairfax House and considers them to be the 'same hand, same templates, same everything' - including the secondary timbers. □ □

This spectacular suite was presumably therefore part of the furnishings introduced to the earlier house at Ditton by George Brudenell, 4th Earl of Cardigan (d.1790), who was created 3rd Duke of Montagu in 1766. The first categoric reference to the suite lies in a series of late Regency watercolors of Ditton, now privately owned, of which only some have been published. In these sumptuous interiors, furniture by George Bullock is clearly discernible alongside earlier furniture - including the settee from the Ditton suite, then covered in green silk damask. It must also have been among the quantity of furniture reported as being saved from a fire at the house in 1812. □ □

Frustratingly, the inventories of Ditton traced to date are brief and inconclusive. However *A Probate Inventory of Ditton Park*, completed on the death of 5th Duke of Buccleuch in 1884, lists the settee from this suite: 'Library - A carved frame double end sofa with back cushions & 2 loose bolsters in silk damask'. It also records various chairs scattered throughout the principal rooms, and if the inventory includes some of this suite, they were re-upholstered in an inconsistent manner. Interestingly, imbricated 'dolphin' scale furniture was also supplied to the 4th Earl Cardigan at an earlier date by Benjamin Goodison in 1741 - 'a carved and gilt dolphin frame to match another' (T. Murdoch *et al.*, *Boughton House, The English Versailles*, London, 1992, p.135, note 27). □ □

By the early 20th century the suite was in the possession of Messrs. Mallett of Bath. Part of the suite, comprising two settees and eight armchairs, was acquired by Vernay and was subsequently sold by Walter in the landmark sale in 1960. A pair were then again sold at Christie's, London, 8 July 1999, lot 25 (£243,500). Other armchairs from the suite are in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London and in the Noel Terry Collection at Fairfax House, York. □ □

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This pair of armchairs - like all of the recently sold armchairs from this suite - displays differences in the treatment and scale of the carving and construction between each other. This would reasonably suggest that several journeymen were working simultaneously in Gordon's workshops on this extensive suite - and that inevitably differences in the chairs by different makers are visible. □□

Ditton Park: □

Ditton Park was a 17th century house inherited by Ralph, Lord Montagu, later 1st Duke of Montagu, in 1688. This suite was most probably ordered by his son-in-law, George Brudenell, 4th Earl of Cardigan, who assumed the title 1st Duke of Montagu in 1749, having inherited the estates of his father-in-law. His only son died of consumption in 1770. As a result, much of Montagu's collection, along with some of the great masterpieces his son acquired during his short life, passed to his second daughter, Lady Elizabeth Brudenell, wife of Henry, 3rd Duke of Buccleuch. The Montagu art collection, from the mid eighteenth century, was said to have been one of the finest in the country. □□ The house and contents reverted to their sons Henry James, 4th Duke of Buccleuch, and later Walter, 5th Duke (d.1884), who passed it to his younger son Lord Montagu of Beaulieu. The estate was finally given up in 1917 and sold to the Admiralty for £20,000.

Provenance:

Part of a larger set comprising twenty-four chairs and two settees supplied to George, 4th Earl of Cardigan (d. 1790) for Ditton Park, Buckinghamshire. □ Thence by descent at Ditton to 1st Baron Montagu of Beaulieu (d. 1905), second son of Walter, 5th Duke of Buccleuch. □ With Mallett, Bath in the early 20th century. □ With Arthur S. Vernay, Inc., New York (two settees and eight armchairs). □ Walter P. Chrysler, Jr.; Parke-Bernet Galleries, New York, 6-7 May 1960, lots 520-525 (two settees and eight armchairs). □ With Stair and Co., New York (four armchairs and a settee). □ Two of which are these, the other pair sold at Christies 8th July 1999 for £243,500. Another pair was sold in the Simon Sainsbury sale 18th June 2008 Lot 60 for £337,000.

Literature:

H. Cescinsky, *English Furniture of the Eighteenth Century*, n.d., circa 1910, vol. II, fig. 392, (one chair from the set). □ R. W. Symonds, 'British Antique Dealers' Association Exhibition', *The Connoisseur*, April 1929, p. 216, No. II. □ D. Nickerson, *English Furniture of the Eighteenth Century*, London, 1963, p. 59, fig. 62 (a settee from the suite). □ Victoria and Albert Museum, *English Chairs*, 3rd Edition, London, 1970, fig. 74 (one of a pair). □ *Country Life*, 17 June 1976 (a pair of chairs advertised by Mallett and Sons Ltd., London). □ P. Brown, ed., *The Noel Terry Collection of Furniture & Clocks*, London, 1987, p. 59, no. 59 (one of a pair). □ L. Synge, *Mallett's Great English Furniture*, London, 1991, p. 117, fig. 131 (a pair).

