

Maharaja Duleep Singh's Marble bust

Made By Queen Victoria's Favourite Sculptor, Rare Piece Auctioned
For £1.70 m, 60 Times Its Asking Price

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Able bust of Punjab's last sovereign maharaja was auctioned here on Thursday for nearly £2 million, some 60 times more than the asking price. It seems the transcontinental sale has enabled Duleep Singh's treasured likeness to finally reach sub-continental hands.

Julian Roup, of Bonhams, the international fine art auction house that goes back nearly 250 years, told TOI on Friday that the bust had been bought by "a UK-based collector and it is staying in the UK".

Roup, however, declined to say whether or not the bust had been bought, as widely rumoured, by a "South Asian interested in Sikh/ Punjab affairs". But he did not admit that the bust had created a palpable sense of its "powerful linkage with Sikh communities around the world". He conceded that "before the sale, there had been a strong move to send the bust to Punjab".

Duleep Singh's bust, commissioned by Queen Victoria to her favoured sculptor almost 150 years ago, has never been anywhere other than in Europe. The Queen, who had a marked weakness for the youthful Duleep Singh, commissioned her favourite sculptor to make it. Gibson executed the royal commission in Rome. The bust is understood to have stayed in Europe from then.

On Thursday night, it was sold for £1.7 million here despite Bonhams' markedly lower asking price of anything between £25,000 and £35,000.

Roup confirmed that "interest from buyers in India and Britain drove the price sky high". He said that the bust could hardly be said to have been sold for more than it was worth. "It has great artistic value... Gibson was a renowned sculptor... it was a very rare piece".

But he admitted the final sale price of was a lot "to do with an attachment to politics and history".

Roup confirmed that the unidentified seller of the bust represented that indefinable quantity uniting commerce, history and politics: "You couldn't put a price on history".

According to reports, before the sale, some potential buyers asked to be photographed standing alongside the bust in a sign that the sculpture has an almost iconic status.

Duleep Singh, who was born in 1833 to Maharaja Ranjit Singh, is seen to epitomize British Raj's most tragic story of loss. At 11, Duleep, who was the rightful owner of the world's then-biggest diamond, the Koh-i-Noor, was removed from his kingdom by the British East India Company after the Anglo-Sikh wars. Exiled to Britain, he was encouraged to lead a life of wanton pleasure.

Bonhams acknowledged in a quote from Christy Campbell, expert on Duleep Singh and author of *The Maharaja's Box* that the young Sikh king had his long hair shorn and taught Christianity. The auctioneers said, in a bland press release that "meanwhile the Koh-i-Noor diamond, glittering jewel in the crown of the Lahore treasury, was pocked by his conquerors and presented to Queen Victoria as a symbol of dominion."

The sale of the bust – at such a huge price – is seen to symbolise subtle and increasingly significant attempts to repatriate totemic symbols of sub-continental history and works of art to the former Raj.

[Courtesy: *Times of India*]



