

Finch & C^o



'OMAI' AN ENGRAVING BY JAMES CALDWELL , AFTER WILLIAM HODGES , FOR CAPTAIN JAMES COOK .

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1 ST PROOF , UNCUT MARGINS , FINE CONDITION .

CIRCA 1777

SIZE : 33 CM HIGH , 28 CM WIDE – 13 INS HIGH , 11 INS WIDE

LITERATURE

'OMAI' OR MORE CORRECTLY MAE WAS A YOUNG TAHITIAN MAN FROM HUAHINE WHOM LIEUTENANT TOBIAS FURNEAUX HAD BROUGHT BACK TO ENGLAND ON THE 'ADVENTURE' . HE WAS PAINTED BY HODGES SOMETIME BETWEEN AUGUST 1775 AND JUNE 1776 . THE PORTRAIT WAS COMMISSIONED BY JOHN HUNTER (1728 -1793) AN EMINENT SCOTTISH SURGEON AND ANATOMIST WHO HAD A GREAT INTEREST IN COMPARATIVE PHYSIOGNOMY AND A PASSION FOR EXOTIC CULTURES AND PEOPLES . HE WAS A KEEN COLLECTOR OF CURIOSITIES , CREATING A LARGE CABINET OF NUMEROUS RARE 'NATIONAL SKULLS' THAT COMPLEMENTED PICTURES OF NON-EUROPEANS .

SOLANDER'S DESCRIPTION OF OMAI UPON HIS ARRIVAL IN ENGLAND FITS BOTH HIS PORTRAIT BY HODGES AND THE PARTICULAR INTERESTS OF HUNTER : 'HE IS VERY BROWN , ALMOST A(S) BROWN AS A MULATTO . NOT AT ALL HANDSOME , BUT WELL MADE . HIS NOSE IS A LITTLE BROADISH AND I BELIEVE WE HAVE TO THANK HIS WIDE NOSTRILS FOR THE VISIT HE HAS PAID US - FOR HE SAYS , THAT THE PEOPLE OF HIS OWN COUNTRY LAUGHED AT HIM UPON THE ACCOUNT OF HIS FLATISH NOSE AND DARK HUE ' .

OMAI WAS ADOPTED BY SIR JOSEPH BANKS AND THE EARL OF SANDWICH AND INTRODUCED TO FASHIONABLE LONDON SOCIETY , INCLUDING GEORGE III AND THE ROYAL FAMILY . HE CAUSED MUCH AMUSEMENT AND WAS GREATLY ADMIRER BY THE LADIES OF THE COURT WHO VIED WITH EACH OTHER TO SIT NEXT TO HIM AT TABLE . DINNER PARTIES WERE HELD IN HIS HONOUR AND HE RECEIVED NUMEROUS OFFERS FROM ARISTOCRATIC LADIES TO TEACH HIM TO READ AND WRITE .

HE WAS PAINTED BY SEVERAL ARTISTS , MOST FAMOUSLY BY SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS WHOSE PORTRAIT OF OMAI HUNG UNTIL RECENTLY IN CASTLE HOWARD , UNTIL IT WAS SOLD , AND THEN BOUGHT FOR THE NATION IN 2003 AT A COST OF £ 9 MILLION . IT NOW HANGS IN THE NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY .