Lot 45

THEODORE WORES
(American, 1860-1939)
Lotus Pond, Shiba, Tokyo 20 1/4 x 26 7/8in overall: 31 x 37in

Sold for US$ 257,000 (CA$ 343,500) inc. premium

CALIFORNIA AND WESTERN PAINTINGS & SCULPTURE
2 Aug 2016, 18:00 PDT
Theodore Wores (American, 1860-1939)
Lotus Pond, Shiba, Tokyo
signed, inscribed and dated 'Theo Wores. Tokio. 1886' with Japanese seal (lower right)
oil on canvas
20 1/4 x 26 7/8in
overall: 31 x 37in
Painted in 1886

FOOTNOTES
Exhibited

Literature

Theodore Wores was born in San Francisco. He was one of the leading California painters of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He went to Munich to study painting in 1875 and became the youngest of the "Duveneck Boys," a colorful band of art students who traveled to Florence, Rome, Venice and Paris with Frank Duveneck, the leading American painter in Munich. After 1880, Wores abandoned the dark palette associated with the Munich style in favor of bright, Impressionist colors and he began to sketch in oils in the open air in addition to painting formal works in the studio. Returning to San Francisco in 1882, Wores broke new artistic ground by being the first serious painter to depict San Francisco's Chinatown.

A friendship with James Abbott McNeill Whistler led Wores to become interested in Japanese art and to visit Japan. His residence in Meiji Japan, from 1885 to 1887 and 1892 to 1894, among the first for an American artist, amounted to the most extended visit for any Western artist. He produced scores of plein air oil sketches showing temples, gardens, and scenes of village life; all largely unseen and unrecorded by Westerners. It is interesting to note that Wores was one of the very first Western artists to be allowed into the country to record and paint Japanese life during the Meiji Period. Japan was very much a closed society before Commodore Perry's arrival in Tokyo Bay on July 8, 1853. Perry sought to re-establish, for the first time in over 200 years, regular trade and discourse between Japan and the western world.

In the late 1880's, Wores worked in New York City in rooms adjacent to those of William Merritt Chase in the famous Tenth Street Studio building. He exhibited widely, became a member of the Century Club, and concluded his peripatetic career with painting trips to Hawaii (1901), Samoa (1902), and Spain (1903) before settling in San Francisco.

The Frame:
Arguably of equal importance, and significant to the work itself, is the Aesthetic Movement hand carved and gilt camphor wood frame which complements and reinforces the composition of the painting. The phenomenal sculptural quality, executed in deep relief, is netsuke-like in precision. Under Wores' own tutelage, it was created in a workshop of wood carvers whose 16th century ancestors carved the ornaments of the famous temples of Nikko. The graceful, deeply carved lotus blossoms, pods and leaves within a swirling movement of water represent a design redolent of Art Nouveau. Turtles and their young peer with intent curiosity into the pond in which they inhabit. Wores writes that in order to capture the exact
movements of the carved turtles, the artisan used live turtles with little strings tied to them so that he could observe and carve their movements. Camphor wood, or iron wood which it is sometimes called, is one of the hardest known woods. Centuries ago, the unsanctioned cutting of a camphor tree was punishable by death. It was mostly reserved for sacred ceremonial items, such as instruments used in temples. The brilliant unification of frame and painting produces a stunning effect, which did not go unnoticed by critics and luminaries of the day. Exuberant reviews won Wores noteworthy praise in the capitals of Europe, where he exhibited his Japan works alongside James Abbott McNeill Whistler. Many of these works soon found homes in the grand residences of European royalty.

It is interesting to note that the plants depicted in the painting are lotuses, not water lilies. That the title is *Lotus Pond* and not *Lily Pond* is significant in that the lotus is a different genus than the lily. Monet's water lilies rest gracefully on the surface of the water, while Wores' lotus blossoms rise above the water's surface to display their iconic blossoms, an important symbol to the cultures of the East.

In William Gerds' book *Theodore Wores: An American Artist in Meiji Japan*, this painting is listed as one of the artist's 'lost paintings'. The sepia tone photographs in the book are from early files kept by the artist, but at the time of the book's publication in 1993, this painting was considered a lost work. To our knowledge, only two paintings have ever surfaced with these original netsuke-style carved and gilt camphor wood frames.