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NEWS

02/2017

Lot 396

Bazile-Charles Le Roy
„Montre Médaillon à Tact“
circa 1800



**Jewellery with secret message „decoded“:
Heures d'Amour, a gift from a king**

One of the top lots of our upcoming auction on November 18, 2017 at the Sheraton Frankfurt Airport Hotel is a precious „Montre Médaillon à Tact“ in a Tavernier „forme collier“ case; a pocket watch that was given as a gift by Napoleon’s brother Jerome Bonaparte, King of Westphalia. The watch bears a concealed engraving „Donnée par le Roi“ (a gift from the king) and a secret acrostic message „HEURES D’AMOUR“ (love hours) – an exquisite piece of jewellery that, 200 years ago, was used to send a tender message...

Tavernier created this fine „forme collier“ case, where front and back are lavishly decorated with fine radial engine-turned pattern and translucent powder-blue enamelling; the revolving front lid has an applied diamond-studded arrow pointer „sous émail“, indicating the hours. The engine-turned case band has lustrous, multi-coloured gemstone touch studs and pearls set in gold. The French names of the gemstones used for the

watch are Hessonite, Emeraude, Uvite, Rhodolite, Emeraude, Saphire, Diamant, Améthyste, Morganite, Opale, Uvite and Rhodolite – their initial letters spell the secret message „HEURES D’AMOUR“.

The history of so-called „acrostic“ jewellery dates back to the 18th century, when Jean-Baptiste Mellerio, jeweller to French Queen Marie-Antoinette, had the idea to spell out secret messages with precious gemstones. At the time of French Empress Marie-Louise, the famous jeweller Chaumet in Paris created a book of fine gemstones and „rewrote“ the alphabet with their initials, so that they could be used to spell out names, poetic words or messages of love. Most of these pieces are used in a romantic context, there are, however,





also examples when they were used to subtly express political protest - such as arrangements of stones that spelled the word „repeal“ to support campaigns in England against slavery.

The most frequently used words in French were „souvenir“ and „amitié“ (friendship), which was spelled out by the French names of the gemstones Améthyste, Morganite, lolite or Iris, Tourmaline, lolite or Iris, and Emeraude.

Short words were commonly used for rings and broches, while longer phrases or even short love letters were worked into bracelets that were usually worn by women. Men would wear the name of their beloved or a love letter from her as a glittering secret in the cases of their watches or in snuffboxes.

It is said that Napoleon was fascinated by acrostic jewellery and ordered several such bracelets to give to members of his family on special occasions. It did not take long for the new trend to catch on in England - even though France and England were at war in the early 19th century, French was the language of the court and the upper classes and the acrostic alphabet was based on the French gemstone names (which were in any case mostly identical to the English names).

In England acrostic jewellery remained popular until far into the 20th century. Obviously some letters of the acrostic alphabet were adapted over the years such as „k“ and „w“, which existed in the English version but not in French; different names were used or even other, individual materials - this appealed to many customers because it made their romantic messages even more personal. It is, however, also the unfortunate reason why many of the remaining pieces have not yet been deciphered...