

Old Graham's philatelic tales 1

Towards the end of the 19th Century, the property of a merchant, who had carried on business with Ceylon for many years, was being sold at auction in Bombay. A stamp collector with time on his hands had wandered into the auction room mainly out of curiosity. As he made his way around the room, he noticed two Chinese gentlemen minutely examining an old vase, evidently of ancient eastern craftsmanship. It was obvious that they held it in high esteem.

As they were replacing the vase on to the table, they discovered the base could be unscrewed. However, they only found inside some dusty documents, which they pushed back inside, and screwed up the base again. But the stamp collector, although he had been watching from a distance, had noticed something which the two Chinese had failed to see, that there were two stamps on the old documents in the vase. He could not properly distinguish what they were, but no sooner than the Chinese gentlemen had disappeared than he hurriedly unscrewed the vase, and pulled out the documents. While he had hoped to find some old stamps, you can imagine his surprise that he had discovered a very fine copy of the eightpenny brown, and another of the fourpenny rose, both from the first imperforate issues of Ceylon. (The two would currently catalogue at about £ 6000 today). This was a wonderful find!

Fearing that some other collector would discover the secret of the vase, he kept an eagle-eyed watch over it. Imagine his discomfort when he observed several Chinese and Japanese gentlemen examining and admiring the vase.

When the day of the auction arrived, the stamp collector eagerly awaited the turn of Lot 158, the old vase. No sooner than it was held up by the auctioneer, a Chinese bid thirty rupees for it. A Japanese gent joined in, and between them they raised the bidding to 250 rupees. The collector could not understand this, for he was sure that nobody else had discovered the secret of the vase. So he started to bid, and much to the annoyance of the oriental gentlemen, he secured the vase for 400 rupees.

He paid the cashier of the auction room at once and hurried out with his prize, anxious only to unscrew the base and obtain the precious stamps. However, when he did so, he found to his great horror, that the documents and the classic stamps had disappeared! He was also in such a shock that he dropped the vase, which smashed into a thousand pieces on the stone floor, much to the intense annoyance and indignation of the Chinese and Japanese gentlemen. But the collector cared nothing for their feelings; he was only worried about those two stamps.

Where had the documents gone? Who had taken them? The Auctioneer knew the story. Shortly before the sale, that Bombay merchant had written to the auctioneer telling him that his wife had left two documents in the vase, and as they referred to her property in Ceylon, could he kindly return the documents, which he did.

What the stamp collector said to this story has unfortunately not been recorded, but what would you have said.....?