HOWGEGO
HISTORIC + MODERN

Strongbox, Safe, Late 16th Century, Nuremberg, Iron, Naïve, Painted, Oak Stand

Sold

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REF: 11332

Height: 49 cm (19.3")

Width: 80.5 cm (31.7")

Depth: 46.5 cm (18.3")

Description

This is a particularly fine example of these atmospheric, early safes with a rare inner lock plate. The naïve painting on this strongbox has survived in excellent condition, exuding charm and character. The mermaid inner lock plate is a rare design, possibly alluding to the source of the money, valuables or documents that were intended to be stored in the strongbox coming from the sea. Documents and private papers are recorded as being kept in strong boxes, which were also used to safeguard other items of personal value.

These iron bound chests were made in Southern Germany, particularly Nuremberg in the late-16th and 17th centuries and exported throughout Europe. They were called 'Nuremberg Chests' until the Victorians applied the term 'Armada Chests' to them in the 19th century. This presumably originated in the erroneous belief that these chests were designed to hold bullion for the financing of the Spanish Armada, and that they were subsequently washed up from wrecked ships. The theory is negated by the fact that most examples are considerably later in date than the Armada. The chests vary little in design but were made in all sizes, from a few inches in length intended for jewellery, to five or six feet in length, suitable for a banker's reserve. They served as the forerunners of the modern commercial steel safe. Each chest has an intricate and complicated locking mechanism, some have hidden keyholes, false panels or a particular sequence of actions to open them.

The top with eighteen, panels reinforced with strap work, and bolts and retaining their original stylised vignettes of flowers and foliage. The central rectangular key plate revealing the keyhole. The key operating the original locking mechanism on the interior of the lid throwing twelve bolts. Protected by a later inner lock plate engraved in relief with three panels depicting mermaids amongst scrolling acanthus leaves. The interior lid decorated with incised acanthus leaves. The hinges original. The interior painted red. The front with sixteen, panels reinforced with strap work and bolts. Four landscape vignettes amongst stylised native flower heads and trailing stems. Twin hasp fittings, one retaining a 17th century padlock, the key misplaced. The false escutcheon centered on the front. The sides with six, panels reinforced with strap work and bolts and original carrying handles and a repeat of the decoration on the front. Retaining original, fine, naïve stylized vignettes of flowers, trailing stems and landscapes on a green ground. German most likely Nuremberg, last quarter of the 16th century.

Related Avebury Manor, South Bedchamber, illustrates a similar strongbox in formal bedroom with an oak tester bed in a Tudor house.

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