Chest of Drawers Chest Oyster Veneer Decoration Painted English Vernacular Folk

Sold

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REF: 11371

Height: 88 cm (34.6")

Width: 89 cm (35")

Depth: 54 cm (21.3")

Description

An exceptionally rare, English, vernacular 17th century elm chest of drawers with wood grain decoration imitating oyster veneers

Wood graining was used in elite interiors during the Baroque period at the end of the 17th primarily to give the impression that panelling was made from a more expensive timber, although the most commonly imitated wood was oak, as well as adding pattern and richness to an interior. The same philosophy was applied to furniture although it is impossible to assess how much furniture was grained as few pieces survive due to its vulnerable and perishable nature and grained decoration is rarely mentioned in inventories. The construction of this chest of drawers is typical of the late-17th century with the deep second drawer; a time when laburnum and walnut oyster veneers were starting to be used in cabinet making becoming the latest, expensive fashion amongst the elite. Some countries like the USA, Southern Germany, France, Northern Italy, and Scandinavia have a strong tradition of painted furniture and in comparison not much vernacular furniture in the UK was painted and only a few wood grained pieces survive. This chest of drawers was painted to elevate its status into a luxury item and, ironically, the charming naïve, wood grain decoration is now rarer than the expensive laburnum or walnut oyster veneers it was imitating.

It is remarkable that the wood grain decoration on this chest of drawers has survived so clearly on the front after 350 years of use, particularly as it is a utilitarian piece which the replacement of the handles demonstrates. The dyes used in paints, glazes, and colored varnishes at the time were organic and it was common practices for manufacturers and merchants to dilute and adulterate paint and artists were focusing on immediate effect rather than permanence so painted effects are vulnerable to environmental conditions as well as handling, polishing and dusting. The original appearance of original painted surfaces on period furniture can only be surmised today, as their current appearance is always a muted shadow of the original aesthetic which would have been bright and bold.

The top is in two sections, faced with a moulded edge. Given that all the other surfaces were painted to simulate laburnum or walnut cabinet furniture, it is most likely that the top was also and under very bright light you can see traces of paint and varnishes. The front is fitted with four long drawers, delineated with 'D mouldings, each divided vertically simulating a pair of short drawers. The top drawer is shallow with rectangular panels retaining traces of the original painted gadrooning. The second drawer is deep with 'H' shaped panels containing a pair of large, original, painted, central oyster veneers with smaller oyster veneers in each corner and rectangular panels of gadrooning above and below. The third and fourth drawers have octagonal moulded panels each containing a pair of large, original, painted oyster veneers. There are faint traces of the original painted decoration on the central rectangular sections below where the original, pierced brass escutcheons are fitted. The chest stands on the original bracket feet. The brass handles are later which is customary after 350 year...

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