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AN IMPORTANT PAIR OF GEORGE II GILTWOOD ARMCHAIRS ATTRIBUTED TO WILLIAM AND RICHARD GOMM CIRCA 1755

Each cartouche-shaped upholstered backrest within a pierced foliate acanthus- and *rocaille*-carved conforming frame, the acanthus-scrolled handholds on S-scrolled acanthus-carved armrest supports above a serpentine-fronted drop-in seat within a conforming pierced foliate-scrolled acanthus and *rocaille*-carved apron, raised on acanthus-carved cabriole legs terminating in acanthus-scrolled feet. Covered in a green patterned silk fabric.

Measurements:

Height of backrest:	42.5 in	108 cm
Width:	29 in	73.75 cm
Depth:	33 in	83.8 cm

Provenance:

Almost certainly originally part of a suite of seat furniture, which included at least seven other arm chairs which were either commissioned by Francis Palmer of Castle Lacken, Ballycastle, Co. Mayo, who married Elizabeth, daughter of Sir Robert Echlin, 2nd Bt. (d. 1757), purchasing in 1780 Rush House which they re-named Kenure Park. Rush House was Elizabeth's ancestral home and had been lost by her first cousin Sir Henry Echlin 3rd Bt. through gambling debts, or by Sir Roger Palmer, 1st Bt. of Castlclackan, Co. Mayo and M. P. for Jamestown and later Portarlinton, who inherited the Kenure estate on the death of his first cousin Robert Palmer in 1811. The date at which the present chairs possibly left Kenure Park is unknown, as is the history of another pair of chairs which was sold at Parke-Bernet Galleries, New York, November 9, 1956, lot 301, the catalogue indicating that they had been purchased by the Countess Constantini from French & Company, New York. Three chairs from the suite passed by descent at Kenure Park to Roderick George Fenwick-Palmer, C. B. E. (d.1968), and were consequently sold by the Trustees of the Palmer Estate at Kenure Park by James H. North, Dublin, 21-24 September 1964, lot 334. One of these is now in a private collection, and the pair was with Mallett & Son (Antiques) Ltd., London, 1968, and subsequently in the collection of Gerald Hochschild, being sold by him, Sotheby's, London, November 9, 1978, lot 43.

Exhibited:

One of the chairs sold at the Kenure Park sale in September 1964 was exhibited at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, *Rococo Art and Design in Hogarth's England*, May 16 – September 30, 1984, no. L61, p. 182.

The form and detail of the present chairs is closely related to a drawing which is included in a group of three surviving manuscript books in the Collection of The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, Delaware, the first volume containing manuscript designs for furniture, rooms, and ornamental designs, some of which are signed by William Gomm and dated July, August, and November 18, 1761. Further evidence of his ownership of the books is evidenced by an example of multiplication possibly addressed to his fifteen year old son William with the measurements of his room at Clerkenwell Close with the request as to 'how many feet of carpeting would cover it'. The design, which is annotated *A*, is pasted into the book with four other drawings in the *rococo* style, *B* being for a pier mirror, *C* for a girandoles, *D* for another pier mirror, and *E* a pier table, naturalistically carved in the form of a tree; a table based on this design, and subsequently shown to have had a Gomm family provenance was sold at Sotheby's sale of the contents of Groombridge Place, the estate of Walton Mountain, September, 15-16, 1992, lot 49.

William Gomm (c. 1698-1780), was the son of a yeoman farmer in Chinnor, and was apprenticed in 1713 to Hugh Maskall of London, a member of the Leathersellers' Company, joining this on the completion of his apprenticeship and subsequently being made free of the Upholders' Company in 1770. First established at Peterborough Court, Smithfield, in 1725, he then moved to Newcastle House, Clerkenwell Court, building a double range of workshops over the surviving medieval nun's hall. By 1756 he had taken his eldest son Richard (born c. 1729) into the business, the partnership continuing until bankruptcy occurred in 1776, although it was noted at that time that Richard 'filed by faults not his own'. It is interesting to note that at some time in the 1730s William became associated with the German cabinet-maker Abraham Roentgen; Roentgen family memoirs mention him 'working with a number of skilled furniture makers in London including one named as 'gern', at Newcastle House, presumably Gomm (Beard and Gilbert, *Dictionary of English Furniture Makers, 1660-1840*, 1986, pp. 349-350).

Gomm's known commissions include supplying various items of furniture to Richard Hoare of Barn Elms, J. Buller of Morval, Cornwall, the Banking premises of Glyn, Halifax and Co., of Birchin Lane, London and Richard Weddell of Pall Mall, London, the father of William Weddell of Newby Hall Yorkshire; the majority of these pieces appear to be of a 'domestic' nature, either of walnut or mahogany. The most extensive commission carried out by the partnership appears to be that carried out for the 5th Lord Leigh at Stoneleigh Park in 1763, and included '183 assorted chairs, together with tables, dressing tables, clothes presses, close stools, a chest on chest, shaving table, commode dressing table, Pembroke table and a sideboard' (Beard and Gilbert, *op. cit.*) Many of these survived at Stoneleigh until dispersed in the 1980s, all of them being again of a 'domestic' nature. Apart

from the present chairs, the most ambitious pieces of furniture, which have been attributed to Gomm, are the aforementioned table from Groombridge Place, and an elaborately carved altar table, the apron centered by a cherub's head made for the chapel at Stoneleigh.

The present chairs are designed in the full *rococo* taste of the late 1750s and 1760s, chairs of a similar form being illustrated in contemporary pattern books such as Thomas Chippendale's *The Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker's Director*, published in three editions between 1754 and 1763, and *The Universal System of Household Furniture*, published in 1762 by William Ince and John Mayhew, where they are described as *French Chairs*. Gomm's manuscript design and that of the present chairs is particularly notable for its lightness, the pierced elements of the carving providing a serious challenge to the chair-maker to provide sufficient strength to the frame overall. This is certainly not indicated either in the published designs of Chippendale or Ince and Mayhew, although a manuscript design by Matthias Lock which is closely related to a surviving chair which appears in various portraits by the painter Richard Cosway, also has these features.

Kenure Park, Rush, Co. Dublin, was originally built in 1703 for the Dukes of Ormonde, subsequently becoming the property of Sir Henry Echlin, the 3rd Bt. After he lost the estate through bankruptcy, it was purchased by the daughter of the 2nd Baronet and her husband Francis Palmer. It then descended in the Palmer family until 1964 when Colonel R. H. Fenwick-Palmer sold the contents, the house and estate being sold to the Irish Land Commissioners.

Unfortunately the house, which had fallen into severe decay, was demolished in 1978, the only part now remaining being the imposing portico by Papworth erected in the 1840s. The few surviving photographs of the interiors of the house indicate that a number of rooms still retained their fine *rococo* plasterwork probably by Robert West of Dublin and carved woodwork which remained after an extensive fire in 1827 only to be subsequently destroyed in 1978.

It is not known when the present chairs left the house, only three chairs from the suite being sold at the auction of the contents of the house in 1964, at which time an unusual ormolu-mounted lacquered commode by Pierre Langlois, and also a superb George II parcel-gilt padouk cabinet-on-stand attributed to Thomas Chippendale were also sold. In the *Chinese* manner with *rococo* decoration, this was recently sold at Christie's, London, June 18, 2008, lot 8 for £2,729,250.

See:

E. T. Joy, *The Country Life Book of Chairs*, London, 1967, pp. 50-53, figs. 49 & 50

John Hardy, 'The Discovery of Cosway's Chair', *Country Life*, March 15, 1973, pp. 265-267, fig. 4, 5

L. Boynton, 'William and Richard Gomm', *The Burlington Magazine*, June 1980, pp. 395-400, fig. 25

