



## A CABINET RETURNS TO THE CAPE



E-mails and the Internet bring the world to our doorstep. Not even an auction in a remote corner of the globe can take place without the word spreading. Earlier last year several antique dealers in South Africa received e-mails tipping them off that a 'Dutch colonial'

cabinet was to be auctioned in Nantes, France. And what a find it turned out to be: a rare and magnificent 18th-century Cape storage cabinet equalled in design and quality to only three other known examples.

The dealer fortunate enough to buy the cabinet and bring the prize back home was Cape dealer and historian, Deon Viljoen. "The cabinet had been in the same family since the early 1800s," says Deon, "but further information was not available."

How such an outstanding piece of cabinetry came to be in France remains a mystery. The greater mystery is that there are no records of the fine craftsmen who made it. Who were the men who laboured to create such a beautifully proportioned and elegant piece of furniture with its curved pediment, doors with perfectly matched wood grain and four drawers, the bottom one incorporating a carved apron? And as Deon says: "There must have been detailed drawings made for such a superb piece.

"Little is known about Cape cabinetmaking," says Deon, "even though the carvers and cabinetmakers were clearly capable of producing quality furniture on a par with any made at that time in

Amsterdam or London."

Fortunately the cabinet can be fairly accurately dated through the original cast-silver handles and escutcheon, and brass lock and hinges. It is very rare for the original silver fittings to still be intact. The handles and escutcheons are by the silversmith Frans Hillegers (1744 – 1814). He was registered as a silversmith at the Cape of Good Hope from 1767. Hillegers modelled his silver handles and escutcheons on existing brass examples imported from England, the neoclassical designs of which are recorded in the archives of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

"Brass or gilt-brass mounts were the norm on European and British furniture in the 18th century," Deon writes in

his latest catalogue, *Uit Verre Streken*. "The use of silver on Cape furniture seems

to be related to Asian rather than European influences. At the Cape, as in Asia, silver was an important signifier of status and wealth. For example, the wearing of silver buttons and shoe buckles was restricted to high-ranking citizens."

The silver fittings on the Nantes cabinet are identical to those on a cabinet at Groote Schuur in what was once the bedroom of Cecil John Rhodes. The style of the bottom drawer with the carved apron is similar in design to one in the Tongaat collection in KwaZulu-Natal.

"In the last 40 to 50 years, no finer piece of Cape furniture has come on to the market," says Deon, "and the fact that after 250 years it is still in the most remarkable condition is credit to the fine craftsmen who made it." ▷

