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Democracy Dies in Darkness

THE MARKET FOR A MARCOS

ORNATE FURNISHINGS UP FOR AUCTION

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By Matt Schudel

NEW YORK -- First of all, there weren't any shoes for sale.

But collectors and the merely curious did get a glimpse of the life style of the rich and famous deposed first family of the Philippines Saturday as furnishings from the Upper East Side town house of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos went on display at Christie's auction house.

What they saw, if not exactly disappointing, was fairly mundane by the standards of the pedigreed stock usually seen at Christie's: chandeliers that looked as though they'd been wired by a junior high shop student; some tall gilt mirrors and deteriorating rococo tables; a beat-up 18th-century sofa with the stuffing spilling out of the arms and cushions.

The furnishings were all heavy and ornate, but people secretly hoping to find outrageous displays of the gaudy and the ridiculous had to be at least a little chagrined, as Ferdinand and Imelda proved to be something less than the Jim and Tammy of the Pacific Rim.

The Marcos furniture is coming up for sale because the Filipino government of Corazon Aquino is cleaning out some of the Marcoses' old residences in an effort to pump a little cash into the national treasury. Four Christie's auctions between June 13 and June 30 will offer furnishings from the Marcoses' Manhattan pied-a`-terre, and all the proceeds will go to the Philippine government through an agency called the Presidential Commission on Good Government.

The highest estimates for the Marcos furnishings were \$12,000 each for a painted 18th-century Italian commode and a French Renaissance walnut cabinet.

"We expect the collection will do quite well because of the strong demand from our buyers of continental furniture," said Jean-Marie Van Isacker, a specialist in European furniture for Christie's.

Fourteen lots of items on display Saturday were mixed in among other collections of European furniture and looked rather shabby by comparison. The Marcoses hurriedly

furnished their town house in 1981 by buying out the complete collection of Mr. and Mrs. Leslie R. Samuels just before it was to be sold at auction.

"They were not putting too much attention on their own tastes," Van Isacker said. "They wanted something very quickly -- which is really poor. They didn't know European furniture very well."

Standing next to the French walnut cabinet, Van Isacker said: "A lot of the carving is not original and was added at a later date. Also, this ugly French varnish won't help."

He admitted that if he were choosing, he wouldn't have some of the items in his own house.

Indeed, some of the Marcoses' pieces looked like leftovers from a high-class rummage sale. Two 17th-century Italian wall lights had been electrified with tape and stereo wire, and metal tubes were stuck where candles would originally have been. Crystal beads were tied on with wire. The 18th-century sofa -- described as "An Italian Rococo Walnut Canape" -- was torn and frayed, and its ancient white stuffing was showing through the holes. Some of the heavy gilt on tables and wall lights was cracked and beginning to peel.

Even if every item in the catalogue were to realize its highest estimate, the Filipino government would make only \$68,000 from the sale.

One American close to the Filipino Commission on Good Government said that many other, finer items used to fill the Marcoses' town house on East 66th Street, less than a block from Central Park. The house was apparently used exclusively for entertaining. A disco was on the top floor, there were four Steinway pianos (including one reportedly reserved for the personal use of Van Cliburn), impressionist paintings hung on the walls, and Imelda Marcos kept million-dollar bracelets in jewelry boxes. But after Marcos was deposed and representatives of the new Filipino government began to move in, the jewelry boxes were empty and many of the richer items had allegedly vanished.

On Saturday, the town house was locked, its windows grimy, and paint was peeling off the window sills. The entryway was dirty and littered.

The Manhattan town house is only one of many Marcos possessions the presidential commission is looking into. The commission is trying to ferret out Marcos' property around the world, sell it and send the money back to the Philippines.

The Christie's sale is among the first, but others may follow. Besides the New York town house, the Marcoses allegedly owned homes on Long Island and near Princeton, N.J.

But on Saturday, nobody seemed to be thinking about politics at Christie's. In the first two hours the Marcos furnishings were on public display, they attracted serious attention only from a couple who brought their own folding yardstick to measure a gilt mirror. The mirror, with an estimated price of \$4,000 to \$6,000, turned out to be four feet wide and six feet high.

"Where are we going to put it?" the man wanted to know.

"Please, please!" the woman responded. "In the living room. Where do you think I'd put it?"