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She devoted her life to the Health Service – but

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The £6m TV stand

Sold for a fortune, antique chest that cost £100 and 'got lost' for 70 years



Paul Harris reports

FOR more than half a century they had scoured the world for it, put out feelers to any likely collector, sent its description to international auction houses.

But there was one place the Victoria & Albert museum didn't look in their hunt for the rare antique Japanese chest. It was under someone's telly in a house a few hundred yards away.

Unknown to the museum and a legion of experts who joined the search, the exquisitely decorated 17th century lacquered coffer, one of only ten left in the world, was being used as a TV stand by an owner unaware of its exceptional provenance.

Yesterday the oft bin lidded casket, bought for £100 and also used as a drinks cabinet, became a treasure chest in its own right. It sold at auction for £6.3million – and once again eluded the V&A when it was snapped up by a Dutch museum.

The ornate coffer, fashioned in cedar wood, metal and gold lacquer, is believed to have been made in Kyoto by master craftsman Kaomichi Nagashige. It bears intricate depictions of celebrated Japanese myths, including The Tale of Genji, widely acclaimed as the world's first novel.

What the illustrations do not reveal, however, is the extraordinary journey of the chest's travels from sought-after artwork to make-a-suit piece of furniture.

The story begins in 1640 when the head of the Dutch East India Company's Japanese office commissioned an order including four extraordinarily fine coffers. They

were sold 18 years later with other lacquerware to French First Minister Cardinal Mazarin, and added to his extensive collection. Two were later acquired by British poet William Beckford. Beckford's daughter Euphemia married the Duke of Hamilton and the coffers would form part of the Hamilton Palace contents sale of 1882, staged to raise funds for the palace upkeep.

The V&A bought one coffer and the other, a larger one, was sold to collector Sir Trevor Lawrence, then to Welsh colliery owner Sir Clifford Cory. When Cory died in 1941, as one expert phrased it: "It

disappeared off the radar." Unknown to the art world, a London-based Polish doctor called Zamiejski had bought it at a bargain price – and later sold it to a French Shell Oil engineer in 1970 for £100. At current values it would equate to roughly £1,250 – around 5,000 times less than the chest is now worth.

Trouble was, the Frenchman decided the chest would make a fine base for his television. And for 16 years, that's what he used it for at his house in South Kensington, just a three-minute walk from the V&A. Meanwhile the museum and other interested parties continued

their search. When the engineer retired in 1986 he took it home to the Loire Valley, where he used it as a drinks bar and store cabinet. It resurfaced only after he died, when his family began a clear-out.

Auctioneer Philippe Rouillac and his brother Aymeric recognised the chest's likely worth and traced its remarkable history before it sold in France yesterday.

Delighted Dutch curator Memmo Fitski, head of East Asian art at Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum, said: "The thing to note about this chest is that it is the best of the best. It was the best when it was made and the

same still applies today. It has an incredible back story which makes it all the more special."

Worth £6.3million? Yes, it was a lot of money, but you have to pay for quality and it is worth every penny,"

Julia Hutt, curator of the V&A's East Asian department, said she was relieved the chest had resurfaced. She added: "It would have been fantastic for us to have been able to bid for the chest but like many museums around the world we didn't have the money."

"I was delighted to hear the Rijksmuseum had won the auction – it is a very fitting home for the chest."



Prize lot: Auctioneer Aymeric Rouillac with the chest