

CHRISTIE'S

“Why, the whole world will pay to see this...”

Carl Denham, King Kong, 1933



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THE EIGHTH WONDER OF THE WORLD



KING KONG ARMATURE
ESTIMATE: £100,000-150,000

Popular Culture: Film & Entertainment Memorabilia

24 November 2009

"And now, ladies and gentlemen...I'm going to show you the greatest thing your eyes have ever beheld. He was a king and a god in the world he knew, but now he comes to civilization merely a captive - a show to gratify your curiosity.

Ladies and gentlemen, look at Kong, the Eighth Wonder of the World."

Carl Denham, King Kong, 1933

Just as fictional explorer and film director Carl Denham enthralled crowds in the 1933 epic, seventy-five years on Christie's South Kensington invites you to journey back and share in the spectacle that was King Kong as it presents the giant ape himself as the highlight of the November Popular Culture sale. This unique relic, the 22-inch armature (metal skeleton) (estimate: £100,000-150,000), was used to allow the animated ape to scale the dizzying heights of the Empire State Building in the films poignant and climactic final scenes.

The King Kong storyline was the vision of adventurer and documentary maker Merian C. Cooper who worked alongside cinema legends including RKO chief technician Willis O'Brien to breathe life into this risky and expensive production. O'Brien, a pioneer in stop-motion animation, took on the challenge of creating the life-like illusion of a 50 foot ape.

The remarkable, life-like appearance of the miniature models was largely due to a unique process O'Brien devised for building them. This process began with his customised design of highly detailed metal skeletons or armatures, the rarest of which will be on offer at Christie's South Kensington. Each armature was meticulously designed with an interlocking frame of ball and socket joints which allowed flexible, life-like movement whilst remaining rigid enough to hold position during the painstaking stop-motion process of filming one frame at a time. Once constructed, the armature was then sculpted into Kong's body using cotton and rubber to form muscles covered in a layer of moulded liquid latex as skin and finished with rabbit's fur. And so King Kong was born.

Accounts vary as to how many armatures were made for the film's leading character Kong. The scale of the miniatures used in *King Kong* and in particular that of Kong himself was a major consideration during the process of filming. It is believed that two 18 inch models were used largely for the filming of the Skull Island sequences, however when it came to the dramatic New York City scenes Cooper demanded more impact and so a larger 22-inch armature was created to impose itself upon the city sky line. Only one armature of this size is believed to have been made to meet the dramatic demands of the films climax, rendering this relic arguably one of the most exceptional historic artefacts of the 1933 production, and it is this artefact Christie's South Kensington is proud to present for sale on 24 November 2009.

Auction: Tuesday 24 November

Viewing: Saturday 21 – Tuesday 24 November

Notes to Editors:

Volumes have been written about the making of the 1933 masterpiece of stop-motion animation *King Kong* and the extraordinary technical achievements this film embodied.

In brief: stop-motion animation is a process whereby 3-D miniature models are brought to life by filming them one frame at a time and making fractional adjustments to the model's position between each frame.

RKO's production of *King Kong* was groundbreaking for a number of reasons. At the time of its release, audiences were thrilled by the life-like appearance of the fantasy creatures and the intense drama of the action packed story. The artistic genius and technical skill employed in the making of *King Kong* continues to inspire generations of contemporary filmmakers and moviegoers to this day.

It was adventurer and documentary maker Merian C. Cooper who devised the thrilling story of the giant 50 foot ape; and who with fellow adventurer, colleague and director Ernst B. Schoedsack in 1931 refined the outline of the film's dramatic concept and persuaded studio executive David O. Selznick to give this risky and expensive production the go-ahead. It was however, another cinema legend, Willis O'Brien whose artistic genius brought the film to life.

Willis O'Brien, Chief Technician at RKO studios, was a pioneer in stop-motion animation. The remarkable life-like appearance of his miniatures was largely due to a unique process he devised for building them incorporating his customised design of a highly detailed metal skeleton or armature for each model.

The scale of the miniatures used in *King Kong* and in particular that of Kong himself was a major consideration during the process of filming. It is reported the bodies of two 18 inch models for Kong were constructed. These were based on a one-inch to one-foot scale, making the full size Kong on screen appear to be 18 foot high. Only one armature for the larger size Kong is believed to have been made and used specifically for the spellbinding New York sequences. This 22 inch *King Kong* Armature has survived until now due to the foresight and tenacity of cinema industry insider and miniature enthusiast Eugene Hilchey.

Hilchey's quest for *King Kong* artefacts began in 1949 when he first saw and photographed several miniatures from this film, in the miniature department at RKO studios. Over the course of the next few years, Hilchey became chairman of a committee set up to collect motion picture artefacts for a 'Hollywood Museum' project. Hilchey finally received custody of this 22 inch Armature in 1967 when the miniature department where it had been housed, was closed for demolition. Hilchey carefully preserved this remarkable piece and a fascinating archive of accompanying photographs from then until now.

In the words of Eugene Hilchey "...*King Kong's phenomenon is 'universal' and my desire now is to be able to make it available for people everywhere to see King Kong's secret - his 'armature'*". For this reason Hilchey has entrusted this truly historic piece to Bison Archives/ Productions, who have brought it to Christie's with a significant quantity of documentation supporting their meticulous research, so that this Armature can be launched onto the world's stage where it belongs.

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