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Auction of computing papers calculated to attract rich geeks

By Mike Cassidy

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So Christie's, auctioneer to the really rich, is getting ready to sell off the treasures of the ancient geeks.

Yep, computer books and documents -- old books and documents, going back to when people were first thinking about what a computer might be, let alone how one might work. Truckloads of deep thinking on calculating and computing over the past 400 years and a few quirky tech trinkets to boot. All worth a cool million.

Let's see -- computers, quirky, million-dollar price tag? If ever there were an auction for Silicon Valley, this is it.

» The Stanford preview of some items from the "Origins of Cyberspace" exhibit will be held in the Albert M. Bender Room of the Cecil H. Green Library on campus.

Hours are noon to 4 p.m. Monday and 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Tuesday. The auction will be held in New York on Feb. 23. Web bids and phone bids can be arranged in advance.

Call (212) 636-2437 or see www.christies.com for details. .

"We're sort of focusing on the Silicon Valley area," says Bendetta Roux, a Christie's spokeswoman. "That's the kind of people for whom this is a no-brainer."

No-brainer? The term hardly comes to mind while flipping through the catalog of more than 1,000 items.

The collection is full of brains -- Babbage, Boole, Morse, Marconi, Pascal, Napier, Von Neumann and others who thought big thoughts and put them down on paper, as in historical letters, essays, articles and journals. (If you have to ask, you can't afford them.)

True, the auction itself will be held in Manhattan on Feb. 23. (Would it kill you to pick up the phone or use the Web?) But Christie's, which knows something about the auction business, knows enough to dangle a few items in front of Silicon Valley's übergeeks.

Dozens of lots featuring some of the documents and artifacts will be on display at Stanford University's Green Library on Monday and Tuesday.

Yes, you'd have to be a little rich and a little eccentric to part with \$25,000 or so for John Napier's "Rabologiae, Seu Numerationis Per Virgulas Libri Duo." And no, it has nothing to do with Harry Potter. (Think of it as a really old math workbook.) But even post-boom, there are plenty around here who've stashed a little away.

"There are going to be probably a lot of people you never heard of," says Sellam Ismail, an avid computer collector from Livermore. "Guys who have successful businesses and started out in the computer world and made their fortunes."

And what about Ismail, who founded the Vintage Computer Festival in 1997?

"I think some of the estimates that Christie's has put on some of this stuff, on all of this stuff, are really high."

Where's your spirit, man?

It's not every day you can buy "A Protocol for Packet Network Intercommunication." (In fact, depending on your spouse, maybe it's not any day you can buy it -- especially for the \$2,000 to \$3,000 Christie's says it's worth.) The 1974 paper by Vint Cerf and Robert Kahn that explained how the modern Internet would work is but one morsel of an auction that for marketing purposes Christie's is calling "The Origins of Cyberspace."

The collection is a staggering hodgepodge of books, academic papers, letters and artifacts gathered by Novato book dealer Jeremy Norman. (Or for the marketing folks, we'll say "staggering amalgam.")

It starts with Lorenzo Pignoria's 1613 treatise that includes an illustration of a Roman table abacus and follows deep computing thought up to the Cerf and Kahn paper. It includes hundreds of items relating to computer pioneer J. Presper Eckert. (ENIAC ring any bells? The World War II electronic digital computing breakthrough?)

There's the serious stuff -- Luigi Federico's 1843 "Sketch of the Analytical Engine Invented by Charles Babbage" with notes by Lady Lovelace, who translated the piece (estimated value: \$30,000 to \$40,000).

And there's the fun -- the Brainiac Electric Brain Kit, a 1950s metal storage tape used on a Univac I computer and Eckert's employee badge from the Sperry-Univac company. There are papers and pieces written by computing heroes, such as John Bardeen, Walter Brattain, William Shockley and Grace Hopper.

"You have basically the history of ideas, expressed in their kind of most technical and most advanced way in these modern papers," says Thomas Lecky, the Christie's specialist who put the auction together.

History of ideas. It's complicated, no doubt. What to buy? What to bid?

Christie's will make it easy on you. The auction house is willing to sell the whole collection -- lock, stock and logarithms -- to the high bidder, if the bid is reasonable. If no one wants the whole package, the items will sell in 255 lots.

But what fun is that? Surely, Silicon Valley could produce some mogul with a spare \$1 million or so to gobble up the entire collection.

Larry Ellison? Maybe. That way Bill Gates couldn't get his hands on it.

The Google boys? Nah. If you can't find it on the Internet, they don't want it.

The Fry's Electronics guys? They are into math, and some of this stuff would look good under glass at the Sunnyvale store.

Meg Whitman? Maybe when the stuff turns up on eBay.

Sadly, Christie's won't play the speculation game. Roux says the company doesn't talk about whom they're talking to regarding big auctions.

But you know who you are. And we'll see you at Christie's.
