



Edited by DIRK BOLL

# AUCTIONEERS WHO MADE ART HISTORY

HATJE  
CANTZ

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## A Cultural History of the Art Auction in 14 Portraits

It is possible that money has always played a role in the perception of art. Certainly this became obvious in the 1980s, when collectors from Japan bought Impressionist paintings following the investment of British pension funds in this category a few years earlier. Similarly, everybody began to buy Contemporary Art in the 1990s. These days it is an accepted fact that the market value of art has a bearing on the canonisation process. We may regret this, but it is unlikely to change any time soon. The all-encompassing transparency that the Internet now brings to the market practically guarantees a grassroots democratic approach and also leaves an indelible mark. Since more than half of all art works sold globally in 2013 achieved prices below €3,000, the market clearly also plays an important role in popularizing the arts.<sup>1</sup>

Even though art markets follow traditional rules and regulations, they have been subject to unprecedented change since the turn of the millennium. At last, auction houses have achieved a transformation from wholesaler to retail business. This was only possible once they had established themselves in the eyes of the buyer as a third channel of commerce alongside art fairs on the one hand and galleries and dealerships on the other. New auction buyers are mainly ‘end consumers’ who are willing to pay higher prices than traders and are receptive to client development activities.



Christian Jankowski, *Strip the Auctioneer*, 2009, C-print, 41 × 50.8 cm, edition of 10, II

In the course of this evolution, the art world has quite clearly become an art industry, at least on its commercial side. As such, it now displays numerous industrial characteristics such as procurement analysis, sales planning, client service, public relations, and brand marketing. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the auction business, where sales are of a public nature and industrial elements become increasingly evident the larger a firm becomes.

But what kind of industry is this actually? There are two large enterprises with business plans: Christie's and Sotheby's. Think Starbucks, or Nespresso. The implementation of the plan is facilitated by direct competitors from the art trade, who have always had a certain entre-





Parker Brothers Inc., Salem, Mass., *Masterpiece: The Art Auction Game*, 1970

preneurial interest in the success of the auction business model, since they can easily use the public validation of art to support their own commercial activities.

When the hammer comes down at auction, it creates a moment of truth, a price achieved in public. This is often explained and almost condoned by the argument that art is merely used as an investment vehicle and that the market is thus manipulated by its participants. However, even the counter-argument – emphasizing the exceptionally high quality of a work of art that sells at a very high price – is only a mitigation masquerading as an explanation. Economically, there is a simple fact: goods were offered and demand has met the supply at a publicly agreed price. This price will remain on record and become a reference point for future sales. The seasonal nature of the auction business enhances the effect, as it creates suspense. As in an Olympic 100-meter sprint, any attempt to break the record can only be made at the next round of games. In the meantime, the historic success becomes both a reference point and an ambition.

The focal point of the process is the figure of the auctioneer. Even if he (or she!) cannot alone create value, the auctioneer's performance has a significant effect on the price of the art work. He strives to turn audience members into bidders engaged in competition, and to this end he makes use of the visceral fascination that auction sales have held over centuries. The ritual dramaturgy of this competition, which is archaic in nature, often creates heart-stopping moments for the participants and grips even neutral observers. It is no surprise that an auction drama features prominently in a recent humorous advertising campaign for a heart medication.<sup>2</sup> In this emotionally charged atmosphere the auctioneer can be compared to a football trainer, who instills his team with the belief that they can win simply because they are better players. The players will believe him if he is a good leader, possibly even disregarding their physical form, and the belief will help them to compete successfully. The only difference is that there are as many teams in the auction room as there are bidders – and all of them look to the same trainer.

This volume tells the cultural history of the art auction through fourteen individual portraits of auctioneers: one woman and thirteen men. Each describes a particular turning point in the development of auctions. While the selection is representative, it is also driven by the availability of existing sources; many highlights of auctioneering history had to be disregarded. The German reader may miss Heinrich Georg Gutekunst or descriptions of the auctions held at C. G. Börner. The French may look for the attractions of Hôtel Drouot. A New York reader may regret the absence of Hiram Parke of Parke-Bernet or the 1973 sale of the Scull collection at Sotheby's, where works by American contemporary artists such as Andy Warhol, Willem de Kooning and Robert Rauschenberg were publicly offered for the first time and achieved a record total of \$2.2 million.

Little is known about some historic auctioneers, making it harder to record their history. James Christie's innovative approach and charismatic performance have been praised for 250 years, but many of those who followed him lack a profile and sometimes even a name. Only in the second half of the twentieth century did the focus shift to the auctioneer. Brand development as well as the image and reference strategy of the international auction houses since the 1970s have turned the spotlight on individuals who would have remained hidden in the background only a few years earlier. This culminated in the late 1980s, when art and lifestyle converged in a merger of art works and the popular aesthetics of commerce. Art became a subject of the popular press, and the actors in the art market sometimes achieved a status comparable to pop stars. We therefore know relatively little about the group of auctioneers who sold the Hamilton and Beckford collections in 1882 over multiple sessions lasting many days, but the relevant media inform us in great detail about the life, for example, of contemporary auctioneer Tobias Meyer, and not solely about his ability to generate a multi-million dollar turnover in ninety minutes at a New York evening sale.

The acceleration of communication through the Internet, including art market blogs, has increased this trend, and inevitably the term 'star auctioneer' has been coined. Some of these figures are portrayed in this book. But 'auctioneers who made art history' were also the unsung heroes of past centuries. These masters of their trade may have been first and foremost sober tradesmen, but their trade relies in part on raising an emotional temperature. In this setting the audience identifies with them as heroic central characters and projects their passion on to them.

This brief cultural history of the art auction therefore shows a unique development. When auctions were a means of disposing of an



William Hogarth, *The Toilette*, detail of the fourth image in the series *Marriage à-la-mode*, 1743–45, oil on canvas, 70.5 × 90.8 cm, National Gallery, London

estate, be it indebted or heirless, or a manner of selling off assets after a bankruptcy, the business had a dubious reputation. Even in the middle of the eighteenth century, William Hogarth's series of paintings *Marriage à-la-mode* depicts labelled lots and an auction catalogue in the household of 'Countess Squanderfield', thus branding auction purchases as the leisure activity of a thoughtless and frivolous class. Even worse, the source of the purchase is meant to indicate the unsavory and disreputable character of the buyer. Even today the expression 'to come under the hammer' can imply an undesirable and forced form of asset disposal. Only in the era of James Christie was an exchange of goods for money in the saleroom transformed into a social event, which provided a certain entertainment value while also allowing for art appreciation as well as intellectual stimulation. Christie and his followers



Daniel Cherbuin, *Moronica*, 2013, Photograph, HD-Video

changed the auctioneer from a meticulous and neutral middleman into a charismatic projection figure in society, who inevitably in due course became the subject of artistic reflection himself.

On 20 May 2009 the artist Christian Jankowski arranged a public auction in which Christie's renowned auctioneer Arno Verkade sold the clothes off his own back: *Strip the Auctioneer*. The final lot was the auctioneer's hammer. The exhibition project *The Auction Room*, curated by young designers Mariana Pestana and Designersblock, focused on the design of the objects in this setting. The 2011 event at the London Design Festival presented an entire auction room display including lots, seating, rostrum and hammer, all of which were then sold at the concluding auction.

The auctioneer has also found his way into popular culture, ranging from small porcelain figures (*The Auctioneer* by Royal Doulton) and

toys actually modelled on the real auctioneer Simon de Pury (*Action Auctioneer* by the artist The Sucklord) to appearances in such comics as the Walt Disney Company's *Donald Duck: Ducktales* (season 1, episode 25: 'Dr Jekyll & Mr McDuck', 1987) and in the universe of DC Comics (the character of 'Auctioneer' and 'Auctioneer II'). In the area of interactive games we have the *Gadgetzan Auctioneer* character by Matt Dixon, the iOS game *Auction Wars: Storage King* by GameDigits Ltd, and the countless auctioneers (including one woman) in the multi-player *World of Warcraft*. Real enthusiasts may be able to track down a copy of the 1970s board game *Masterpiece* to enjoy the excitement and glamour of the auction world in the comfort of their own homes.

These examples, no matter how far fetched they are, nonetheless relate to the contributions in this anthology, which round out the sequence of biographical texts and examine the presence of the auctioneer in everyday life, in fine art, in film and in literature.

## 1 London 1766

Around 1700, the London art market became highly specialised and efficient. Lifting Oliver Cromwell's Puritan laws was an important prerequisite for this development, as all art imports from abroad had previously been prohibited.<sup>3</sup> Once again British aristocrats could, and increasingly did, go on Grand Tours of continental Europe. Above all, the impression these travels made on them formed the basis for their own collecting activities. An art collection soon became an indispensable asset to maintain a prestigious position in society. The country's beginning supremacy in European trade channelled large funds into its economy. While the Italian aristocracy became impoverished and had to sell, the British aristocracy became established buyers.<sup>4</sup>

From the middle of the century, London and Paris dominated other cultural centres last not least because of the supply required by the royal courts as well as increasing demand from the wealthy middle class.<sup>5</sup> At the beginning of the eighteenth century educational tours took the art lover to the sites of classical antiquity, while the art buyer travelled to London and Paris. The art trade responded by opening up to this development. Showrooms invited the visitor to linger and enjoy the pleasure of looking at art; they became places of intellectualisation through stimulating exchange across social classes.<sup>6</sup>

The 1760s therefore marked a turning point in England. As the Royal Academy was founded, the first Annual Exhibitions encouraged

the enjoyment as well as the consumption of art. The competition between the London and Paris markets influenced art prices, with consequent implications for the European auction business.<sup>7</sup> The oldest auction house of that era still in existence today is Auktionsverket, founded in Stockholm in 1674. The Vienna Dorotheum opened in 1707, initially as a pawnbroker. Even the London firm of Sotheby's had a very different profile at the time. Until the twentieth century the house specialised exclusively in book sales.<sup>8</sup> London auction sales took place only during the town season from September to May. The upper classes were in the country over the summer, and business ceased. The traditional German saying, *Kirschen rot, Handel tot* ('cherries are red, when business is dead') did not just apply to the art trade. Indeed, this schedule continues to set the rhythms of the auction market today.

The London art market was buoyed considerably by the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, since this was where emigrating aristocrats could sell their only moveable possessions: art works and jewellery. Between 1790 and 1820 several important continental collections were sold in London, such as Calonne, Conti, Lafitte, and Orléans. Highlights were the sales of Countess du Barry's jewels at Christie's and the Talleyrand collection at Philips.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, a number of dealerships sprung up, such as those of Old Masters dealers Paul Colnaghi, Arthur J. Sulley and, in 1817, Agnew's, where art works saved from the French Revolution found British buyers.<sup>10</sup>

Representing the economic system of this market through financial analysis is rather daunting. A world record price of a kind for the period seems to have been paid by Augustus the Strong for Raphael's Sistine Madonna, at least according to the views of contemporary commentators, who described £8,500 as extraordinary.<sup>11</sup>



## 1 James Christie The Power of Place, Promotion and Personality

In a business prone to secrecy and not averse to hyperbole, separating myth from reality to explain the success of an auction house presents a challenge. In the case of Christie's, the difficulties are compounded by the destruction of its historical archives – apart from a set of annotated sale catalogues – when a bomb fell on the King Street saleroom in April 1941. Furthermore, the origins of its founder, James Christie, are so shrouded in mystery as to suggest a conscious effort on his part to obscure them. But it is clear that he was the right man in the right place at the right time, and before his death on 8 November 1803, he had raised the business of art auctioneering to new prominence.<sup>12</sup>

From his short obituary in the *Gentleman's magazine*, it seems he was born in 1730. The earliest Christie auction to be traced dates from 1760, and 'Christie' based in Oxford Road [Street] is listed among the twenty-two auctioneers in Mortimer's *Universal Director* of 1763.<sup>13</sup> Of those who dealt in art, the most successful were Abraham Langford, established in the Great Piazza, Covent Garden, and John Prestage, who held picture sales in a 'Great Room' in Savile Row. The deaths of Prestage in 1767, Langford in 1776 and the leading art dealer, Dr Robert Bragge, the following year, helped to clear the field for Christie.<sup>14</sup>

Although he was still based off Oxford Street, his sale of the property of a 'Noble Personage (Deceas'd)' on 5–9 December 1766 took place



Thomas Gainsborough, *James Christie*, 1778, oil on canvas,  
126 × 102 cm, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

at ‘the Auction Room, in Pall Mall’. The move of his home and business to Pall Mall the following year was a clear signal that he intended to rise in the world. Connecting Haymarket to St James’s Street, it could not have been a more propitious location in the social geography of the metropolis. There were three royal residences on the south side – St James’s Palace at the west end, Carlton House at the east and newly built Cumberland House in the middle. On the north side, in William Almack’s rooms at nos. 49–50, the most fashionable London clubs were having their early meetings. Testing the market before acquiring his own prem-

ises, Christie held his first Pall Mall sales in the 'Great Room' at the eastern Haymarket end, no. 125, leased in 1765 to George III's librarian, Richard Dalton, to serve as a print warehouse.<sup>15</sup> In 1768, he himself leased nos. 83–84 Pall Mall, nearer Almack's but still on the south side, sandwiched between Schomberg House to the west and Cumberland House to the east.<sup>16</sup> He spent a thousand pounds on alterations, erecting a 'spacious and lofty' auction room in the garden to the rear, completed by the end of 1768.<sup>17</sup> The cachet of Pall Mall increased further when, in 1783, Carlton House was presented to the Prince of Wales on attaining his majority, and after extensive improvements it became the hub of high society.<sup>18</sup>

In Pall Mall, Christie also had his finger on the pulse of the contemporary art world. The newly founded Royal Academy held its first meeting in Dalton's rooms at no. 125 in December 1768 and its first exhibition there the following summer. But Dalton could not make a financial go of it and assigned his lease to Christie in 1771 with a restrictive covenant safeguarding the Academy's continued use of the space for its annual exhibitions, which were held there until 1779. For more than thirty years Christie used one or other of his Pall Mall 'Great Rooms' for auctions, splitting the sale of Sir Joshua Reynolds's pictures in March 1795 between them and sometimes renting out no. 125.<sup>19</sup> Until 1774, the rival Free Society of Artists used Christie's premises at nos. 83–84 for its annual exhibitions. Leading artists lived in the neighbourhood, notably Gainsborough in the west wing of Schomberg House from 1774 until his death in 1788. With artists not only producing works but also collecting and dealing in them, to be at the centre of the art scene was crucial. It has been calculated that Christie staged thirty-two sales of artists' property between 1766 and 1803.<sup>20</sup> Artists were also more trusted than most to pronounce on the merit of pictures for sale.

Christie joined an ever-growing circuit of attractions that kept fashionable West End society amused during the Season. In the wake of the successes of the Seven Years' War, London was 'swinging' with unprecedented confidence. Besides the round of theatres, clubs, pleasure gardens and, from 1772, the splendid new Pantheon in Oxford Street, shopping for luxury goods had never been more appealing. Commercially-minded entrepreneurs competed to relieve the nobility, gentry and aspiring middle-classes of their funds, either in their own showrooms or in those of the auctioneers or both. At a time when luxury retailing was still a novelty, stock control in its infancy, cash flow uncertain and bankruptcy ever threatening, Christie performed an extremely valuable service. His 'Great Rooms' operated as a superior sort of outlet village, disposing of goods whose fashionable moment had peaked but were not yet ready for recall to their places of manufacture. From 1767 onwards he sold: the surplus stock of assorted china-men, including Nicholas Sprimont's Chelsea porcelain and the Chelsea and Derby ware of his successor, William Duesbury; Boulton and Fothergill's ormolu-mounted vases, candlesticks and perfume burners 'of exquisite workmanship and finished in the antique taste' in 1770, 1771 and 1778; items from James Cox's Museum of bejewelled mechanical marvels following his bankruptcy in 1779; and Josiah Wedgwood's basalt busts and jasperware in 1781, following the death of his partner, Thomas Bentley. In addition to such leading 'brands', he auctioned off the stock-in-trade of businesses that were closing down – artificial stone ornaments, jewellery, plate and fashion accessories, glassware, hats and millinery, broadcloth, lace and Spitalfields silks.

Christie could not afford to be fussy about his clientele and was prepared to travel to the suburbs and provinces to take sales on site, including the live and dead stock on a Hampshire farm. London house

sales were based mainly in the West End – Mayfair and St James's, Marylebone and Soho. Where he could, he named titled owners. Probably the largest was the twelve-day sale that took place in December 1775 of the contents of Holland House in Kensington, following the death of Henry Fox, 1st Baron Holland, which so distressed Horace Walpole he could not bear to attend.<sup>21</sup> In situ sales of household furniture, plate, china, linen, wines etcetera constitute by far the largest category of catalogue in the archives, and they provided Christie's bread-and-butter throughout his career.

While Christie was only one of many auctioneers capable of disposing of household goods and surplus stock, by the end of the 1770s he seemed to be well on the way to dominating the market in pictures. Following the Peace of Paris, the import of paintings (mainly from Italy) rose to over a thousand a year.<sup>22</sup> Among those bringing them in were Robert Ansell (c.1732–1789) and Robert Strange (1725–1792), who in turn supplied Christie. Besides providing the aristocracy with picture frames and furniture, Ansell staged a picture sale at Christie's each February from 1768 to 1772, the contents described as 'consigned from abroad'. The earliest of these sales was the first Christie picture sale to attract a sprinkling of nobility among the buyers. Ansell might have been related to the James Ansell, who witnessed Christie's marriage in 1772 and was his business partner from January 1777 until October 1784.

In 1769 Robert Strange, the leading line-engraver of his day, issued a descriptive catalogue of the pictures he had acquired during his travels in France and Italy, prior to their dispersal in two sales held at Christie's in 1771 and 1773. The latter included Poussin's *Landscape with a man killed by a snake*, which went to Sir Watkin Williams-Wynn for £650,<sup>23</sup> and the last lot in the sale, Claude Lorrain's *Landscape with the voyage of*

*Jacob*, bought for the Earl of Chesterfield, then virtually on his deathbed, by his valet for 400 guineas.<sup>24</sup> In a letter of 1 May 1774, Horace Walpole expressed his astonishment at the prices now paid at auction: 'Next to gaming, which subsides a little from want of materials, the predominant folly is pictures – I beg their pardon for associating them with gaming. Sir George Colbrooke, a citizen, and martyr to what is called *speculation*, had his pictures sold by auction last week.'<sup>25</sup>

The success of the Ansell and Strange sales attracted a string of prestigious remnants from the estates of deceased foreign grandees, while ambassadors to the court of St James found Christie's a convenient place to dispose of their plate, china and wine cellars before returning home. Between 1776 and 1794 the firm sold the property of ambassadors from Hanover, Spain, Naples, France, Holland (two), Denmark, Prussia and Sweden.

Dealers such as Anstell, John Bertels (1727–1792) and Benjamin Vandergucht (1752–1794) supplied Christie's, among others, with pictures they procured on the Paris or Antwerp markets.<sup>26</sup> A great deal of recycling went on in the trade, and Christie also handled dealers' posthumous stock sales.<sup>27</sup> The letters of William Buchanan (1777–1864) provide insight into how they used the firm, bringing a 'parcel' of Italian imports 'forward at Christie's at a period of the year when people are full of money.' Pictures were consigned which were not so likely 'to go off rapidly by private sale'; so in effect, dealers used Christie's like the manufacturers of luxury goods, to dispose of end-of-line stock.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, dealers' rings could also keep prices low. When works imported from Rome by the artist James Irvine fell victim to such tactics at Christie's on 24 March 1792, he complained to a friend, 'All agree that so compleat an instance of villainy and underhand dealing never came within their knowledge.'<sup>29</sup>