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Collectors at auction, auctions for collectors

Hadrien Rambach

A large number of people, including most collectors, have bought or sold at auction¹. In 2007 alone, over 80 million people used the electronic auction-house Ebay (founded by Pierre Omidyar in September 1995), spending almost \$ 50 billion in total. Although the Internet has made auctions global and more democratic, they are no novelty and have been found in most cultures, from antiquity onwards. This short history of auctions, their techniques, their customers, and what they offer for sale, is designed to give numismatists a broader understanding of a familiar and important element of their collecting life.

The concept of art may be rather recent, but this does not mean that there was no art before or that it was not the subject of commercial exchanges. As societies evolved, the need emerged for a fair way to appraise and sell property, such as the possessions of enemies of the state, or estates without heirs. Throughout history, auctions have been used to dispose of anything of value, such as antiques (including coins and other collectables) and works of art. The English word *auction*, documented by around 1600, derives from the Latin word *auctio*, which meant «a sale by increase of bids», from the verb *augeo* («to increase»). This etymology is no surprise, as auctions were developed during the Roman Empire, when this type of sale became common. Much of what we know about this development comes from the archives (154 tablets) of Lucius Caecilius Iucundus (c. AD 20–62), an important banker and *auctionator* in Pompeii². The Latin vocabulary relating to these sales originated in the sales of war-spoils and captured prisoners³. On the battlefield, each soldier would mark his space by planting his spear in the ground: the sale by auction, *subhasto*, was done «under the spear» (*hasta*), which gives the etymology for the Italian and Spanish words for auctions (*asta* and *subasta*). Auctions took place in Rome too, within an enclosed place called the *atrium auctionarium*⁴.

In ancient times, slaves were sold by auction in Greece, in particular on the island of Delos. Although modern auctions are mostly associated with the fine and decorative arts, a wide variety of goods is sold in the same way, from timber and crops – such as tobacco – to fresh fish, boats, cars, industrial patents, land, and so on. Animals (for example the living menagerie of Lady W.) were on sale at the Hôtel Drouot on 1 April 1859; Sotheby's started as a specialist in printed books; and the first sale by Christie's was of fine wines⁵. The sales of yearlings in Deauville and Lexington are celebrated. Whole villages can be sold: St Augustine (AD 354–430) wrote that «some celebrated cities were put up to auction, like farms»⁶, and James Christie (1730–1803) auctioned for the very high price of £ 39,000 the borough of Gatton in Surrey⁷. Even the patriarchate of the Greek

excavated in July 1875. On the auction process and law in ancient Rome, see E. CAILLEMER, Un commissaire-Priseur à Pompéi au temps de Néron, Nouvelle revue historique de droit 1877, p. 397; R. GRONIER, Le Commissaire-priseur officier ministériel (Paris 1941), pp. 9–12; T. MOMMSEN, Die Pompeianischen Quittungstafel des L. Caecilius Iucundus, Hermes XII, 1877, pp. 88–141, and H. TAUDIERE, Journal des Commissaires-Priseurs 1937, p. 344. See also CATULLUS 106, CICERO (De Lege Agraria, I.3), MARTIAL VI.61, and PLINY (Epist., VII.2.1).

- 3 CICERO, De lege agraria, II.25.
- 4 The seller was then called *dominus*, the buyer *emptor*, and the shouter *praecox* (this employee was in charge of advertising the sale and conducted the auction as *auctioneer*). The auction-house was owned and managed by a «banker», the *argentarius*, who took the risk of paying the sellers immediately after auction (before the buyers had paid for the purchased goods).
- 5 Samuel Baker, on 11 March 1744, sold for £ 826 «Several hundred scarce and valuable books in all branches of polite literature» in the Exeter Exchange in the Strand (the company gained its present name when it was taken over by his nephew John Sotheby, 1740–1807). James Christie, on 5 December 1766, sold «A large quantity of Madeira and high flavour'd claret».
- 6 AUGUSTINE, The City of God, III.28.
- 7 R. LACEY, Sotheby's. Bidding For Class (London 1998), p. 30. The village carried an automatic seat in the House of Commons.

1 This research was instigated by the late Jeannette Pomeraniec (1928–2005), and I wish to dedicate it to her memory. The following article is based on a paper delivered at a conference held on 10 March 2008 at the Institute of Historical Research

(University of London). The author is very grateful to Susan Bracken, Andrea Galdy and Adriana Turpin for having invited him to talk at their monthly seminar on «Collecting & Display (100 BC to AD 1700)», to Daniel Schmutz for

his suggestions in editing this paper, to Alan Walker for his many corrections, and to Michael Hall for trying to improve my written English.

2 Protected by being buried in the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79, these archives were



Didius Julianus (28 March–1 June 193), Gold aureus, 7.25 grams.
Obverse: IMP CAES M DID IV-
LIAN AVG, laureate head right.
Reverse: RECTOR ORBIS, Julianus
standing left, holding globe and
roll.

Church of Ochrida was put up for auction in 1726⁸. Although Ebay for example, does not allow the sale of «humans, the human body, or any human body parts», it does permit «items that contain human hair (such as lockets) as well as skulls and skeletons that are used for medical purposes». Such limitations on what is appropriate to sell at auction are not obvious: the petrified body of a man (found in a French warehouse) was auctioned on 27 June 1813 for the high price of 8,200 francs (i.e. 2.38 kg of gold)⁹.

The first documented auction is described in Herodotus' *History of the Persian Wars*. Among the remarkable things the author witnessed during his visit to the Babylonian Empire in the fifth century BC was the unusual way that brides were sold at the annual wedding auction – a practice that Herodotus considered to be the wisest of their customs. «Whatever maidens were of a marriageable age they [the organisers] used to collect together and bring in a body to one place; around them stood a crowd of men. Then a crier, having made them stand up one by one, offered them for sale, beginning with the most beautiful; and when she had been sold for a large sum, he put another who was next in beauty. They were sold on condition that they should be married»¹⁰. The auction would start with increasing positive bids, but end up with negative bidding: at a later stage in the sale, «buyers» would *be paid* to accept the unattractive maidens!

During the Roman Republic, auctions were used to dispose of the property of enemies. By doing so, the winner would weaken his opposition, raise money for his own party, and display visibly his victory. Examples include the auction organised by Cato of the treasures taken from Ptolemy of Cyprus (Cleopatra's uncle) in 58 BC¹¹ and the sale of the goods of Pompey the Great in 48 BC¹². Collecting had become a habit for rich citizens¹³ and many private collections were described by Cicero (106–43 BC)¹⁴. The emperor Caligula (who reigned AD 37–41) was an active supporter of auctions. He attended many, such as the famous one where Aponius Saturninus, who had accompanied the emperor to the auction, fell asleep nodding and woke up to discover that he had involuntarily purchased thirteen gladiators for 90,000 *aurei* (almost 700 kg of gold)¹⁵! As for the emperor Nero (reigned AD 54–68), «he would even break into shops and rob them, setting up a market in the Palace, where he divided the booty which he took, sold it at auction, and then squandered the proceeds»¹⁶. Marcus Aurelius (reigned AD 161–180) sold Hadrian's jewel collection at auction¹⁷. Pertinax (reigned AD 192–193) auctioned the goods of Commodus, which included jewellery, but also slaves, buffoons, and old clothes¹⁸! Even St Paul (c. 5 BC–c. AD 67) bought a property at auction¹⁹. An auction, possibly the most important one ever, took place after the assassination of Pertinax by the praetorians in March AD 193, when the Roman senator Didius Julianus (AD 137–193) bought the Empire with a bid of 25,000 *sestertii* per prae-

8 Paisos paid 145,000 francs for the office on 20 November 1726 (S. VAILHE, Greek Church, in: The Catholic Encyclopedia, vol. 6 [New York 1909]).

9 F. DURET-ROBERT, Les 400 coups du marteau d'ivoire (Paris 1964), p. 21.

10 HERODOTUS, History of the Persian Wars, I.196.

11 PLUTARCH, Cato the Younger, XXXVI.1–2.

12 CICERO, Philippic, VII.26–30.

13 Cf. E. BONNAFFE, Les Collectionneurs de l'ancienne Rome (Paris 1867).

14 Cicero himself owned eighteen villas full of books and works of art. Cf. L. TEATHER, Museology and its traditions. The British experience, 1845–1945, PhD dissertation (Leicester 1984).

15 SUETONIUS, De Vita Caesarum:

Caius Caligula, XXXVIII.

16 SUETONIUS, Lives of the Twelve Caesars, Nero, VI.26, Loeb translation. Passage quoted in P. DE BAYSER, Le Piéton de Drouot, les enchères de A à Z (Paris 2009), p. 417.

17 Hadrian's collection of gems was sold at public auction in Trajan's Forum by Marcus Aurelius, together with other valuable works of art. The proceeds were used to pay for the expenses of the war with the Marcomanni.

Cf. EUTROPIUS (Compendium of Roman History, VIII.12–14) and the Historia Augusta (Marcus Aurelius, II.17.4–5).

18 Historia Augusta, The Life of Pertinax, VII.8–11, VIII.1–7.

19 AUGUSTINE, Letter 96.2, AD 408.

torian²⁰; he was to be murdered just two months later by the soldiers of Septimius Severus, but he had established himself as a «patron saint» of auctioneers.

In the western world²¹, the sale of the Roman Empire in AD 193 was the last notable auction to take place during antiquity. In the centuries after the fall of the Roman Empire, collecting dwindled to nothing – or, to be more precise, was carried on by the Church. However, as early as the twelfth century, there was a rebirth of collecting. Trajan's Column had to be protected by an edict of the Roman Senate in 1162²². St Francis of Assisi (1182–1226) worried about the increasing number of lovers of manuscripts and works of art and forbade the members of his order (the Franciscans) to collect books. The spirit of collecting was also displayed by the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II (reigned 1220–1250) when he had reproductions made of some of the ancient sculptures excavated during the explorations he was financing in Sicily. Proof that auctions had developed considerably by 1254 is the need felt by the French king St Louis (reigned 1226–1270) to regulate them.

Whenever auctions developed, they were accompanied by the introduction of new legal measures. In England, Henry VII (reigned 1485–1509) promulgated a law that required auctioneers to be licensed²³. In France, Henry II (reigned 1547–1559) created a limited number of *huissiers priseurs* in 1556. These auctioneers were allowed to handle only inheritances and judicial sales. As a consequence, almost all early French auctions were estate sales²⁴. The first generalist sale is supposed to have been held in 1712 by Pierre Antoine Matteus. Around that time too, auctions ceased to be held outdoors (for example on the Pont Notre-Dame) and were moved into buildings. A major change was the development of specialised sales. The first printed auction catalogue was published in Leyden for the dispersal of the library of Philips van Marnix van Sint-Aldegonde (1538–1598) on 6 July 1599. The catalogue was prepared by the renowned book-dealer Louis Elzevier (c. 1540–1617); among the lots were several numismatic books and some ancient coins as well. The first printed auction catalogue devoted to coins was issued in Amsterdam for the sale of the Johan Raphael Grill Collection in 1679²⁵.

20 CASSIUS DIO, Roman History, Epitome of book LXXIV.11. The «underbidder», who stopped at 20,000 sesterii, was Titus Flavius Sulpicianus (Pertinax's father-in-law). The price paid was equivalent to 250 aurei, i.e. around 1.7 kilo of gold per praetorian (the aurei originally weighed 7–7.5 grams, but Didius Julianus reduced it to 6.5–7 grams). At the time of this auction, there were ten cohorts of praetorians (cohors praetoria), each of them numbering between 500 and 1,000 men. Since the reign of Domitian (AD 81–96), they were paid 40 aurei a year (see M. DURRY, Les

Cohortes prétorienne [Paris 1938] and A. PASSERINI, Le Coorti pretorie [Roma 1939]). Without justifying his calculation, Daniel Amor estimated the total cost of this auction in modern currency at € 14 million (D. AMOR, Dynamic Commerce [Bonn 2000], pp. 19–23).

21 The history and nature of auctions held outside the Western world cannot be dealt with here, however interesting the topic would be. Auctions were held in the Far East. For example, the properties of deceased Buddhist monks were auctioned in China around AD 700, in order to raise funds for their temples

(K. REYNOLDS, Going, going, gone! A survey of auction types, [Los Altos, California, 1996]); but the auctioneer was a monk, and he was in charge of preventing bidders from getting too excited and bidding inconsiderately! In the Arab world too, auctions are a well-known phenomenon, and I could refer to a number of them, especially ones at which books were sold (cf. H. TOUATI, L'armoire à sagesse. Bibliothèques et collections en Islam [Paris 2003]).

22 J.B. ROSS, A Study of Twelfth Century Interest in the Antiquities of Rome. Medieval and historiographical essays in honour

of James Westfall Thompson (Chicago 1938), pp. 302–321.

23 There were severe penalties for sales by «public outcry» by any unlicensed person.

24 Cf. E. BONNAFFE, Dictionnaire des amateurs français au dix-septième siècle (Paris 1884) and E. BONNAFFE, Les Collectionneurs de l'ancienne France (Paris 1873).

25 87+(9) pages in 12° entitled Catalogus variorum & selectissimorum numismatum Graecorum, & Latinorum [...] Bibl.: C. DEKESEL, A Bibliography of 17th century numismatic books (London/Crestline 2003), cat. G145. The first English coin auction took place on 3 April 1710 with the sale of a Gentleman's collection of 212 lots of Greek Coins, Roman Medallions and Brasses (Bibl.: H.E. MANVILLE/T.J. ROBERTSON, British Numismatic Auction Catalogues [London 1986], p. 4). Bassoli was mistaken when he wrote that the first coin auction catalogue was Thomas Fritschen's Vollständiger Catalogus eines raren Müntz-Cabinetes of June 1709 (F. BASSOLI, Antiquarian Books on Coins and Medals from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century, transl. by Elizabeth Saville [London 2001], p. 79). It is probably erroneous information too that the first coin auction took place in Leyden, in 1598, with the sale of a French gentleman's collection (E.E. CLAIN-STEFANELLI, Numismatics an Ancient Science. A Survey of Its History [Washington DC 1965], p. 21).

However, the number of coin collectors grew only very slowly²⁶, as did the number of such auctions. For example, in the seventeenth century more than 1,100 art lovers could be listed in France, but in 1689 John Evelyn (1620–1706) was still lamenting the lack of coin collectors in Britain²⁷. Part of the celebrated collections of King Charles I (reigned 1625–1649) were auctioned in 1649–1651 at Somerset House. But in Britain, the fashion for auctions started only with the arrival of William III (reigned 1689–1702, born in the Netherlands). The Low Countries had been a centre for auctions, especially of books and prints, and the taste of Continental Europeans for public auctions had developed in particular after the sale of several tons of Chinese porcelain in 1603–1604, following the capture of the Portuguese ship *Santa Catarina* in Macao²⁸.

London's first art auction house was established in Poland Street in 1726 by Christopher Cock (d. 1748)²⁹. Today, the most famous auction houses are large Anglo-Saxon ones, all founded in the eighteenth century: Sotheby's (founded in 1744), Christie's (1766), Bonhams (1793), and Phillips (1796)³⁰. Indeed, the eighteenth century was a turning point for auction houses. Auctioneers established the practice of publishing a catalogue for each significant sale and started to illustrate them. Auctioneers such as Edme-François Gersaint (1694–1750) developed a literary style that eventually gave birth to art criticism; see, for example, his account of the life of the painter Antoine Watteau (1684–1721) in a 1744 sale catalogue³¹. A number of *émigrés* fled the French Revolution with precious items but no cash, and sales, such as that of the Orléans collections in 1793, helped to expand the London market. A decade later, George III (reigned 1760–1820) observed that every aristocrat had become a dealer in paintings³²! Successful and flamboyant auctioneers had appeared by the end of the eighteenth century, replacing the former «*poor brutes in shabby black clothes*»³³ who mainly sold second-hand goods. One such handsome and fashionable auctioneer was James Christie (1730–1803), as depicted in his portrait by Thomas Gainsborough (1727–1788)³⁴.

26 The often quoted number of over 950 European coin collectors in the sixteenth century is without doubt highly exaggerated. David Murray refers to 380 coin collections in Italy, 200 in France, 200 in the Low Countries, and 175 in Germany (D. MURRAY, *Museums: their history and their use* [Glasgow 1904], vol. I, pp. 14–15), but these figures come from the doubtful information given by Hubert Goltz in 1563 in his *C. Julius Caesar (on their voracity, cf. C. DERESSEL, Hubertus Goltzius in Douai* [5.11.1560–14.11.1560], RBN 127, 1981, pp. 117–125, who proved that it was impossible for Goltz to have met the people he listed).

27 J. EVELYN, *Diary* (London 1879), volume III, page 442, letter to Samuel Pepys (1633–1703), 12 August 1689.

28 Cf. M. JULIA, Hugo Grotius in context: Van Heemskerck's capture of the Santa Catarina and its justification in the *De Jure Praedae* (1604–1606), *Asian Journal of Social Science*, Nr 31, 2003.

29 L. LIPPINCOTT, *Selling art in Georgian London. The Rise of Arthur Pond* (New Haven/London 1983), pp. 113–114. Cf. R. MYERS, *Sale by auction: the rise of the auctioneering exemplified in the*

firm of Christopher Cock, the Langfords and Henry, John and George Robins c. 1720–1847. Sale and distribution of books from 1700 (Oxford 1982), pp. 126–163.

30 The print dealer Thomas Dodd and book specialist Walter Bonham founded Bonhams in 1793. Harry Phillips (d. 1840) – a pupil of Christie – set up his own company in 1796; the two companies merged in 2001. In Vienna, the Dorotheum was founded as early as 1707.

31 E.-F. GERSAINT (1694–1750), *Catalogue raisonné des diverses curiosités du cabinet de feu M. Quentin de Lorangère* (Paris 1744). The birth of art criticism is usually associated with the critics of the salons: Étienne

la Font de Saint-Yenne (1688–1771), who wrote about the 1737 salon, and Denis Diderot (1713–1784), who wrote about the 1765 salon.

32 J. FARINGTON, *The Farington Diary* (London 1922–1928), vol. II, p. 130, 8 August 1803. *And Annals of the Fine Arts for 1817*, London 1818, p. 203. Quoted in F. HASKELL, *La Norme et le caprice* (Paris 1993), p. 57, n. 82.

33 The *Huissiers/Commissaires-Priseurs* were «*pauvres bougres*», «*en triste habit noir*», who were «*sujets à gagner des fluxions de poitrine*» according to Louis-Sébastien Mercier (1740–1814) in his *Tableaux de Paris* (Amsterdam 1783, p. 344). The traditional black clothes

did not disappear right away. A Revolutionary law indicated that «*les commissaires-priseurs auront, dans l'exercice de leurs fonctions, l'habit complet noir, chapeau à la française et une ceinture noire*» (29 Germinal, an IX, article 11).

34 Thomas Gainsborough (1727–1788), *Portrait of James Christie (1730–1803)*, 1778, oil on canvas, 126 x 102 cm. Now in the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, inv. no. 70.PA.16. For an iconographical study of auctioneering, see K.H. ARNOLD, *Auktion in der Kunst* (Frankfurt 1998). An amusing illustration of «*The art of bidding*» was sketched by Jim Bateman on 25 January 1933 in *Punch*, or *The London Charivari*.

Having reappeared during the mediaeval and early Renaissance periods, as part of a wider cultural and economic development, auctions reached a peak of refinement during the eighteenth century, when they boomed and took their current shape. Society in the eighteenth century was avid for luxuries, beauty and pleasures; it was the world of the *salons*. These have now disappeared and with them the interest in classical cultures. Nevertheless, auctions are unlikely to disappear because they have become part of many people's virtual social life on the internet and because there is still a need for public dispersals of property.

Since antiquity, the organisation of auctions has evolved, as has the type of customer attending them, and the nature of the goods sold. Three main types of auction were in existence by around 1600. The *hourglass* or *candle auction* was based on the principle of rising oral bids within a strict time limit. *Dutch auctions* are decreasing auctions, in which the selling price is reached when a bid is low enough for a buyer to accept it. In *English auctions*, now the most common type, increasing oral bids continue until there is only one bidder left. In the very late seventeenth century in England, a law was passed forbidding the sale of East Indian goods by any way other than candle auction³⁵. This remained the favoured type of auctions until the mid-eighteenth century. Other techniques of sale exist. The *mail-bid auction*, in which bidders send written offers, is quite common for collectables³⁶. The Chinese *handshake auction* is rather complex: the bidder must press one of the auctioneer's fingers and indicate the monetary unit. The *whisper auction* has not been successful, as prospective buyers do not seem to enjoy whispering their bids into the auctioneer's ear. *The English auction* is not only the type most widely held, it is also the one that by and large generates the highest selling price³⁷.

The most important recent innovation has been the appearance of computerized auctions on the internet. But electronic auctions cannot provide the physical feeling of being part of a community (the same can be said of telephone bidding). An auction room is a very particular place, with its own vitality, atmosphere and codes, which attracts specific social groups. The world of an auction allows its participants to take refuge from the world outside, and live in a dream, surrounded by objects from some bygone time. It can, in fact, also make them oblivious to what is going on around them. On the evening of 7 July 2005, Sotheby's held its auction of Old Masters Paintings, notwithstanding the terrorist attacks that had taken place on that day in central London. Whatever happens, *the show must go on...*

Who buys at auction? Museums buy only rarely. Pliny (AD 23–79) relates how the first known pre-emption took place: in 146 BC, after the sale at auction of a painting by Aristides of Thebes (fourth-century BC) for 600,000 *sestertii*, a Roman consul forbade its purchaser, King Attalos II (reigned 160–138 BC) to take possession of it. Given that it had been sold for such an enormous amount of money, the consul feared that the painting might have some unnoticed properties attached to it³⁸! In modern salerooms, an increasing number of items are acquired by dealers, either acting on behalf of collectors or purchasing items to sell to prospective buyers. The art historian André Chastel (1912–1990) declared that «*the collector is the main figure of the art world*»³⁹. After the First World War, buyers of Britain's treasures were described as «*Boches, Jews and Transatlantics*» by the Provost of Eton⁴⁰. In a less polemical way, one can simply state that

35 Using one-inch-high candles (2.54 cm).

36 These offers were at first supposed to remain sealed until the end of the sale, at which time the highest bidder would obtain the item for an amount equal to the second-highest bid plus an added premium. Nowadays, auction houses enter the bids in their computers as they arrive, some even releasing the information to the public. In theory (at least), this is a haphazard auction as the bids are neither increasing nor decreasing but given in a random order. Cf. R. CASSADY, *Auctions and auctioneering* (Berkeley 1967). Cf. W. VICKREY, *Counterspeculation, auctions, and competitive sealed tenders*, *Journal of finance*, volume 57, 1990, pp. 49–61.

37 Cf. P. MILGROM, *The Economics of competitive bidding: a selective survey. Social goals and social organization. Essays in Memory of Elisha Puzner* (Cambridge 1985).

38 PLINY, *Natural History*, XXXV.8.

39 P. CABANE, *Les Grands Collectionneurs. Du Moyen-âge au XIX^e siècle* (Paris 2003), p. 15: «le collectionneur est le personnage central du monde des arts» (André Chastel).

40 LACEY (in 7), p. 71.

art goes to money, as it has always done. It is obvious that people can afford to collect only if they have money to spare. After the Reformation, the paintings that had been removed from churches in England were put up for auction in Paris⁴¹. The flow of art was in reverse at the Versailles auctions that took place from 25 August 1793 to 19 August 1794, when most lots were purchased by Englishmen⁴². During the preceding decades, the empress of Russia had been one of the main buyers at auction in western Europe. When some Delacroix paintings were sold at auction for 120 francs in 1907 (less than 35 grams of gold), Degas referred to these high prices as «Californian»⁴³!

Why do people buy at auction? «It's very rare to be able to appreciate art without wanting to own it»⁴⁴. Truly passionate collectors use auctions to buy what they desire to own. One such collector was François Marcille (1790–1856), who steadfastly refused to resell anything and ended up with 4,500 paintings and 4,000 prints⁴⁵! Similarly, after having bought Paul Cézanne's (1839–1906) *Boy in the Red Waistcoat* in 1958 for £ 220,000, Paul Mellon (1907–1999) asked someone whether he had paid too much for it, but immediately answered the question himself: «You stand in front of a picture like that, and what is money?»⁴⁶ Calouste Gulbenkian (1869–1955) once said that «no price was above him»⁴⁷; Marcel Dassault (1892–1986) gave orders to buy a specific painting by Renoir «at whatever price it would fetch»⁴⁸, and the auctioneer/collector Maurice Rheims (1910–2003) gave the same «bids» for some Art-Nouveau furniture that he wanted to purchase⁴⁹. When such dedicated collectors have the means, they believe that money should not be an issue when it comes to acquiring the object of their dreams.

The process of buying can also be a motivation in itself. The owner of a collection told an admirer that he found the works «desirable only because he did not own them»⁵⁰. According to the auctioneer David Redden, who in 1993 sold at Sotheby's the unobtainable remains of a lunar vehicle on the moon for \$ 68,000, «it was a conceptual thing, because true collecting is not about the actual possession of objects. With the greatest collectors – who may physically keep their things in bank vaults – the collection exists in their heads.»⁵¹ According to the collector Louis La Caze (1798–1869), there are three types of collectors: «those who buy to own, those who buy to prevent others from owning, and those who buy to enjoy and let it be enjoyed»⁵². History indeed provides examples of such types of behaviour, but I would add another – those who buy to be seen buying. By collecting art, one displays (literally) one's wealth, one's contacts, one's power and one's taste. Some buyers will prefer the privacy of private-treaty sales, and enjoy their guests' surprise at discovering their finds, but many will prefer to buy

41 G. CORROZET, *Les Antiquitez, histoires et singularitez de Paris* (Paris 1550) Cf. E. BONNAFFE, *Causeries sur l'art et la curiosité* (Paris 1878), pp. 81–82.

42 M. HOOG/E. HOOG, *Le Marché de l'art* (Paris 1995), pp. 24–26, which refers to M. BEURDELEY, *La France à l'encan, 1789–1799. Exode des objets d'art sous la Révolution* (Paris 1981).

43 CABANE (n. 39), p. 249.

44 Peter Wilson, quoted in LACEY (n. 7), p. 144.

45 CABANE (n. 39), pp. 181–182.

46 LACEY (n. 7), pp. 122–123.

47 «Maître, je vous remercie d'avoir eu la courtoisie de me porter ces deux feuillets. Mon secrétaire, muni d'une décharge signée par moi et d'un chèque, viendra les rechercher ce soir à votre bureau, à l'issue de la vente. / Vous désirez donc les acquérir? / Evidemment. / Et jusqu'à quel prix? / Au prix auquel vous les adjuderez. / Mais si le prix dépasse... / Je ne comprends pas votre propos. Aucun prix ne me dépasse. Je veux ces deux miniatures. Un point c'est tout» (M. RHEIMS, *Haute Curiosité* [Paris 1975], p. 65).

48 «Achetez-le pour moi ce Renoir. / Jusqu'à quel prix? / Eh

bien, jusqu'au prix où vous l'adjuderez» (RHEIMS [n. 47], p. 155). Rheims kept the collector anonymous, but his identity is revealed in P. LÉVY, *Des artistes et un collectionneur* (Paris 1976), p. 129.

49 The sale at Drouot in December 1969 contained works by François-Rupert Carabin which Rheims wanted «à n'importe

quel prix» (M. RHEIMS, *En tous mes états* [Paris 1993], p. 14).

50 «Vous les trouvez attirantes parce que vous ne les possédez pas. Pour moi, maintenant, elles sont souvenirs plus qu'œuvres d'art» (RHEIMS [n. 47], p. 316).

51 LACEY (n. 7), p. 301.

52 «Ceux qui achètent des tableaux pour les avoir, ceux pour que les autres ne les aient pas,

les troisièmes pour en jouir et en faire jouir» (CABANE [n. 39], p. 189). The spirit of competition and meanness of the second category is to be expected: «Après les tableaux de Michel-Ange et la porcelaine des Médicis, ce qu'il y a de plus rare chez l'amateur, c'est la bienveillance» (E. BONNAFFE, *Physiologie du Curieux* [Paris 1881], p. 14).

in *public sales*: these allow the world to know that they bought a Picasso or a Warhol for a record price, and this makes their name (or that of their casinos) famous. For such purchasers, auctions are a perfect playground, where all the «right» people can admire them, and where they may even be filmed by TV reporters. Together with the work of art, one acquires publicity and glory. Over fifty years after it occurred, the epic battle between Basile Goulandris (1913–1994) and Eugenia Niarchos (1927–1970) over a painting by Gauguin (1848–1903) has not been forgotten⁵³. They, at least, were actual art lovers. Some buyers instead seem to acquire art solely with the goal of acquiring social status – for example, those South American collectors who used to keep the Sotheby's label on the frame of their paintings⁵⁴. The «trophy buyers» want to buy the best, or at least the costliest: William Randolph Hearst (1863–1951) once bought a carpet for \$ 40,000 because it had been advertised as the most expensive in the world⁵⁵. And it is only when he noticed the price that he had paid (\$ 10,000) that John Pierpont Morgan (1837–1913) realised that for about a year he had been sitting in his library facing a bronze sculpture attributed to Michelangelo (1475–1564)⁵⁶! Many collectors, by contrast, are bargain-hunters: auctions always give hope, and buyers dream of underpaying. Unnoticed bargains can be found thanks to the large number of objects offered for sale at auctions. But if experts can miss a precious piece, buyers can also be fooled by a not-so-interesting one. Mistakes and poor cataloguing include the table signed by «*the famous French cabinet-maker Assnat*» (the ownership mark of the French National Assembly)⁵⁷, and the painting «*attributed to a still-unknown artist*»⁵⁸. If the auctioneer finds naïve customers, sellers may sell their property for more than it is worth, something unlikely to happen in retail. Upset by the extravagance of bibliophile monks⁵⁹, Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) speculated about the collector's motivation(s). More interesting than the over-quoted psychoanalytic explanation, that collecting is part of an anal-retentive process⁶⁰, is the theory that collectors are well aware that «we are but dust and shadow»⁶¹: the book dealer Hans Peter Kraus (1907–1988) declared that «*A Kraus book will be a Kraus book forever*»⁶². Through the provenance that they bestow on works of art, collectors may well be trying to reach immortality.

Religious faith in relics can transform itself into the collecting of relics, which leads naturally to collecting without faith. The penis of Bartholomew the Apostle was long venerated⁶³; that of Napoleon (1769–1821) was offered for sale not so long ago⁶⁴. Apparently, John F. Kennedy (US president 1961–1963) used to keep in his desk some hairs that had belonged to a horse of Napoleon⁶⁵. The link between auctions and relics was recently highlighted when a piece of burnt toast sold on Ebay for a high price, because it seemed to show the face of the Virgin Mary⁶⁶.

53 Margaret Thompson Biddle sale, 14 June 1957, Galerie Charpentier in Paris. Cf. R. MOULIN, *Le marché de la peinture en France* (Paris 1967), p. 204, n. 10, and RHEIMS (n. 47), pp. 187–190.

54 LACEY (n. 7), p. 304.

55 P. BLOM, *To have and to hold. An intimate history of collectors and collecting* (London 2003), p. 134.

56 BLOM (n. 55), p. 126.

57 J. HELFT, *Vive la Chine* (Paris 1955): «Lu dans un catalogue de vente américain: «Table à jeu en acajou, signée du célèbre ébéniste français Assnat». En retournant la table, je vis en effet qu'elle portait la marque au feu de l'Assemblée Nationale».

58 P. EUDEL, *Les Balades dans Paris* (Paris 1894): «Attribué à un

auteur jusqu'ici demeuré inconnu».

59 BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX, *Apologia ad Guillelmum, Patrologiae Cursus Completus* (Paris 1884–1894), vol. 182, pp. 91 sqq. (BLOM [n. 55], p. 19).

60 This idea was developed by the psychoanalyst Marie Bonaparte. Cf. D. WINNICOTT, *L'enfant et sa famille* (Paris 1971), p. 45, and

O. FENICHEL, *La théorie psychanalytique des névroses* (Paris 1953), p. 345.

61 The vanitas paintings remind us that *pulvis et umbra sumus*.

62 W. MUENSTERBERGER, *Le collectionneur: anatomie d'une passion* (Paris 1996), p. 164.

63 J.A.S. COLLIN DE PLANCY, *Dictionnaire critique des reliques et des images miraculeuses* (Paris 1821).

64 *Omnia Omnibus Ubique* («all Things for All People, Everywhere») is the motto of Harrod's, but the privilege of offering really anything for sale is the auctioneer's. Christie's offered indeed, on 29 October 1969, «a small dried-up object, genteelly described as a mummified tendon, taken from his body during the post-mortem», but Napoleon's penis failed to reach its reserve, stopping at £ 14,000 in the room (BLOM [n. 55], p. 139).

65 P. BOUSSEL, *Des reliques et de leur bon usage* (Paris 1971), p. 235.

66 It sold in 2004 to GoldenPalace.com for \$ 28,000.

Buying at auction is almost a supernatural experience, because the purchaser acquires a lineage by automatically becoming part of the human chain of the work's previous owners. Lucian (c. AD 125 – after AD 180) ridiculed the collectors who had bought items such as the lamp of Epictetus⁶⁷; a wooden table sold for 1.2 million *sestertii* in the auction of the Numidian king Juba (reigned 60–46 BC), whilst a table that had been owned by Cethegus sold for 1.4 million⁶⁸. By grouping a collection in a permanent catalogue, an auction highlights the collector's «work» of selection. An object that comes from a «named» collection is more expensive, as if its interest was confirmed by having been chosen by the previous owner, or as if the new purchaser were also buying a privileged and private link with the former collector. Forced by debts to auction some goods, the wife of John Connally (1917–1993) declared in 1987 that «There's a story behind almost every one of the 1,100 items you see here. It's more than giving away a physical item. It's giving away a part of what we are»⁶⁹. Such items carry a history with them, enabling a collector to feel close to his predecessors, people whom he may have admired or respected. This explains the seduction of memorabilia auctions. «A key is no longer a key if it belonged to the Bastille. A knitting needle is an object with a special aura if Marie Antoinette made it rattle, and a shaving kit will evoke horrible associations if it was once owned by Danton»⁷⁰.

«Whatever else auctions are, they are normally good fun»⁷¹. An auction can be considered as a «show» for the upper classes: when the estate of Claude Gouffier (1510–1570) was sold in 1572, many aristocrats attended the event, including Catherine de' Medici (1519–1589) and the French King's brother⁷². Similarly, not long before that, in 1559, the estate of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (1500–1558) was auctioned in Valladolid and in Madrid, and «it wasn't just an auction, it was an event – a feeding frenzy: it attracted wealthy and humble, young and old, the curious and the celebrity-seekers»⁷³. Francis Haskell (1928–2000)⁷⁴ described auctions as acting like modern temporary exhibitions – and one knows how popular these are! In the eighteenth century, Parisians could attend one auction every day⁷⁵; they were numerous and lasted a long time. The auction of the Duke of Tallard required 33 sales spread over almost 2 months in 1756⁷⁶, that of the Prince of Conti lasted 45 days in 1777⁷⁷. In December 1782, the *curiosos* spent a month viewing the sale of the Duke of Aumont, which clearly illustrates the «social» aspect of auctions, a place where one can meet and be seen – as the Champs-Élysées would be in the nineteenth-century, or the races in the twentieth. The auction rooms became part of an itinerary including the Court and the theatre. An 1813 print described *A day of fashion* as starting with «In the morning, drop in at Christie's»⁷⁸, where the Prince of Wales (King George IV, reigned 1820–1830) was well known to attend auctions in person⁷⁹. An art dealer wrote in 1786 that «one shouldn't be surprised by the many people that attend auctions, because they are a show, they are exciting»⁸⁰. Auctioneers try to create an attraction and the auction room sometimes becomes a circus – some consider

67 LUCIAN, III, Remarks Addressed to an Illiterate Book-fancier.

68 SENECA, De tranquillitate animi (BONNAFFÉ [n. 41], pp. 64–65).

69 The New York Times, 24 January 1987.

70 L. TOMERIUS, Das Glück, zu finden. Die Lust, zu zeigen, Die Zeit, 28 May 1993 (quoted in BLOM [n. 55], p. 137).

71 C.W. SMITH, Auctions. The social construction of value (New York/London 1989), p. xii.

72 BONNAFFÉ [n. 41], pp. 83–86.

73 M.-T. ALVAREZ, The Almoneda: the second-hand art market in Spain. Auctions, agents and dealers. The mechanisms of the art market 1660–1830 (Oxford 2007), pp. 36–37.

74 F. HASKELL, La Norme et le caprice (Paris 1993), p. 152, n. 433.

75 Bonnafé identified an average of forty-two auctions a year in Paris between 1776 and 1785.

76 The sale had only 1132 lots, which could easily be sold in a day in a modern auction.

77 The record seems to be held by the Bibliotheca Philippica, formed by Sir Thomas Phillips (1792–1872), which started to be auctioned by Sotheby's in 1886, and was still being auctioned in the 1980s, but this was to be expected of a collector who aimed to have a copy of every book ever printed. In fact, the dispersal came to an end only in 2003, since H. P. Kraus had bought the remainder of the library.

78 «A day of fashion», 24 August 1813, text by W.T. Parke, sung by C. Taylor at Vauxhall Gardens.

79 We are grateful to Lynda McLeod for telling us that the Prince of Wales purchased Sèvres porcelain from the Royal ma-

nufactory on 15 March 1790, and (through Lord Yarmouth) The Shipbuilder and his wife by Rembrandt on 12 June 1811.

80 F.-C. JOULLAIN, Réflexions sur la peinture et la gravure (Metz 1786), quoted in BONNAFFÉ [n. 41], p. 117: «Il ne faut pas

s'étonner, si les ventes attirent une grande affluence de monde; elles font spectacle [...]; elles excitent l'attention [...].»

those who leave bids and do not attend to be ridiculous and to miss the point⁸¹. Alfred Taubman (b. 1924), owner of Sotheby's, declared once, «God help us if we ever take the theatre out of the auction business. It would be an awfully boring world»⁸². It is no surprise that that the sale of the made-to-measure furniture of the French dwarf Delphin in the 1930s was very successful⁸³. When the writer André Breton (1896–1966) first visited the Hôtel Drouot, he commented: «how entertaining, all those objects!»⁸⁴.

One cannot conclude without evoking the link between auction and death: *all is dust and goes back to dust*⁸⁵, and auctioneers obtain their stock from death, divorce and debt. Whilst attending an auction, one may be hurt if a badly hung painting falls off the wall or an antique chair breaks. Emotion may kill you there, and indeed a collector died of a heart attack after successfully acquiring the coin he wanted⁸⁶. Buyers can even risk excommunication, and therefore being affected by the auction even after their own death: such would have been the case with the bidders (there were none!) at the estate of a religious community, sold after its closure by order of the French Republic⁸⁷!

The nature of what is sold at auction is a reflection of society: war or peace, wealth or economic crisis, people's interests, etc. Auctions started by selling women, then war loot (i.e. objects), then specialized items for cabinets of curiosity, and finally fine art. From an initial utilitarian function, auctions have become suppliers of pure luxury. This may not last, and electronic auctions are witnessing a surge in the purchase and collecting of objects. This essay has focused on the important sales, and the important buyers. Obviously, these are just the tip of the iceberg – the visible part of the auction world. But they offer lessons that can be applied to most sales and buyers. Not much art is yet sold over the internet, which functions rather like everyday provincial sales⁸⁸.

I have tried to present some of the reasons why buyers go to auction, none of which seem out-of-date. There is a trend for auctions to concentrate on high-value items: eighteenth-century auctioneers preferred to focus on art, and similarly Christie's has recently closed its collectables departments in London. However, there are still general (mixed) sales, in which just anything can be found, and this is what seems most to seduce and attract buyers. Buying at auction is about business; but it is also a lifestyle, and an art.

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Photo: NAC auction 38, lot 92.

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81 CHAMPFLEURY, LHôtel des commissaires-priseurs (Paris 1867): «Le collectionneur qui donne commission et n'achète

pas lui-même ressemble à cet Anglais qui, ayant note sur son calepin la vue de Paris du haut du Panthéon, y fit monter son

domestique».

82 Sunday Business Post, 28 April 2002.

83 This recalls an anecdote related

by PLINY, *Naturalis Historia*, XXXIV.6. A shouter called Theonis had united in one single lot a magnificent bronze candelabrum and an ugly, hunch-backed slave called Clesippus. The courtesan Gegania bought the whole for the astonishing amount of 50,000 sesterii, before exhibiting both the candelabra and the naked slave during an important banquet. She eventually took the slave as lover, and he created a cult of the candelabra (the source of his wealth) when he inherited her estate.

84 RHEIMS [n. 47], p. 135: «Comme tout cela est divertissant, tant d'objets!»

85 King James Bible, Genesis, 3.19: «In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return». Even William Randolph Hearst (1863–1951) had to see his collections return to auction.

86 Dominique Vivant Denon (1747–1825) died of a cold he contracted at a sale (BLOM [n. 55], p. 120). And Georges Andrieux, a book expert in Paris, died barely a few hours after selling a library of incunabulae.

87 The threat proved successful, and there were no bidders at the sale of the Congrégation des Pères du Sacré-Cœur de Betharram, on 29 March 1880 (DURET-ROBERT [n. 9], p. 29).

88 The most expensive item sold on eBay to date, at \$ 4.9 million, is a private jet.