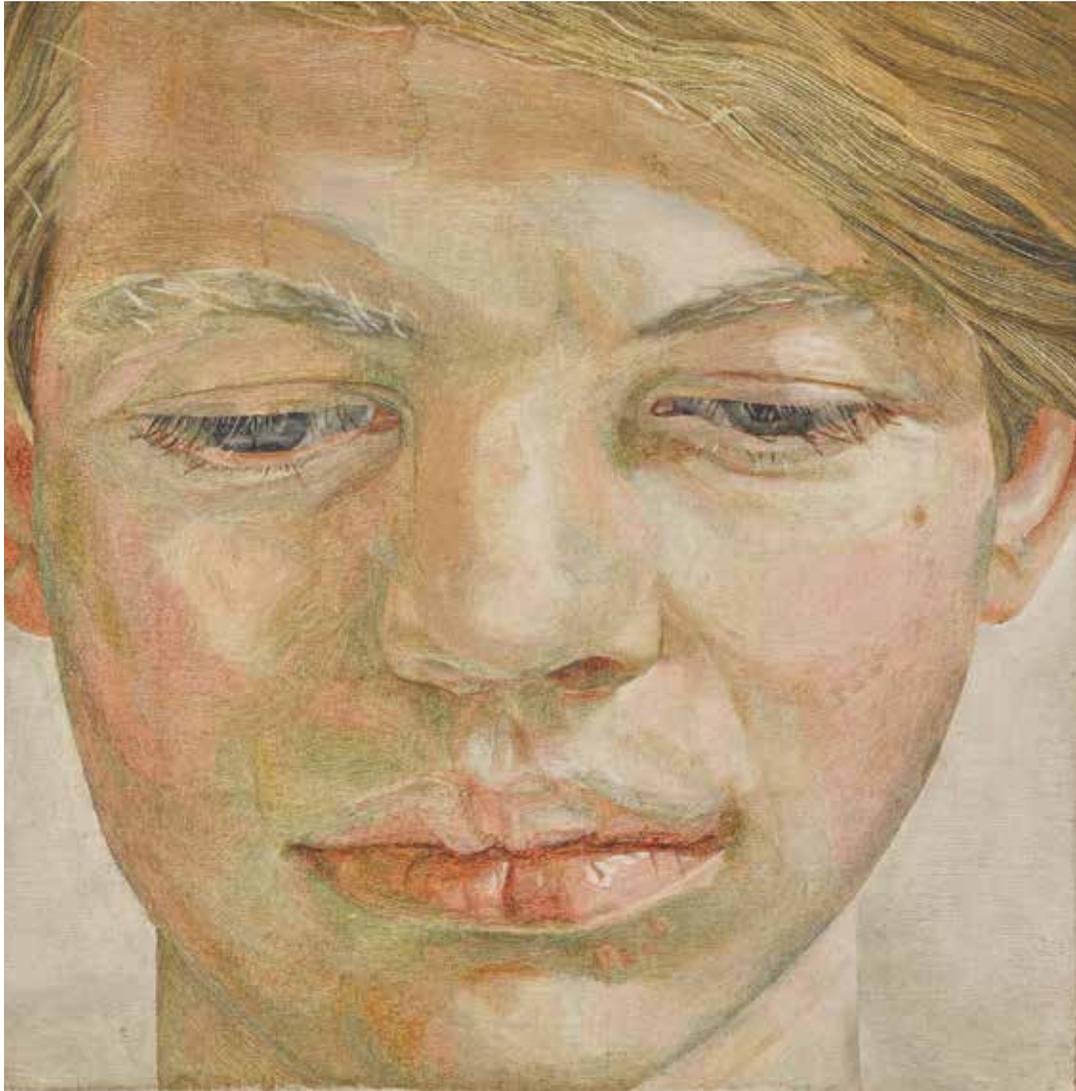


Art Market

Susan Moore

Early masterpieces by Hockney and Freud are up for grabs in London, while extraordinary collections are being sold in New York and Paris. In January, Americana and art by women broke records, but business in Europe seems to be less buoyant



1. *Head of a Boy*, 1956, Lucian Freud (1922–2011), oil on canvas, 18 x 18cm. Sotheby's London (£4.5m–£6.5m)

Preview

Works by two titans of post-war British art lead the contemporary sales in London this month, one large, the other small. Both were painted at key periods, and when the artists were in their early 30s.

David Hockney's double portrait *Henry Geldzahler and Christopher Scott* (1969) is the final work to be offered from the collection of Barney Ebsworth, a group of American paintings that has already achieved a colossal

\$323.1m at auction at Christie's. Perhaps Ebsworth viewed the British painter as an honorary Californian; either way, the primary subject here is the legendary Metropolitan Museum of Art curator and passionate advocate of the contemporary, Henry Geldzahler; the painting itself, in terms of subject-matter and technique, fitted seamlessly into a collection that had Edward Hopper's *Chop Suey* (1929) as its centrepiece.

The clarity of Hopper's reductive style was an influence on Hockney, but so too was

Piero della Francesca. There is something of the latter's clearly defined volumes and profiles, his hypnotic calm and high-key pastel palette – all that pistachio and pink – in this modern-day triptych. The second figure is Geldzahler's then partner, the artist Christopher Scott, but he seems as incidental here as the balancing floor lamp. It is the sitter's engagement with the painter that compels.

Christie's 6 March sale marks only the second auction outing for this widely published and exhibited double portrait. Only

three of Hockney's double portraits remain in private hands: *Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures)* of 1972 took a bow at auction just last November, eliciting much comment, mostly about the circumstances of its sale for \$90.3m, an auction world record for a work by a living artist. Again executed in Hockney's favoured 7ft by 10ft format, *Henry Geldzahler and Christopher Scott* comes to the block with a third-party guarantee and an estimate 'in the region of £30m'. The figure is more in keeping with the artist's previous record price of \$28.4m, and has also been determined, according to Christie's head of sale, Katharine Arnold, by the bidding price points of the eight individuals who competed for *Portrait of an Artist*. Hockney's previous high was found for a kaleidoscopic late landscape, *Pacific Coast Highway and Santa Monica* (1990), not an iconic figurative painting of 1969.

In contrast, Lucian Freud's *Head of a Boy* (Fig. 1) at Sotheby's measures a mere 18cm square, but it has an intensity and power that belies its diminutive scale. Painted in 1956, it is one of a small group of closely scrutinised and obsessively recorded heads seemingly positioned inches behind the picture plane. The closest parallels in Freud's work are *Boy Smoking* (1950) and the Tate's famous 1952 portrait of Francis Bacon, stolen when on loan to Berlin in 1988 and still missing; here, though, a tight composition has given way to such extreme cropping that the head is almost propelled beyond the picture surface. Such is the artist's concentration on his subjects in these paintings of the 1950s that details of eyes, lashes and mouth are subject to what he described as 'involuntary magnification'.

The artist penetrated beneath that carefully wrought surface too. Herbert Read famously described Freud as 'the Ingres of Existentialism' and in this sitter we sense a thoughtfulness and melancholy. He was the Hon. Garech Browne, who died last March aged 78, painted at home in Ireland when he was 16 years old and the artist was still married to his cousin, Lady Caroline Blackwood. Browne, also a Guinness heir, was a larger-than-life personality in his own right: a patron of Francis Bacon and many other Irish painters, poets and musicians, he entertained splendidly, as had his mother before him, at Luggala in Co. Wicklow.

Christie's sold two of Browne's Freud drawings of Bacon last October, for £584,750 and £488,750. Sotheby's now offers Freud's portrait of the patron with an estimate of £4.5m–£6.5m – and a guarantee – on 5 March. It is worth noting that the portrait, along with the Christie's drawings, was among the works of art Browne bequeathed to the National Gallery of Ireland, an institution for which he had



2. *Mélibée*, 1931, Francis Picabia (1879–1953), oil on canvas, 195.5 x 130cm. Sotheby's Paris (€2.5m–€3.5m)

3. Guanyin, 11th–12th century, Dali Kingdom, Yunnan, gilt bronze, ht 38cm. Christie's New York (\$4m–\$6m)



also worked to secure Francis Bacon's studio. A statement from Sotheby's informs us that the will was discretionary and, after careful consideration, the executor and trustees decided to sell at auction.

Marianne and Pierre Nahon became art dealers in order to continue to collect, founding the Galerie Beaubourg in Paris in 1973 to show work by Pop and New Realist artists, such as César and Arman, who were also their friends. In a short video on the Sotheby's website they walk us through their remarkable holdings and allude to the collection's second theme, sensuality. The tale began when the 15-year-old Pierre acquired a watercolour by Picabia, and here he describes the artist's 1931 painting *Mélibée* (Fig. 2) as probably the masterpiece of the artist's series of 'transparencies'. His wife cannot conceal her distress that they are parting with it.

From 1927, Picabia had begun to superimpose layers of linear patterns and figurative fragments to create highly personal and poetic, dreamlike images which greatly interested the Surrealists. *Mélibée*, dated around 1931, is from a second series. Its title is drawn from classical myth but this grave, poignant, monumental head derives – again – from Piero della Francesca. Picabia described these 'transparency' paintings as ones 'where all my instincts can give themselves free rein'. The canvas is expected to fetch €2.5m–€3.5m at Sotheby's Paris on 19 March, and more works are offered in day and online sales.

Even the Nahons' extensive holdings pale in comparison with those of the late Herbert and Florence Irving, whose extraordinary philanthropy included presenting around 1,300 Asian works of art – and \$80m – to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Their collection was the result of three decades of close collaboration with the dealers and curators who became their friends, and now Christie's New York offers what remained of that vast collection, some 400 lots, ranging across evening, day and online sales during Asia Week (13–23 March).

A highlight of the 20 March evening sale of lacquer, jade, bronze and ink – Chinese, Himalayan, Japanese and Korean – is a rare and unusually large gilt-bronze seated figure of the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara (Guanyin in Chinese), dating from the 11th–12th century (Fig. 3). Various details, including its particular seated pose, indicate that it was produced in the Dali Kingdom (937–1253), an independent state in south-west China at the time of the Song dynasty. Guanyins sometimes have multiple heads and limbs, and here we find four arms (originally there were more), an indication of the deity's ability to assist more than one being in attaining enlightenment (estimate \$4m–\$6m). **A**

that year's record high, and 80 per cent sold by lot. The reason, according to the head of department, Erik Gronning, was a diverse and impressive offering of property, a lot of its estate material fresh to the market. The 1,250-plus lot extravaganza filled all 10 floors of the York Avenue headquarters. The quality of the offering saw the return of collectors that the company had not seen for years, institutional buying, and more of the new bidders who have slowly been making their presence felt in the last few years – all of them, as Gronning noted, under 60.

Strikingly, early material in particular defied expectations, with 'pilgrim century' American furniture – plus Delftware and other decorative arts bought over from England during the 17th century – selling well above estimates at the \$4.2m Vogel sale. For later material, provenance was all. An unassuming tavern table with links with Jefferson soared nine times over estimate, while a mahogany bonnet-top high chest of drawers made around 1760 in Newport, Rhode Island, fetched \$543,000 (estimate \$150,000–\$300,000). It had remained in the family, untouched and unpublished, until now. Strong prices, certainly, but still perhaps 25–30 per cent less than such pieces may have achieved at the peak of the market.



2. *Athena*, 1st century BC (after 5th-century Greek original), Italy, marble, ht. 137cm. Grusenmeyer-Woliner

Topping the various-owner Americana sale, however, was a pair of naïve portraits of Dr Andrew Aitkin and his wife and daughter, painted around 1805 by the enigmatic African American Joshua Johnson. The son of a white man and a slave, he is believed to be the first artist of colour to make a living as a painter in the US. In 1796 he is listed as a portrait painter in the Baltimore City Directory, and two years later the artist took out an advertisement declaring himself a 'self-taught genius'. Estimated at \$60,000–\$80,000, the paintings changed hands for \$675,000. Another pair of Johnson portraits, of children with butterflies, similarly sold for 10 times their estimate at Christie's for \$516,500.

The highest price of the week was also found at Christie's. Ammi Phillips's *Girl in a Red Dress with a Dog* (c. 1830–35; Fig. 3) is one of this prolific artist's most celebrated 'four children in red', and the directness of his imagery, his reductive technique and bold, vibrant palette, make his portraits no less appealing today. The canvas fetched \$1.7m, a new auction record for the artist and the price also found for one of Edward Hicks's many versions of *Peaceable Kingdom*, from around 1833. Christie's auction of Outsider and Vernacular Art on 18 January achieved its highest

total in the category to date, \$4.3m. In total, Christie's Americana series realised \$15.9m.

Tucked between the two New York sales series was BRAFA. This Brussels fair is renowned for its offerings of tribal art and antiquities as well as works by local masters, and these categories did not disappoint. A case in point was the life-size Roman marble statue of Athena, carved in the 1st century BC after a 5th-century Greek bronze original attributed to Myron. Headless, armless and footless, it is nonetheless a remarkable work. On loan to the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire in Geneva from 1985 to 2008, it was subsequently offered at auction at the depth of the market.

(Grusenmeyer-Woliner).

There was unexpected pleasure too, in the form of one of Frida Kahlo's painted plaster corsets of around 1950, featuring a baby *in utero* underneath a Communist hammer and sickle – an extraordinary convergence of her political, medical and psychological struggles (Sofie Van de Velde, €2m). Heritage Gallery of Moscow devoted their entire stand to Soviet propagandist art and design. At the time of writing, most sales in any field were not for high-value works of art. Perhaps belts are tightening in Europe. **A**



3. *Girl in a Red Dress with a Dog*, c. 1830–1835, Ammi Phillips (1788–1865), oil on canvas, 82.6 × 68cm. Christie's New York, \$1.7m

Review

The female certainly triumphed at Sotheby's Master Paintings evening sale in New York on 30 January. There were record prices for an early 17th-century still life of fruit and flowers by the Milanese Fede Galizia (\$2.4m), two early 18th-century paintings by the shadowy Venetian artist and poet Giulia Lama (\$495,000) and also for Angelica Kauffman's portrait of the Spencer children, which sold over estimate for \$915,000. Causing the real stir of the sale, however, was Elisabeth-Louise Vigée Le Brun's life-size *Portrait of Muhammad Dervish Khan* (1788; Fig. 1). This 225cm-high tour de force not only topped the sale's 'The Female Triumphant' section but the entire auction, soaring over estimate to sell for a record \$7.2m.

The sitter was one of three ambassadors sent to the French court in 1788 by Tipu Sultan, ruler of Mysore, in a bid to regain French support for ousting the British from India. Dark-skinned, turbaned and outfitted in gold-embroidered topcoats and the kind of gauzy muslins just beginning to come into fashion in Europe, the men caused a sensation. Vigée Le Brun saw them at the opera, and was determined to paint them. They declined, unless the request came from Louis XVI – a request the artist succeeded in procuring. This portrait and that of Osman Khan were exhibited at the Salon in 1789; but by that autumn, the artist had fled Revolutionary Paris and the paintings are next recorded in her husband's estate sale of 1814. The whereabouts of the latter is still unknown.

As a social and historical document, as well as a masterly piece of painting, this portrait is the French equivalent of Sir Joshua Reynolds's *Portrait of Omai*, a print after which the artist may have seen. At Sotheby's London in 2001, *Omai* had fetched the then extraordinary price of £10.3m. As for the three returning ambassadors, their embassy a political failure, Tipu Sultan ordered their heads cut off.

The \$52.7m sale was 76 per cent sold by lot, a better sell-through rate than the Old Master drawings auction that morning; but prices were extraordinary at the earlier sale, and the \$15m total the highest ever recorded at Sotheby's for drawings. At its core were 13 works deaccessioned by a member of the Dutch royal family who found herself roundly criticised in the Dutch press for not giving first refusal to national museums. As expected, the top lot was the monumental Rubens preparatory study of a young man (illustrated in the January issue of *Apollo*). Estimated at \$2.5m–\$3.5m, it soared to a record \$8.2m – a lot of money for an Old Master drawing but hardly a fortune in terms of the wider market.



1. *Portrait of Muhammad Dervish Khan*, 1788, Elisabeth-Louise Vigée Le Brun (1755–1842), oil on canvas, 225.5 × 136cm. Sotheby's New York, \$7.2m

It is tempting to assume that at least some of the bidders on the large and dynamic pen-and-ink drawing after part of Leonardo da Vinci's lost fresco of *The Battle of Anghiari* also thought they were pursuing a Rubens: he had extensively reworked one anonymous copy of the Leonardo and this sheet was long considered another autograph work. Offered at \$25,000–\$35,000 as 16th-century Italian School, it fetched \$795,000. A further highlight was a red chalk *Portrait of a Youth*, startlingly modern in its directness, here attributed to

Agostino Carracci but in the past ascribed to his more distinguished brother Annibale. This came with an estimate of \$35,000–\$45,000 and left with a price of \$1.5m. For drawings collectors – and these buyers were collectors – a long and stellar provenance seemed to have exerted more than its usual pull.

After a decade or more in the doldrums, it appears that Americana is back on the buyer radar. Earlier in the month, Sotheby's achieved its highest total for an Americana sales series since 2007 – at \$21.3m, just \$600,000 shy of