

Watch how I mix the umber with the rose,
Tinctures of flesh beyond imaginings,
The dew still on the petal, light of light,
Waterdrops glistening on the lifted arm—
A talent, and a gift: no muddiness,
No crudity, no vaulting after vague
Resemblances, but everywhere my crisp
Edges of excellence, a bounding line.

These Frenchmen and these Dutch—I've heard of them,
But what of them? These vogues will come and go
As they have always done. The test must be
Standards established by the chosen few
Time has vouchsafed to us—Praxiteles,
Phidias, a handful else. Where can Art go
Except in emulation? Here—the pink
Lies on the white, and trembles on the cheek.

Stanislaw Baranczak

Browsing through “Homes and Gardens”

So, that's how things are in that world; but
let's show vigilance, let's not be deceived, that
furniture of theirs also gets covered with dust, those juicy
steaks tend to be overdone, those lawns have
continually to be cut, dust, ashes, the mower's
roar in that world too they
have sometimes bled, some of them
are dead, their tanned and massaged
faces also sometimes grow pale and sweat;

and moreover we too have our achievements,

our products are in the lead, our
positive appearances succeed more and
more often, our endeavours do not recede, our
youth accedes to the ranks, our visible effects
proceed when specific activities are embraced;

and yet in this world some have always bled,
even when all goes smoothly, there is someone dead,
and if he is alive, it's only in the other
world there is nothing for one to be dying,
only there everything is not for bleeding
and not for believing

Translated by Adam Czerniawski

NOTES & TOPICS

European Diary

Art in Auction



THE HIGHEST price ever paid for a painting—by New York's Metropolitan Museum at Christie's on 27 November 1970—is over £2,310,000, for Velazquez's "Juan de Pareja." This fact now dominates considerations about the picture, for art and monetary values have become inextricably intertwined. There is the unchaste glamour of expensive things, an instinctual suspicion or disbelief that an expanse of canvas can really be so desirable. By comparison gold bullion seems impressively emphatic. Yet this enormous price was not determined solely on grounds of investment or pure aesthetic, and when market price is equated with the value of the object as a work of art a natural confusion arises, sadly reflected by the American tourist who marches into a museum and asks point-blank to see the most expensive picture.

Nor does the price of a painting necessarily reflect its beauty. Market factors, the painting's saleability, orient around its size (small paintings have a clear utility for private buyers), its condition, its period, the identity of the painter, and whether he is fashionable. A signed and dated painting has much greater value than an unsigned one—a palette-sketch by Renoir or Picasso exacts an astronomical price, while respectable unsigned oils go unwanted.

Certainly the illogical value we attach to the age of a painting would have surprised our forbears, who slung out the mediocre with abandon, but it is bound up with the feeling that antiquity must mean quality and high standards. Old possessions have the appearance of stemming the tide of teeming and bewildering change, and new forms of "art" are constantly being created, right up to yesterday's tin tea caddy. Perhaps our reverence for third-rate old work stems partly from the fragmented and isolationist character of much contemporary art.

IN JULY THIS YEAR at Christie's, a Matisse sold for £720,000, far more than any 20th-century painting had ever fetched. Yet "Young Sailor" would not normally be regarded as an example of Matisse's best work. The curious implications of this new record are interesting to tease out and compare. Does that price reflect the status of the painting, and the painter, in art history? Does it change assessments of the Post-Impressionists?

Academic art history is phlegmatic; it assumes that the long view is always the interesting one, that eventually the calibre of a Goya or a Rembrandt will show through and become established. There are certain paintings of such force and energy that the degree of horror they initially arouse may indicate their ultimate importance. Flabby imitators quicken the solidification process: copiers of Kandinsky and Cézanne have found that mimicry is not so easy, for the evolution of the way the eye sees the same things is exciting at its turning-point, and the pictorial intensity of paintings breaking new ground cannot be rediscovered.

In the art market tentative experiments are not appreciated. Bacon and Hockney have become expensive because critics have asserted their importance. The next step is to refine a painter's portfolio down to a handful of seminal works, and here the auction-house cataloguer with a good eye can, like the critic, play a part in moulding art history—detecting the way in which one painting in a portfolio marks a significant junction, is indeed the crucial axis of the painter's work and the justification of his ideas. Through the system of advised reserves and estimated sale prices this perceived quality affects the painting's hard-cash worth. Above all, the cataloguer's conversations with clients and dealers before the sale influence a painting's desirability, for auction-rooms decidedly have the capacity to push a particular lot. And the presence of investment buyers (financial groups or individuals) as guaranteed bidders in the sale-room has increased the fluidity of a painting's monetary value.

AUCTION-ROOM PRICES are volatile and with inflation and the deduction of auction-house commissions, taxes and charges it is often very difficult to get returns from an investment in fine art comparable to those from orthodox investment. For sale-room practice is complex, and frequently not understood.

The estimate in an auction-house catalogue of the price a painting will fetch is based on the most recent price realised by the painter's work. (Many of the most expensive—and most illustrious—works of art are sold in private transactions, and never go to auction.) But a previous high price may have been a freak—two parties have vied unexpectedly fiercely in the sale-room; there has