

A blurred photograph of an art gallery. The scene is brightly lit with long, narrow light fixtures on the ceiling. Several people are seen in motion, looking at art on the walls. The overall atmosphere is clean, modern, and professional.

# Art Market *Review*

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The Art Basel and UBS Art Market Report 2019 demonstrates the resilience of the market despite on-going global economic uncertainty. Public auction sales of fine and decorative art and antiques in 2018 reached \$29.1 billion - an increase of 2.1% on the 2017 total of \$28.5 billion.

The three largest auction markets – the US, China and the UK continued to dominate sales during 2018, increasing their collective share of worldwide sales to 87%, up 3% from the previous year. The US market remained by far the largest with 40% of sales (up from 35%), followed by China at 29% (down from 33%) and the UK at 18% (up from 16%). Despite the political turmoil surrounding Brexit, the UK performed strongly with sales of just under \$14 billion against a mixed performance in the rest of Europe with many of the larger markets contracting.

Although less extreme than in 2017, which saw multiple record-breaking multimillion dollar lots distort overall results, growth in 2018 continued to be driven by art at the high-end of the auction market, particularly works priced over \$10 million. Post-War and Contemporary sales (generally artists born after 1910) reached \$7.2 billion in 2018, an increase of 16% despite a 5% reduction in the number of lots sold. Sales in Modern art (generally artists born between 1875 and 1910) also recorded strong sales results of \$4.3 billion in 2018, up 19% on the previous year despite a decline of 10% in the volume of transactions.

The Post-War and Contemporary sector covers a wide range of artists, including both those deceased and living at various stages of their careers. 2018 was a notable year for sales in this segment, with David Hockney's 'Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures)' achieving the top overall price in this sector of \$90.3 million at Christie's New York in November. The amount was a record price for a living artist and far surpassed the previous record, held by Jeff Koons for 'Balloon Dog (Orange)', which sold for \$58.4 million in 2013. Painted by Hockney in 1972, the large canvas composition of

the two figures was based on two separate photographs, and combined the themes the artist was exploring in the late 1960s and 1970s through his famous 'swimming pool' and 'double portrait' series.

The most expensive painting sold at auction in 2018 was from the Modern sector of the market. Amedeo Modigliani's 1917 large painting of a reclining nude entitled 'Nu couché (sur le côté gauche)' sold at Sotheby's New York in May for \$157.2 million, making the work the fourth most expensive work of art in auction history. In the publicity leading to the sale Sotheby's had confirmed the \$150 million estimate was the highest amount ever placed on a work at auction. A key driver in the unprecedented auction estimate was no doubt the presence of an irrevocable, or third-party, bid placed in advance on the painting. In the end, the work only narrowly exceeded its estimate, selling for \$139 million plus \$18.2 million fees to the single bid from the unnamed guarantor.

After 2017 saw in the Leonardo 'Salvator Mundi' smash the auction record for a singular artwork, last year signalled the highest total ever for a private collection sold at auction. The sale by Christie's New York in May of the paintings, antiques and decorative arts collection of Peggy and David Rockefeller realised \$832.5m. Despite speculation in the press that the sale could exceed the unprecedented \$1 billion mark, the record-breaking result achieved was particularly gratifying because of the auction's charitable purpose, with all proceeds from the sale going to 12 charities stipulated in the will of the late David Rockefeller who died in 2017.

The Rockefeller sale itself significantly surpassed the previous auction record of \$485 million for the Yves Saint Laurent collection in 2009. The highest individual artwork sold from the Rockefeller collection was Pablo Picasso's 'Fillette à la corbeille fleurie' (1905). The work divided experts who were unsure how the market would react to the large painting's subject matter of a naked teenage girl from the artist's lesser known early Rose Period, and therefore not easily recognisable as a Picasso. Nevertheless, the painting reached its guarantee and sold for \$115 million, thereby surpassing the significant \$100 million milestone – a feat that only this work and the Modigliani sold by Sotheby's achieved during the year.



**Banksy (b. 1973) 'Girl with Balloon' (2006) retitled 'Love is in the Bin' (2018) Jack Taylor/Stringer. Getty images.**

As with the Leonardo sale in 2017, Christie's once again demonstrated their more populist approach to marketing the highest profile auction sales. Where the 'Salvator Mundi' sale was presented "as a once in a lifetime opportunity" to acquire "the last da Vinci in private hands", here the charitable auction was presented through a shrewd marketing campaign as the opportunity to "Live Like a Rockefeller". As in 2017, marketing hype and hyperbole were seamlessly meshed together culminating, after a six-month promotional campaign, in 10 days of online sales and three days of live auctions at the Rockefeller Centre where over 1,500 objects were sold. The success of Christie's strategy, underscored by the provenance of the renowned Rockefeller

couple themselves as much as the objects for sale, saw record prices achieved for artists ranging from Delacroix and Corot to Monet and Matisse.

If 2017 had seen Leonardo's 'Salvator Mundi' (c.1500) tear up the records books with its unprecedented \$450.3 million sale, 2018 marked the literal attempt by the street artist Banksy to 'cut through' the vagaries of the art market. The 'Leonardo' has remained mysteriously out of public view since its monumental sale, despite repeatedly being scheduled for exhibition at the Louvre Abu Dhabi, leading to increased speculation about the painting's authenticity and uncomfortable questions over the more opaque machinations of the art world. In a brilliantly choreographed PR stunt at Sotheby's London in October, Banksy managed to stage the live shredding at auction of one of his best-known works 'Girl with balloon' (2006). Conveniently captured on camera and uploaded on Banksy's own Instagram account, the painting was cut in strips seconds after the gavel fell by a shredder concealed in the painting's frame.

This act of deliberate self-destruction made an additional, perhaps unintended, statement on our modern perception of artistic versus economic 'value'. The generally secretive Banksy publicly declared following the stunt, how the plan to completely shred his work was foiled by a technical glitch, leaving the torn strips hanging down outside the frame. Shortly after the sale Pest Control, the authentication body for the artist, verified the painting as a new 'original' artwork under a new title 'Love is in the Bin'. Where the intact Banksy had already equalled his record price at auction of £1.04 million, the now notorious partially shredded work is considered by specialists to have doubled in value to be worth in excess of £2 million.

About the author: Dr James Lindow has a PhD in the History of Art from the Royal College of Art and the Victoria & Albert Museum and is a critically acclaimed author.



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