

# Reasons to be cheerful

**Crispian Riley-Smith looks at the importance of regional sale rooms in the fine art market - and how to add value by the most careful research**

**O**ver the last few years, the market for works on paper sold outside the main London salerooms has been strong.

This has occurred for a number of reasons and there is reason to be cheerful for many auctioneers, vendors and buyers. The general view amongst some auctioneers – and I have worked for the London houses and as a consultant to the regional auction houses – was that the best prices were to be found in London.

While this might still be the case in some instances, the regional auction houses are able to get high prices for drawings and watercolours due to the extraordinary reach of the internet and the continuing demand for stock from dealers and objects from collectors.

This is not confined to the fine art field, but covers the applied arts and all fine arts. The reach of websites such as the saleroom.com, which will be known to many auctioneers, is extensive.

Regional firms are now no longer sending their specialist material to London for sale, and are quite confident of selling it themselves. Some of the high prices sold in the past few years illustrate that the market is strong for the right material, especially if it is presented to the market in the right way.

## Combined catalogue

As a dealer in drawings and watercolours, as well as other fine art fields, I see that the trend amongst auctioneers is for the combined catalogue.

The auctioneers on the whole prefer not to specialise too much, since the material that comes to them for sale is



naturally going to be very broad. This trend has extended to the London salerooms, with the combined catalogue the norm rather than relegated to the 'single collection'.

This combined catalogue was actually the form for many of the auctions up to the 1970s and continued throughout the continent through the 1980s and 1990s and well into the 2000s.

With the expansion of the market at the main London salerooms in the 1980s, the market specialised and fragmented into single catalogues for fields such as Impressionist pictures, Victorian pictures, Old Master pictures, British pictures, miniatures, German and Expressionist pictures, Scandinavian pictures and Old Master drawings, to name a few.

This has proved costly to the

auctioneers and it is unlikely that this format will be returned to. The trend now is to combine many of these fields into single catalogues: cross fertilisation is the new buzz word. However, the all-encompassing combined catalogue was never abandoned by the regional auctioneers or continental auctions.

The buyers at auctions still include many dealers, but now more private clients are coming to the auctions.

Historically, the private buyer was the domain of the dealer, but now the private collector is looking further afield. This is due to the proliferation of television programmes such as 'Flog It' or 'The Real Deal' and of course 'The Antiques Roadshow'.

Also, the market is open to many dealers and collectors from all countries due to the internet.

The buyer is also getting increasingly sophisticated and is looking at different avenues in order to find the object of their desire.

I have chosen just two sales which illustrate the high prices reached at auction, though there are plenty to choose from.

### Australian farm

The first was a sketchbook that came from Rushbrooke Hall in Suffolk and was sold by Rowley's as part of their Antiques and Fine Art Auction at Tattersalls in Newmarket on July 22, 2010. The album was catalogued as Anglo-Australian school (19th century), and estimated at £200–£300.

The watercolour came with an inscription on the mount: 'Strawberry Hill, Nr Albany, King Georges Sound, Australia.'

This was what was of interest to buyers, and indeed the work sold to the National Trust of Australia at £28,000, plus premium.

The farm at Strawberry Hill was one of Western Australia's first settlement farms and was the earliest under constant cultivation.

The farm was established in 1827 as part of a military settlement managing incoming convicts, and it later became

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the official government residence of the region under Captain Sir Richard Spencer.

He built the 'Old Farm' in 1836 which still exists today and is open to the public and run by the National Trust of Australia. Hence their interest in purchasing this fascinating lot.

In 1836, the farm was visited by Charles Darwin and Captain Fitzroy at the end of his voyage on the *Beagle*, Darwin describing the site in his journal as 'a small and neat farm in what is the only cultivated ground in the district'.

The sketchbook had inscriptions from three members of the Trimmer family, and a descendant, Elizabeth Trimmer, married into the Rushbrooke family, hence the the reason for the album being at Rushbrooke Hall.

There were several members of the Trimmer family associated with this area of Western Australia.

The auctioneers found records of a Mrs Trimmer setting sail from Sydney on board a government schooner,

'Champion', for King George Sound in 1836 and, by looking at later marital records, it seems there was certainly one branch of the Trimmer family (Arthur Trimmer) who was related to Sir Richard Spencer, the Governor at Strawberry Hill.

The auctioneers found a newspaper report one year earlier in 1835 of a Mr Trimmer and a government representative narrowly escaping death after they attempted to attack a group of Aborigines who had been accused of pilfering from a farm in Western Australia near the town of York, igniting a new period of violent confrontation between the settlers and Aborigines.

Additionally, they discovered that 'Arthur River', a town directly north of Albany and King George Sound, was named after an Arthur Trimmer who was sent out to this region as part of an exploration party commissioned by the British Governor.

The research carried out by Rowley's added a great deal of value to this lot.

### Adding value to Vitruvius

Mallams auctioneers in Oxford were able to add value to a group of drawings that sold for a hammer price of £165,000 on an estimate of £4,000–£6,000 on June 8, 2007, and were related to the work of Vitruvius.

They were interesting because of their date, subject matter, historical and artistic merit and rarity.

Mallams had these drawings extensively researched by Ian Campbell, Professor of Architectural History and Theory at Edinburgh College of Art, and I think it helpful to draw on his research which gives some background information and puts Vitruvius' work in context and how this group of drawings are related to his work.

The lot included eight drawings of varying sizes containing fragments of an illustrated Italian translation of Vitruvius' Ten Books on Architecture. Both the drawings and the writings were in the same brown ink, and were by the same artist, Italian School, circa 1550. ➔



**Settlement price:** Sold at Rowley's, estimated at £200–£300, it went for £28,000 (plus premium). This rare watercolour is of one of Western Australia's first settlement farms at Strawberry Hill, Albany, now run by the National Trust of Australia

Vitruvius' Ten Books, written circa 30-20 BC, is the only substantive classical text on architecture, and became of critical importance in the Italian Renaissance when architects strove to revive architecture *all'antica*.

This was not an easy task since Vitruvius looked to Greece for many of his exemplars and used many Greek architectural terms, which were not always applicable when understanding Roman ruins, as became apparent with the publication of the first illustrated edition by Fra Giovanni Giocondo of Verona in 1511.

Giocondo's humanist scholarship is impeccable and his interpretation of Vitruvius' temple types follows the text to the letter, and yet the result for the *in antis* temple is nothing like the reality known from the physical evidence.

Already by 1520 the manuscript translation, prepared by the humanist Fabio Calvo for Raphael, included a plan correctly interpreting the *in antis* temple, and others appear in the drawings by Giovanni Battista da Sangallo added to a 1486 first edition of Vitruvius around 1530.

Had the great project outlined in the famous letter of 1542 by Agostino de' Landi for a Vitruvian Academy to

prepare a multi-volume critical edition, translation and commentary of the Ten Books been realised, Giocondo's errors may have been exposed sooner.

However, the fact that his interpretations were followed in the great Italian translation and commentary of Daniele Barbaro of 1556, with illustrations by Andrea Palladio, ensured that they became virtually canonical until the eighteenth century.

The drawings sold at Mallams all belong to the first three books of Vitruvius, and the drawings of the *in antis* temple are similar to those in Giocondo and Barbaro, although it is not clear if the fragments pre- or post-date the latter.

That the artist was translating from the Giocondo edition or one of its successors is confirmed by the inscriptions, which does not occur in printed editions earlier than 1511.

At the time of the auction, it was possible to make various suggestions as to who drew these beautiful drawings.

Professor Campbell put forward the name of Baldassare Peruzzi, who is said to have begun a commentary on Vitruvius himself and had experimented with perspectival plans in his project drawings for New St Peter's, while his pupil, Sebastiano Serlio, gives

instructions for constructing them in his Second Book: On Perspective published in 1545.

Another associate of Peruzzi, Antonio Labacco, makes use of them in his *Libro appartenente all'architettura* of 1552, before orthogonal plans became normative.

It is possible, therefore that the artist may belong to the circle of Peruzzi, although there is nothing to prove a direct connection.

## The three Ds

The vendors who come to auctioneers come for the same reason – they want to sell, and it is the job of the auctioneer to do just this.

However, if there is an opportunity to make the most of an interesting drawing or watercolour, there is also plenty of scope if the auctioneer can find something of significance that will interest a buyer, as in these two cases.

Objects are still being brought to the salerooms because of the three Ds: death, divorce and distress. For the most part, this continues to be the route of objects to market. ■

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**Besieged:** sold at Mallams Auctioneers, Italian School, circa 1550: 'Fragment 5 Verso. View of the Siege of Larignum, illustrating Vitruvius 2.9.15-16.' This was estimated at £4,000-£6,000 but went for £165,000