

C. G. BOERNER

DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

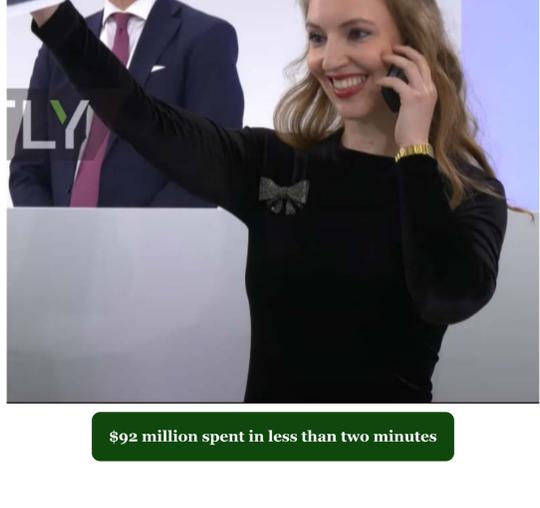
Distraction / Abwechslung
3 February 2021

Here we are again, another round of old master sales in New York is over. Botticelli's beautiful young man, who, in the late eighteenth century, had found his way from Tuscany to Glymllifon Park in the Welsh village of Llandwrog and had since 1982 resided on Manhattan's Upper East Side (which did not stop him from intermittently adorning the walls of Washington's National Gallery of Art and the Metropolitan Museum), seems now to be destined for Russia or, perhaps more likely, a Swiss freeport.



Sandro Botticelli, *Portrait of a Young Man Holding a Roundel*, 1480s, tempera on panel (sold at Sotheby's, New York, January 28, 2021)

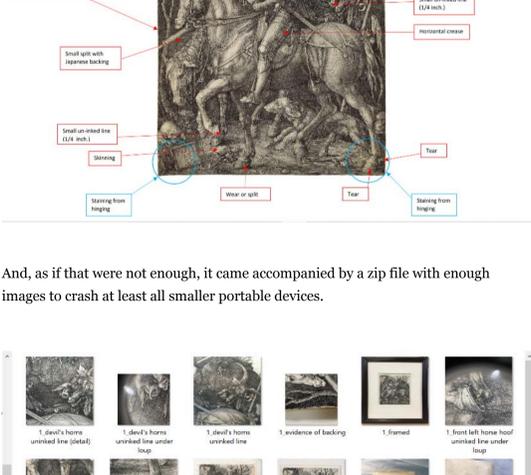
A year into the pandemic, holding even such high-profile sales online is no longer new. The HBO-worthy camerawork of the Sotheby's team, however, was:



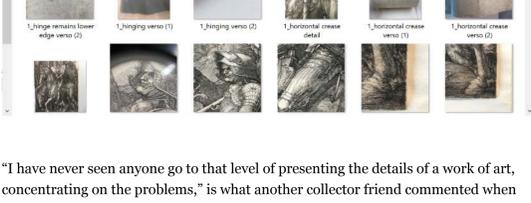
\$92 million spent in less than two minutes

The world of old master prints provides somewhat of a contrast to all that glitz and bling (could it be that the video of the sale was also a hidden preview for the next jewelry auction?) and remains safely hidden backstage. The prints for sale last week were offered across the pond in pandemic-stricken post-Brexit London. And the event was "remote" in the most literal sense of the word. Even Londoners (I mean those who are still left—according to the trusted *Guardian*, the British capital's population declined for the first time in more than 30 years with over 300,000 people having left town in 2020) did not have a chance to see anything in person. One passionate collector learned this the hard way after having made a slightly desperate round of phone calls. None of the few locals knowledgeable of such an arcane subject as old master prints were able or willing to venture out for a preview. What to do about it?

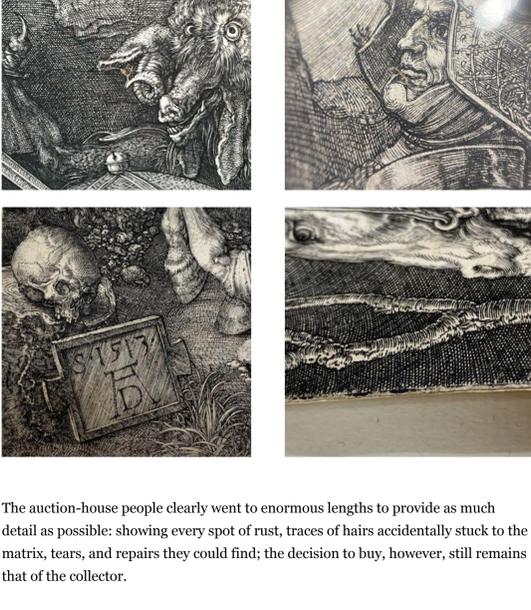
Our digital age is also often called the "information age"—and, therefore, the most obvious way to help collectors decide what to buy is perhaps to provide exactly that: information. An intriguing example is this fairly detailed (to say the least) condition report for an impression of Dürer's *Knight, Death, and Devil*.



And, as if that were not enough, it came accompanied by a zip file with enough images to crash at least all smaller portable devices.



"I have never seen anyone go to that level of presenting the details of a work of art, concentrating on the problems," is what another collector friend commented when faced with this inundation of facts. The question therefore remains if, based on such an informational overload, any decision could ever be made.



The auction-house people clearly went to enormous lengths to provide as much detail as possible: showing every spot of rust, traces of hairs accidentally stuck to the matrix, tears, and repairs they could find; the decision to buy, however, still remains that of the collector.

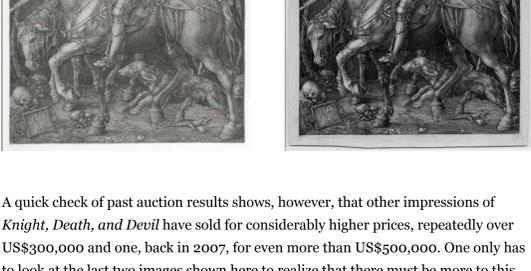
What, then, are the criteria by which the quality of a print can be judged? Perhaps this is a good moment to start a series of *Abwechslungen* that try to grapple with exactly this.

Questions of connoisseurship in the field of prints are decidedly different from those for drawings, paintings, or sculpture. Authorship is only rarely in doubt, and after more than two centuries of art historical cataloguing and inventorying, most prints have been described in the standard reference works, handbooks, and, more recently, collection websites. Prints, by their very nature, are multiples and thus exist in more than one example. The print connoisseur's concern, therefore, is the overall quality of the impression at hand. And the two basic factors used to judge an individual impression are its printing quality and its condition, with the latter's role somewhat mitigated by the print's importance and rarity.

Is the impression good, or less so? Was it printed early on, soon after the artist had finished the plate, or was it reprinted by later publishers? More specifically, how can we define what makes a "good" impression? And what about those condition issues so carefully pointed out in the report shown above? There will be plenty of ground to cover.



For now, let's briefly return to Dürer's *Knight, Death, and Devil* looking for a buyer in London. After all, it is one of Dürer's *Meisterstiche*, but thanks to the Nuremberg master's business acumen, it is hardly an especially rare print. The auction house's own findings had clearly cautioned their experts to a very modest estimate of £20–30,000. And they were right. It proved to be attractive enough to find at least two interested parties undeterred enough to bid, and in the end, the print sold for £47,880, or about US\$65,500.



A quick check of past auction results shows, however, that other impressions of *Knight, Death, and Devil* have sold for considerably higher prices, reportedly over US\$300,000 and one, back in 2007, for even more than US\$500,000. One only has to look at the last two images shown here to realize that there must be more to this "spread" in the pricing than a mere condition report. This is just one of topics the forthcoming missives will try to address.

A last word about the London impression: total disclosure, I had the opportunity to see it in person while it was still in New York. Overall it was actually much nicer than all the remote information could communicate. In the end, it got perhaps a bit too pricey to acquire for stock, but whoever bought it, did well.

... to be continued ...



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