



Fig 1: Yongzheng 15in-high bottle-vase. Sin\$6,875,000

Toasting online success

A bottle of fine cognac tempts oenophiles, as a virtual marketplace record is smashed in imperial style and a Buddhist's remarkable collection is sold

WE have it on the highest authority that new wine should not be put into old bottles (or rather wineskins), but what about old wine and new bottles? The parable was brought to mind by the Sotheby's sale of a bottle of Gautier Cognac, 1762, for £118,580. It had been bottled some time in the 1840s and, presumably, the purchaser will not make any rash changes, however tempting it might be to try a drop. New bottles and old contents could make a good metaphor for the current market, as new methods are evolving to sell antiques and older art.

Ten years ago, I was disconcerted to find Christie's old South Kensington premises almost

deserted on the morning that a much publicised sale of clear-outs from Althorp in Northamptonshire was to be held. I had been to a crowded view a couple of days before, so could I have got the date wrong?

No, it was simply that telephones and bids on the book were taking over from physical attendance. Even before the current state of affairs, online was making headway for timed auctions over several days and that is currently the norm, together with sessions where an auctioneer takes online bids in real time. It was in 1958 that Peter Wilson of Sotheby's pioneered black-tie evening sales as Society events; when will we see a crowded room again, with or without evening dress?

Having been at Maastricht in December 1975, when there were only 29 picture dealers exhibiting at the very first of what became the great TEFAF fairs,

I devoutly hope that this March was not my last visit. It was less crowded than in recent years, but it was one of the best and, although it had to close early, good business was done. At the very least, fair organisers and the art world as a whole are going to have to rethink the culture of previews. However, as Tristram Hunt puts it, 'the willingness to congregate must return—and it will'.

Despite the impossibility of opening parties and physical viewing, dealers' online exhibitions seem to be going well, as are auctions across the board. Let us look at one or two success stories.

Well before Covid-19, one of the first online marketplaces was www.the-saleroom.com, which can trace its ancestry back through print journalism to the weekly auction calendars published by the *Antiques Trade Gazette* since 1971. It recently posted a record for any lot sold



Fig 2: Lidded Vessel by Edmund de Waal. £9,000

through it, Sin\$6,875,000 (£3.9 million), paid in an online sale run by HotLotz of Singapore for a Yongzheng (1722–35) blue-and-white bottle-vase (**Fig 1**). The 15in-high vase carried the six-character mark on the base and was finely painted with nine five-clawed imperial dragons and stylised clouds.



Fig 3: Oval Pot with Dipped Rim by John Ward. £13,200

Despite its quality and an unusually interesting provenance, it had been estimated only to Sin\$2,000. According to the vendors, the family of statesman Sir Oliver Goonetilleke (1892–1978), who played a notable part in the transition of Ceylon to Sri Lanka, it had been presented to him by the Chinese prime minister

Zhou Enlai. The sale ran from April 18 to May 3 and, in online terms, the bidding during the last 2½ hours was 'feverish'.

If asked to think about Buddhists and possessions, one might respond with... begging bowl?... robe?... round, wire-framed glasses?... but surely not a collection of 1,200 objects, including many contemporary ceramics, crammed into a small East London flat. However, Michael Evans, a former engineer and local-government official who became Dayabandhu ('Kind Friend') on conversion in 2004, has said: 'I don't buy for investment, I only buy what I like. I know people who regard their collection in financial terms—for the names on the bottom of their pots. For me, that's not collecting for the right reasons.'

When encroaching dementia made a dispersal necessary, the specialist contemporary-ceramic auctioneer Maak was brought in

and the online sale was a great success. John Ward's *Oval Pot with Dipped Rim* (**Fig 3**) made £13,200, the top price, and *Lidded Vessel* (**Fig 2**), the most expensive of several of Edmund de Waal's cool porcelain pots, reached £9,000. I was taken by Annie Taylor's pieces inspired by finds on the Deben foreshore in Suffolk, including a stoneware *Claw* (**Fig 4**) at £384. Ewan Henderson's rugged teacups were popular, selling for more than £800 each. ↪

Next week Soldiers three



Fig 4: Stone-ware Claw by Annie Taylor. £384