

SMART LOT

Auctions are on the up – and the smart money is increasingly going online. Absolutely finds out more

By **LIBBY NORMAN**

You've spotted your dream lot and you're watching the price tick up. The auctioneer is fielding buyers from Japan, from Puerto Rico, South Africa and Australia. Then you place your bid and watch the gavel come down – you've won, and you're still in your dressing gown and slippers. Welcome to the heady world of online auction shopping.

There's an increasingly global audience not just for the big-four auction houses, but for smaller regional salerooms across the country. The rise is down to a combination of factors. eBay made us familiar with bidding for treasure online and auction houses had already moved online – aided

by platforms such as thesaleroom.com (this first arrived on the scene way back in 2006). The pandemic switched things up several gears, but it did something more too – giving people stuck at home a frisson of retail therapy in strange times.

And some of that frisson has stuck. Wiltshire auction houses Woolley & Wallis may have a new showroom in the heart of Salisbury, but it has seen an exponential rise in private clients via online routes even since the end of the first lockdown in 2020. Many other auctioneers say the same thing. At Sworders, on the Essex-Hertfordshire border, the impact of online has been "massive" says Director and Head of Design auctions John Black. "We now hold many of our sales without meeting clients – our processes have



BURMESE 20TH-CENTURY GILT-LACQUERED BUDDHA, SOLD AT A RECENT ASIAN ART SWORDERS SALE FOR £2,400

been tweaked and we now give potential bidders more information in the way of photos and condition reports than we did two years ago." Like many salerooms, Maidenhead and Hampstead auctioneer Dawsons went online at the start of the pandemic and, says commercial director Pete Liggins, that sudden enforced switch shifted the whole market. "What we quickly discovered is that there is a new online audience very keen to explore the world of auctions," he says. "The auction industry has seen a huge uplift in online spending."

Online auctions are great news for anyone with limited time and an eye for something different. Good too for the cautious bidder because, let's face it, the physical auction room can be a daunting place. The fear of losing out to a permanent man from the trade is only matched by the irrational but ever-present worry of carting home an unwanted what-not or tallboy if you scratch your nose at the wrong moment. No such fear with online auctions because bidders remain unseen – a paddle number is assigned and pops up on the auctioneer's screen when you bid. There's a delightful feeling of anonymity and full freedom to scratch your nose.

Online auctions organised by the auction houses are very well regulated – you may be unseen, but you have to pre-register in advance. You may be asked for proof of identity the first time you bid and will definitely need to supply your credit card number. Formalities over, you have a live auctioneer on your screen, complete with gavel and all the other saleroom paraphernalia you'd expect. It's surprisingly immersive and can be nail-biting fun when you're watching a lot that shoots off the scale.



EBEL 1911 STAINLESS STEEL CHRONOGRAPH, SOLD BY SWORDERS FOR £620

WOOLLEY & WALLIS CHINESE PAINTINGS SPECIALIST
FREYA YUAN-RICHARDS WITH A SCROLL PAINTING
BY CHEN ZHIPO (SOLD FOR £281,250)



ABOVE: GRAYSON PERRY 100% ART PLATE, SOLD BY SWORDERS FOR £280
BELOW: DIAMOND AND RUBY TARGET RING, SOLD BY SWORDERS FOR £1,700

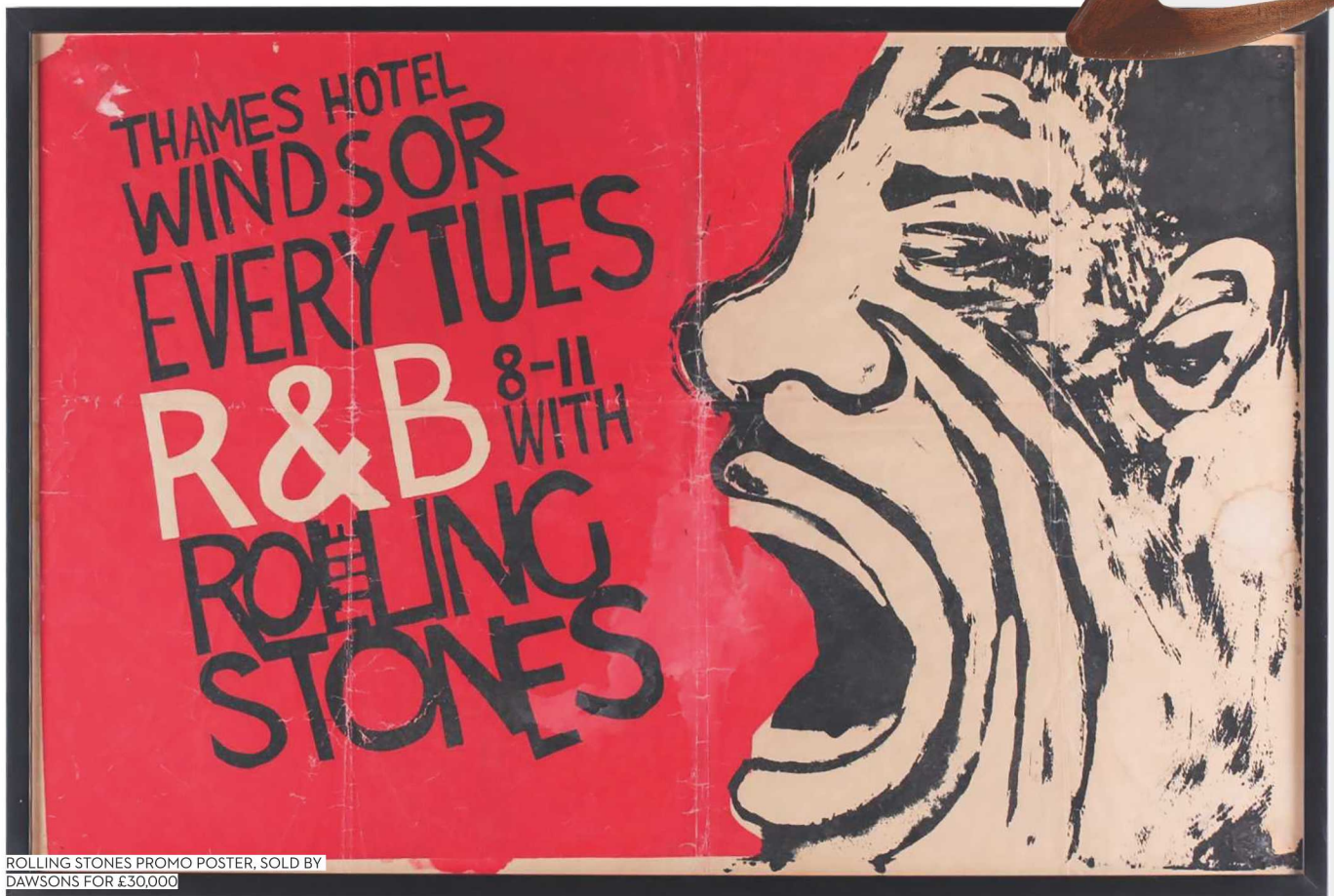
Auction houses are investing heavily in all the front end and behind-the-scenes elements needed to instil buying confidence. Websites have been refined and many houses have their own online platforms. This looks slicker and, in most cases, places virtual buyers on an equal footing with 'in the room' buyers when it comes to buyer's premium/commission (see Auction knowhow). You'll find really good images – five to ten detailed shots are not unusual – plus the option to get a detailed condition report or do a 'walk round' via video link before the sale.

So what are people buying? The answer would be look for it and you'll probably find it online. On saleroom.com alone there are around four million lots from more than 700 auction rooms each year. But there are definite trends among luxury hunters. Jewellery remains buoyant and, while you always expect peaks in times of economic uncertainty, that doesn't tell the whole story. Sworders recently added monthly jewellery auctions alongside its twice-yearly Fine Jewellery and Watch sale. John Black says watches are a key area of growth at the moment. There is lots of interest in period jewellery – Art Deco, for example – alongside more contemporary pieces. Diamonds are always going to have intrinsic worth, but interesting provenance or a really interesting cut or setting boosts interest.

Period 'brown furniture' that was once such a mainstay remains depressed, so a snip in relation to high-end contemporary – you can pick up a smart Georgian chest of drawers or desk for a few hundred pounds. These days, says John Black, the focus is on the right piece not necessarily the history. "The 'Decorative' market – those items that are all about 'the look' rather than great concern for period and authenticity – is an area that is seeing growth." He also points to another growth

"NO NEED TO FEAR CARTING HOME AN UNWANTED WHAT-NOT IF YOU SCRATCH YOUR NOSE AT THE WRONG MOMENT"

DANISH TEAK BOOMERANG ROCKING CHAIR BY MOGENS KOLD, SOLD BY SWORDERS FOR £1,100



ROLLING STONES PROMO POSTER, SOLD BY DAWSONS FOR £30,000



ASIAN ARTWORKS ARE DOING WELL – WOOLLEY & WALLIS
JAPANESE SPECIALIST ALEX AGUILAR WITH A JAPANESE KORO

area – for contemporary and modern design. Visit a 20th century auction and you'll see that some mid-century Scandinavian and British names are hitting surprising prices thanks to quality of materials, craftsmanship and clean aesthetic.

There's also the curious rise of 'talking point' pieces. Sworders' regular Out of the Ordinary sales feature everything from erotic artworks to circus artefacts (collection of crystal balls anyone?), taxidermy and even, recently, a life-size model of Lara Croft. Woolley & Wallis sold a pair of six-foot carved wooden devils by Francesco Toso for £87,500 in 2020 – almost six times the estimate. The maker came to an untimely end showing similar devilish wares at the Chicago World Exhibition in 1893, possibly adding to their allure. "The trend for the striking, the unusual or the just plain weird has been growing for some time," says Associate Director and European Ceramics Specialist Clare Durham.



TEAK WRITING BUREAU
DESIGNED BY JOHN HERBERT
FOR YOUNGER FURNITURE,
SOLD BY SWORDERS FOR £260

Asian artworks have been a boom area for a while now, but the whole area of contemporary arts and prints is booming, say both Bonhams and Sworders. It can be gratifying to secure a Banksy, Peter Blake or Grayson Perry piece – also more affordable than you might imagine. Then there's the real rarity, such as a Rolling Stones poster promoting a set at the Ricky-Tick Club in Windsor. Like the band, there's some wear and tear, but it made a world-record price of £30,000 last November.

At the pop end of luxury, buyers are snapping up classic motors and designer fashion. Rarity value no doubt plays its part – a Yamaha OW-01 or roadworthy Jaguar XJS (both recent sales successes at Dawson's) conjure up a world of gas-guzzling hedonism. When it comes to fashion, leader of the pack is the Hermès' Birkin bag. At Bonhams' March sale of Designer Handbags and Fashion in Knightsbridge, star lot was a cocktail Birkin, which realised a stratospheric £34,000 including premium.

The head of the Designer Handbag and Fashion department at Bonhams Knightsbridge Meg Randell says part of the allure is because it is so very hard to buy a new Birkin and the bags are always made in extremely limited numbers. So having a Birkin in the back of your cupboard could make financial as well as fashion sense – you can always auction it off down the line. But do collectors paying these prices actually dare to carry the bag? Meg Randell says the interesting thing is that designer fashion auction hunters sometimes do. "There's a nice blurring between shopping and collecting," she says.

Actually, that whole blurring between shopping and collecting seems to sum up pretty well what today's luxury buyers love most about the whole experience of going to an online auction. Even better is the knowledge that, if you tire of it, you can always sell it on. ❶

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MEG RANDELL, HEAD OF DESIGNER
HANDBAG AND FASHION DEPARTMENT
AT BONHAMS KNIGHTSBRIDGE



Auction knowhow

Buyer's premium is typically 25-30% – check terms before bidding. Auction houses' online platforms often charge less commission than general auction platforms.

Artist's resale rights may apply to contemporary art and this should be flagged on the lot.

Don't forget shipping – more costly for breakable and large items and valuable lots.

Auction houses may ship and can always recommend trusted couriers.