

Thatcher depictions tick the box for bidders

Judging by recent events, members of the Conservative Party might well look back longingly to the days of Margaret Thatcher when Britain's first female prime minister brought a comparative measure of stability to government.

Certainly her premiership was much in the mind of bidders at two recent auctions held on the same day.

Prolific portraitist

A portrait of Thatcher which had been bought by the late spread betting trader and Tory donor Stuart Wheeler at a Conservative Party fundraising evening in May 2004 was offered at **Dreweatts'** (25% buyer's premium) sale of the collection on October 4 at Chilham Castle in Kent.

Wheeler died in July 2020, aged 85, with his will specifying that profits from the sale of the Grade I-listed property go to charity.

The 23½ x 19½in (60 x 50cm) signed oil on canvas by royal portraitist **Richard Stone (b.1951)** was an earlier version of the portrait painted in 2009 for the collection at 10 Downing Street. The lot was accompanied by a photograph of Wheeler and Thatcher in front of the portrait.

Estimated at £800-1200, it sold at £35,000, over three times the previous auction record for the artist. The auction house said no details about the buyer could be released.

Dreweatts' head of house sales and private collections Joe Robinson said: "This was certainly surprising based on the results of similar works which have come to the market.

"Margaret Thatcher remains one of the most iconic figures of the 20th century with comparatively very few



Left: *Portrait of Baroness Thatcher* by Richard Stone which sold for **£35,000** at Dreweatts, and **(right)** a photograph of the painting's owner Stuart Wheeler and Thatcher that accompanied the lot.



Below: *First Time at The Box* by Alfred Reginald Thomson – **£17,000** at Sworders.

portraits of her completed and still with a large following. Richard Stone was a prolific portraitist known as being the youngest artist ever to gain a royal commission.

"It is likely that the BBC's use of her late majesty's portrait, by Stone, for their coverage for the days following her death, will not have been lost on the market."

First speech

Meanwhile, a portrait said to depict Thatcher as she made her first speech in the House of Commons after becoming Prime Minister in May 1979 was offered at **Sworders (25% buyer's premium)** in Stansted Mountfitchet, also on October 4.

Painted by **Alfred Reginald Thomson (1894-1979)** and titled *First Time at The Box*, it was consigned by dealer Daniel Hadden.

Hadden bought the 3 x 4ft (92cm x 1.22m) unframed oil on canvas at Sunbury Antiques Market's Kempton fair in 2015 from a trader who, in turn, had bought it in a London

house clearance. It took Hadden a long time and a lot of work to establish the artist and subject.

His research, which included meetings with members of the Houses of Lords and Commons, contacting the Conservative party's historian Lord Lexden and tracking down one of Thomson's grandchildren in Scotland, took seven years in total but ultimately proved fruitful.

Offered with a £3000-5000 estimate at the Modern and Contemporary Art auction at the Essex saleroom, the painting was quickly carried over predictions and came down to a competition between two determined phone bidders from the US. The gavel fell at £17,000.

"I'm over the moon," Hadden told ATG. "I was surprised to hear that the painting had interest from the United States. It just goes to show you that whatever your views are on Margaret Thatcher, she is world renowned and quite rightly deserves her place in history.

"It has been a lot of hard work

with many hours of research. It was also very exciting to be invited to the Houses of Parliament and meet some of the lords. I was very lucky to have the support of the very helpful Lord Lexden who was instrumental in the project."

The picture itself came about as Thomson had been given permission to sketch from the public gallery in the chamber.

The artist (who was deaf from birth) had painted a similar view of the Commons with Harold Macmillan at the despatch box in 1960. Seemingly he had 'updated' image to depict Britain's first female PM with the use of photographs. Malcolm Hay, the then curator of the Parliamentary Art Collection, confirmed the attribution.

A high price for the artist, it stands only behind a boxing scene that made £60,000 at Christie's in 2012 and another of a cocktail bar that took £48,000 also at Christie's in 2014 terms of auction results for Thomson according to Artprice.



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