

AUCTION ETIQUETTE

The auction industry is moving with the times, offering new ways to participate in sales. We take a look at this evolving world and offer expert tips for successful bidding

WORDS LINDSEY HARRAD

Auctions are a fantastic way to snap up a bargain and experience the excitement of the gavel coming down on your winning bid. But no matter how many episodes of *Bargain Hunt* you've watched, the fast pace of a real-life saleroom can be an intimidating experience for the uninitiated.

The global auction market is booming, hitting record levels in 2021, with the three leading international auction houses – Christie's, Sotheby's and Phillips – achieving \$12.6 billion in sales between them. Of course, this is often high-end stuff – private art collections, precious gem jewellery and celebrity collectables – but the trend is reflected in auction houses across the country too, with most posting increased or record turnover figures last year. It seems the pandemic has created exciting opportunities for traditional auction houses.

Guy Schooling, chairman of Sworders Fine Art Auctioneers (sworders.co.uk), agrees: 'Hammer prices are generally still above pre-pandemic levels, as are sold rates. In many ways, lockdown assisted the auction industry: although it made the operations side of our business more complicated and time consuming, the public realised they could view and buy online from the comfort of their home. We now consider Sworders to be an e-commerce business. We also established our own delivery service during lockdown, operated on a not-for-profit basis to improve the ease of purchase and the remote service.'

The huge growth in online services means that most people don't attend auctions in person anymore, which may be disappointing for those who love the cut and thrust of the saleroom, but there's still a thrill to be had in bidding in real time online while the auction is live, competing with rival bidders anywhere in the country, or even the world. It's also a lot less intimidating to bid from home.



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All lot details should be accurately described, including any imperfections

why viewing is important

- Unless operating exclusively online, most auction houses offer a pre-sale viewing, so you can examine items for maker’s marks, imperfections or take measurements. Although bids can be placed remotely, if you’re local to the auction house it’s always a good idea to go to the viewing. ‘There’s no substitute for examining items in the flesh before bidding,’ advises Guy Schooling of Sworders. ‘You can also ask auction-room staff questions; reputable firms will offer genuine advice.’
- If a piece is misdescribed or damage has not been accurately detailed, consumer legislation allows you to return the piece. But if there has been an opportunity to view and you have simply changed your mind, there’s no redress – so do your research.

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GOING, GOING... GONE

So what should you look for at auction? From mid-century furniture to art deco lighting or movie memorabilia, there are auctions out there catering for specific categories and eras, as well as more general auctions, so whether you have a wishlist of pieces for a specific project or collection, or are an opportunistic browser waiting for something to catch your eye, auctions offer rich potential. The key thing is to keep an open mind.

Experienced buyer Hannah Verrall, who owns glamping site Warren Farm in Pembrokeshire (warrenfarm.wales) and has used auctions to furnish the site’s beautiful bell tents, says the habit runs in her family. ‘Three generations of my family used to go to the auction every month: my grandparents, my mum and me,’ she says. ‘Mainly we saw it as a day out combined with a treasure hunt – we never knew what we might come home with!’

Hannah says many of these pieces have been treasured. ‘We’ve bought some amazing things over the years. The pianola my mum bought me for my 16th birthday now makes the perfect stand for my gin collection. I also remember the time we spotted two carver chairs in consecutive lots. The first one was sold for quite a high price, but we managed to

snap up the second, much nicer chair, for far less. At the end of the auction, my grandmother ended up having a physical tug of war with the purchaser of the first chair! The auctioneer had to be called to adjudicate, confirming that the chair was indeed ours. Thirty-five years later it’s still a much-loved piece in our family and perfectly matches my great-great-grandmother’s mirror. ‘I like to focus on the things we won, rather than the pieces we lost. The way I see it, those things are now loved by someone else who valued them higher on the day.’

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Perhaps the biggest risk of buying at auction is getting caught up in the moment and bidding too much, and this can happen just as easily in the saleroom as online. Hannah says it’s a good idea to plan in advance how much you are prepared to spend – but don’t go the other way and be too conservative if you really love a piece. ‘Always remember that something is only worth what you’d be prepared to pay for it,’ she says. ‘If it’s something that matters to you, think about how gutted you’d be to see it sold to someone else. If you think it’s worth £50, place a bid of £50, not £25 and risk losing it. Or if it’s something you know is worth a lot normally but it doesn’t “sing” to you, consider putting a modest bid on it – you’d be surprised how often we’ve secured something with a cheeky low bid.’

Many people fear they might accidentally bid by moving their hand at the wrong moment, but Hannah is reassuring. ‘I’ve never accidentally bought something by scratching my nose! The auctioneers are used to people having different



Auction houses, such as Sotheby's, have seen a boom in business over the last two years

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Hannah Verrall used auctions to furnish the bell tents at her glamping site at Warren Farm

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Sworders hold live auctions, as well as catering to a wider audience through online bids

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A pre-sale viewing at Sworders allows customers to browse and check out pieces in person

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sworders top tips for auction success

CHOOSE A REPUTABLE AUCTION HOUSE

And with online platforms, always check to see how your money is protected, with funds only released from a buyer to a vendor once the purchase has been received.

VIEW THE LOTS If you can visit pre-sale viewing, do so; most have weekend viewing and it's part of the experience.

DO YOUR RESEARCH Examine pieces carefully, request condition reports and always ask questions about lots you are interested in.

BE OPEN MINDED Get inspired by what's on offer at the auction on the day.

CHECK EXTRA CHARGES Before bidding, check how much you might have to pay in additional charges, including the buyer's premium (a commission charged to buyers by the auction house), VAT and shipping costs.

CONSIDER YOUR PRICE LIMIT Don't get too hung up on pre-sale estimates – think about what that piece is worth to you. But equally, don't get too carried away – fix your spending limit then add one or two more bids. Sometimes just one extra bid is all you need to secure a prize piece.

styles of bidding: they'll only start taking smaller movements as bids once they know you. So start simple with just a flash of your paddle number.'

If you're nervous, simply leave a commission bid, which is when you give the auctioneer a list of the lots you want to bid on and a maximum price for each lot. 'You can either stay to watch the bidding, or leave and find out later what you've won and what slipped through your fingers that day,' says Hannah. 'If you really want to take the stress out of things, buy remotely – but still always try to view in person. And don't worry that you'll end up paying full whack: the auctioneer will only go to your bid after the last other person's highest bid.'

LOTS FROM YOUR LAPTOP

Alternatively, look for timed rather than live auctions. Guy says: 'Many auctions now operate on a timed model, similar to eBay. This allows bidders more time to reflect on lots and their bids. Sworders closes most of our timed auctions on a Sunday evening for the convenience of our bidders. This type of auction can be just as addictive!'

However, eBay itself has now evolved into more of a marketplace in recent years, which is partly why genuine online auctions have become increasingly popular. 'Most items sold on eBay are actually fixed price,' says Robin Gray, managing director of online auction platform William George

Timed online bids, rather than live auctions, allow you to reflect before committing to a bid



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(williamgeorge.com). 'Now 88 per cent of products on eBay are "Buy it Now", so auctions are a much smaller part of what they do these days. Everything we do is auction based and we pride ourselves on delivering exceptional customer service. Plus, we have accessible humans on hand should anyone need any help!'

If you're concerned about 'sniping' with online auctions – where a last-second bidder can grab the prize before you have a chance to bid again – then look for auction platforms that offer preventative measures. 'You won't fall foul of sniping with our auctions,' says Robin. 'If someone bids on a lot when there are 10 minutes or less remaining on the clock, it will reset to 10 minutes again to give you another chance to bid if you wish. My tips for getting a bargain are to look out for "no reserve" auctions and always check how many competing bidders there are. Before you bid, check what similar items have previously fetched at auction so you can set a budget you're happy with.'

Opening up online access has made buying at auction more appealing to a younger market too, attracting buyers who are drawn to the sustainability of buying antique and vintage pieces. It's a wonderful way to find interesting furniture and decorative items rather than buying homogenous, mass-produced new pieces with a high carbon footprint. Many vintage pieces are well designed and have a high-quality finish and craftsmanship that modern pieces rarely match – at affordable prices, anyway.

Hannah agrees. 'It's the only way to buy unique pieces of good quality furniture and other items without paying silly money for them. And when you're furnishing a big house, or even a whole glamping site like we are, it feels great to be giving good furniture a new lease of life without breaking the bank. I love the variety that you get, never knowing what's going to pop up – sometimes modern pieces, good quality repro pieces or beautiful old pieces that you can't find anywhere else. It's a thrill to find something unusual, especially pieces that have good bones, and discover treasures that others have overlooked.'