

Art market focus

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Interest soars for the amazing artist who overcame disability

A rare watercolour of bird feathers by a 19th-century artist born with the congenital deformity phocomelia (ie without arms or legs), is to be auctioned at Sworders in Essex next week. Sarah Biffin (1784-1850) was so resourceful that, by the time she was 10, she had taught herself to sew and write using her mouth. In those days, there was no help for disabled people, but at 13 she was able to support her family by earning £5 a year, touring the country as "The Limbless Wonder" or "The Eighth Wonder" with Emmanuel Dukes' travelling fairground. Before long, she had also taught herself to paint miniature portraits, which Dukes sold for three guineas each.

An 1807 print by Thomas Rowlandson, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, depicts her in an advertisement at St Bartholomew's fair in London, where she performed alongside prize-fighters, musicians, wire-walkers, acrobats, puppets, and wild animals. It was here, the following year, that she was introduced to William, 16th Earl of Morton, which led to artistic training, aristocratic and Royal patronage and, ultimately, the acknowledgment of the Society of Arts and the Royal Academy.

In spite of her disabilities – and the fact she was a woman – Biffin achieved considerable recognition. She became sufficiently popular, for instance, to have her London studio mentioned in Charles Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *The Old Curiosity Shop*. In 1824, she married a



bank clerk, William Stephen Wright, but the marriage did not last, though he left her, she wrote, with "a very modest salary". In her last years, as her skill dwindled, she was supported by a pension awarded by Queen Victoria, whose portrait she had painted in 1848. The Queen also bought a portrait Biffin made of her father, the Duke of Kent, in 1839.

Biffin died in 1850 aged 66. Years later, the Rev Edward Boys Ellman described her as "a heavy looking woman; she wore a turban and was always seated on a sofa. Her paint brush was pinned to a large puff sleeve which covered the short stump of the upper part of the arm. When painting she leant her right shoulder forward,

almost touching the table. She fixed and removed the paint brush with her teeth, when necessary to wash the brush. She declared that she considered that for painting she had the advantage of those who had arms, for surely it was easier to paint with a short brush than with a long stick!"

It is not known how many works she completed. Certainly, only a few, nearly all portrait miniatures painted on ivory, have appeared on the market. The Artnet auction database lists only 17 in the last 35 years. The highest price until December 2019 was £2,000. But in the past two years, as women artists receive greater recognition generally, Biffin has been making headway.

In that month (December 2019) a self-portrait from the highly regarded Dr Erika Pohl-Stroher collection of miniatures appeared at Sotheby's with an £800 estimate, and sold for a staggering £137,500 to an anonymous private collector. Emma Rutherford, who runs the miniature department of TV presenter Philip Mould's Mayfair gallery, was an unsuccessful bidder. She said afterwards: "That's a remarkable sum for a relatively unknown miniaturist working in the currently unfashionable early 19th century, especially as the ivory has a crack in it." The self-confidence portrayed in the work is also remarkable, said Rutherford, in that "she represents such strength in overcoming not only the prejudice that would undoubtedly have been shown towards a professional female artist but also towards someone who would have been viewed as a circus freak."

Then, this summer, a surprise work in the form of a small 1812 watercolour of bird feathers – a subject Biffin is not known for – appeared at Sotheby's from the collection of the late art dealer Cyril Fry. Estimated at £4,000, it sold for £65,520. The 1812 watercolour to be auctioned next week is slightly faded by exposure to light over the years, and has fewer feathers. Estimated at £3,000, it is a rarity. Accompanying the work, which is inscribed "Drawn by Miss Biffin, 6th August 1812", is a Georgian handbill from the same year advertising the painter as an attraction "During The Races".

Sworders' picture comes for sale from the collection of the late Peter Crofts, a Cambridgeshire antiques dealer who lost both legs in a plane crash, aged 20.



A week of C and new tec

Never has the old and the new in the art market appeared in sharper relief. Last week, attention was focused on the cornucopia of sales of contemporary art and non-fungible token (NFT) promoting taking place during the winter fair season in Miami. NFTs may not be universally accepted as art but they have found their way to the market through auction rooms, and dealers who want access to the crypto-billions associated with them. Because Miami Beach is home to a growing community of financial technology firms, which invest in NFTs, galleries and art fairs there are accommodating NFTs to lure such investors into the world more traditional, analog art fairs.

Reflecting the shift, last week also saw *Art Review* award NFT its first place in its annual Power list (usually given to a dealer, artist, collector or curator), while the consortium that bought Banksy's *Love is in the Air* in May for \$12.9 million (£9.7 million) revealed that it was now splitting it digitally into 10,000 parts for sale as separate NFTs. It was, it said, a way of "democratising ownership", with the potential to trade up on each token/share.

This week, the focus is on London's Old Master auctions, gallery exhibitions, where there are no NFTs and the tempera-



Admired by Queen Victoria: a watercolour self-portrait by Sarah Biffin (1784-1850) and, left, her 1812 study of feathers