Part I  The Auctions
Introduction

In the economic development of Western Europe, urbanization, markets, and the commercialization of art followed parallel trends. In the course of time, when markets became fairly developed, auctions of general merchandise and of art works emerged—in ancient Rome, in early 15th century Venice, in 16th century Antwerp and Amsterdam—as a quick and efficient way to dispose of goods.

Amsterdam in the late 16th and 17th centuries was primarily a trading city. Almost everyone had things to sell, from the master craftsman to the merchant engaged in international trade. Already from the mid-1580s, after Antwerp had fallen to Spanish troops and its port on the Scheldt had been blocked by the Dutch insurgents in their war of liberation against Spain, Amsterdam had become the premier emporium and entrepôt of Europe, the place where merchants in the rest of Europe could most conveniently and economically purchase all manner of staples, from cannon shot to mercury. Many of these staples reached the market via agreements freely negotiated among competitive buyers and sellers on Amsterdam’s stock market—its beurs—and in other places where traders met and dealt. But, as we shall see presently, auctions also played a significant role in making a market for a number of commodities, including lumber, leather, peat, spices, tulip bulbs, imported porcelain wares and ship’s equipment. The “law of one price, one market” was already so well established by 1585 that weekly price lists were printed for most staples traded on the beurs which served as reference points for the rest of Europe. This commercial culture extended to trading in works of art. For a merchant or a successful craftsman who had attended auctions of spices or ship’s equipment or who had traded on the beurs, buying works of art at an auction held by the Orphan Chamber or by the Bankruptcy Chamber (Desolate Boedelskamer) must have seemed like a natural extension of his business activity. Ever since the beginning of the 16th century paintings had been sold at auction as part of the estates of deceased citizens, along with their clothes, their furniture and their pots and pans. But for those who were too busy to attend these mixed sales, specialized auctions of works of art had been held in Amsterdam at least as early as 1608.

The efficiency of Amsterdam’s markets was enhanced by their volume and depth, which in turn depended to a major extent on the population of the city. This was of course a self-reinforcing mechanism: the larger and more capacious Amsterdam’s markets became, the more they attracted traders and craftsmen from other parts of Europe, who settled in the Netherlands and contributed to the capacity of these markets. When Amsterdam’s population numbered only 30,000 inhabitants in 1567, the
capital assets of its inhabitants were very limited. The town specialized in North-sea fishing and in importing grain and lumber from the Baltic regions, hardly the sort of high value-added trade on which it batten in later years. Starting around 1585, Flemish and German immigrants, some of whom came to the Dutch Republic because they were Protestants, others because they were attracted by its religious tolerance, by its relatively mild political regime, or by its prosperity began to inundate the city. Population rose explosively: from 60,000 inhabitants in 1585 to 105,000 in 1622, to an estimated 175,000 in 1650, and to 200,000 by the end of the century. Many of these immigrants, particularly from the Southern Netherlands, but also from Cologne, Hamburg, Dantzig, and Frankfort in Germany and from Portugal (mainly Jews) brought capital with them. The immigrants brought valuable information – about foreign markets, emergent technologies, novel ways of doing business – which added to the local stock of knowledge. Information flowed freely through Amsterdam’s highly porous economy. The simultaneous accretion of population and capital, which continued to fructify in a propitious social and political environment, brought Amsterdam to its commercial eminence in 17th century Europe.

In any given historical context, some human activities are reflected in and commented on in contemporary writings, some are not. In 17th century Holland, for example, public preaching, military operations, and dancing were frequently cited in published and unpublished writings, from books, letters, sermons, and diaries to consistory records. Auctions, with very few exceptions, were not. They were not sinful; but neither were they edifying. They represented the sort of ethically neutral social mechanism that people took for granted and never commented on, at least in the writings that have come down to us. There are, to my knowledge, no contemporary representations of art auctions, as there are occasionally of raffles and lotteries. As an economist with an interest in social history, I could not have written this book on the basis of the occasional mentions of sales scattered in archival sources. That would have been like reconstructing the sociology of today’s stock market or of gambling casinos from odd stock market quotations or daily proceeds. Fortunately, I disposed of a trove of source material to work on, consisting of 29 thick Notebooks of auction records conducted by the Orphan Chamber of Amsterdam, which somehow escaped the ravages of time. These records, dating from 1597 to 1638, contained not only the bare-bones description of things sold – from bodkins to Dürer prints – and the prices they brought but, even more important to my purpose, the names of most of the buyers. (Only 17 percent of the buyers paid in cash and remained anonymous). These 2,000-odd buyers in 524 sales, along with the names of the owners of the goods sold, form the core of the present study. While I concentrated my efforts on sales of works of art (separately or as part of mixed sales with other goods), I also took an occasional look at sales of jewelry, porcelain, flower bulbs, and frames, to see whether the buying public for those goods was similar to or differed from that for works of art.

In the first part of the book, I apprehend the auctions recorded in these Notebooks
chiefly from a “macro” perspective: I study the way auctions were organized and conducted, the wealth of owners and buyers, the subjects of works of art sold, the artists to which they were attributed (for a minority of the works sold), their prices, and so forth. In chapter 7, I begin to delve into the family, guild and business links among buyers. This descent into the “micro” sphere is essential to my purpose of moving from a bland, lifeless description to at least a partial reconstruction of auctions as a social activity. In part II, devoted to “selected buyers”, I trace the life trajectories of various individuals who are known to have bought at auction and insert them into a social and economic framework. The careers of the most prominent art dealers (and buyers) are traced in chapters 13 to 15. Four chapters are given over to the links between buyers and major artists, including Rembrandt, who was himself a buyer of art at auction. The activities of buyers who were immersed in the cultural life of Amsterdam are studied in chapters 21 and 22. One chapter toward the end of the book brings together some anecdotal evidence about a few buyers that may throw at least a slanting light on their mentalités. The “micro” material in parts I and II is more suggestive than probative. It is especially inadequate in explaining why buyers bought particular works of art at auction or, for that matter, from other venues. At a distance of nearly four hundred years, we can only make an occasional guess at their motivation. Nevertheless, I believe that this kind of detailed, prosopographic work is an indispensable step toward an understanding of the workings of the art market.