Art at Auction in 17th Century Amsterdam

Montias, J.

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Concluding Words on Auctions

While this study encompasses only about 15 percent of the auction sales of the Orphan Chamber whose records have been preserved, it covers over 95 percent of the value of the lots sold and, I believe, all the attributions cited in the 29 Notebooks. The vast majority of the lots omitted were cheap untitled little boards (bortgens) or little prints (printgens) that sold for cash. For the first time since these sales records have been studied, the emphasis has been laid on the buyers: their age, wealth, geographic origin, and connections with each other and with the owners, alive or deceased, of the goods sold. Of the 2000-odd buyers, some information has been uncovered about nearly two-thirds (detailed information on over half). Very few buyers whose family name was inscribed in the notebooks remain totally unknown. We found that many, if not most, of the buyers were linked by family, business, guild, neighborhood, or other ties with other buyers. One gets the impression that buying at auction was a highly social activity that helped to knit together the society or, perhaps one should say, the various societies in which the better-off burghers of Amsterdam—representing perhaps 15 percent of the population—intermingled. Such conviviality applied of course to attendance at the higher-class sales: the sales of the estates of poorer citizens, consisting more exclusively of inexpensive clothing and household goods, attracted chiefly the uitdraagsters, of whom there seem to have been at least one hundred active at one time or another in the entire period 1597-1638. These women, and a few men who also belonged to the trade, contributed to the circulation of works of art, mainly, we suppose, from the higher to the lower strata of the population.

We have seen that a certain amount of wealth was a necessary condition for buying at auction, except for uitdraagsters who turned over their small capital rapidly by reselling the goods they bought as soon as they could. But it was not a sufficient condition. Even among the highest purchasers of shares in the United East India Company (V.O.C.) and the taxpayers who paid the highest taxes on wealth, at least two-thirds are not known to have made purchases at Orphan Chamber auction. For those who did, other factors clearly played a role: a family relationship with the late owner of the goods sold; a common origin in Antwerp, Hamburg, or Cologne; membership in a guild, a chamber of rederijkers, a group of fellow practitioners of the art of fencing, a literary circle, or a militia company; living in a certain neighborhood; and belonging to a religious group politically connected with the Orphan Chamber were factors that apparently contributed to the probability that an individual with a certain amount of wealth would be a buyer at auction. A certain proclivity toward risk and the thrill of buying at auction—perhaps even of outbidding rivals—may also have played a role.
Few out-of-town buyers and, as far as I can tell, no foreigners attended these auctions. Virtually all the paintings sold were by Dutch and Southern Netherlandish masters. The relative parochialism of Amsterdam auctions perhaps enhanced their social character: the majority of buyers at the more important sales probably knew each other and, often, knew personally the painters whose works they bought. In any case, the situation changed drastically within a year after the last preserved Notebook of the Orphan Chamber, when foreigners (Alphonso Lopez, Joachim Sandrart) paid the highest prices – for Italian paintings – at the Lucas van Uffelen sale (at which prices were several times greater than the highest recorded prices in the preserved notebooks.) It is still not clear whether the Van Uffelen sale was truly exceptional or whether more sales took place in its aftermath of comparative scope and depth.

As it was, even in the period covered in this study, there were enough wealthy burghers whose estates were handled by the Orphan Chamber (including the former burgomaster Jacob Poppen, Albert Jonckheijn, Jacques Rombouts, Jacques Verbeek, Gommer Spranger and Jan van Maerlen), as well as successful artists and art dealers (Gillis van Conincxloo, Crispiaen Colijn, Paulus Bisschop, Cornelis van der Voort, Barend van Someren and Jan Basse) who had works of art sold, either in voluntary sales or from their estates, to supply the auction market with a wide assortment of paintings, drawings and prints at prices that ranged from a few stuivers to hundreds of gulden. The highest auction prices (nearly) matched the top prices occasionally encountered in notarial inventories, contracts or depositions. Thus, auction records could serve to anchor dealer’s prices, the prices in private transactions, and the estimates made by guild members and professional appraisers for comparable works. Orphan Chamber auctions constituted a small but a very significant part of the rapidly growing market for art in Amsterdam.

“A small part”, to be sure, for neither the auctions held by the Orphan Chamber nor those held by the Desolate Boedelskamer could satisfy the growing demand of the public for the finest art. Even the slim evidence we have at our disposal from dealers’ inventories and from notarial documents where dealers’ transactions are recorded strongly suggests that dealers met a specialized demand that auctions could only rarely accommodate. The inventory of Johannes de Renialme of 1657, which constitutes the most complete stock-in-trade of a dealer that has come down to us, at least for Amsterdam in its Golden Age, shows that Italian paintings were a distinct and important part of a dealer’s offerings. So were 16th century paintings by famous painters. Both were virtually absent from auctions (prior at least to the Van Uffelen auction of 1639) and from the bankrupt inventories that have been preserved. The paintings exchanged by Marten van den Broeck against ship’s equipment in 1647 (which is the subject of chapter 18) were so different in character from those one would have expected to see in a privately owned inventory that I tentatively concluded that they constituted a dealer’s stock. This was also true of the paintings belonging to Johannes de Renialme that had been deposited in an attic belonging to Lambert Massa in 1640 (chapter 14). Very few private collections owned Italian
paintings and works by famous 16th century masters, and the chances that they would come up at auction were slim. My guess is that a rich merchant like Samuel Godijn, whose probate inventory of 1633 contained numerous Italian paintings, including some by Palma Giovane and Guido Reni, and a tronie by Jan van Eyck, had bought them from a high-class dealer like De Renialme.

In addition to offering a more rarefied assortment, dealers had other advantages in competing against auctions. They saved buyers time, which was probably very valuable to the richest and busiest merchants. In most sales, paintings were mixed with other household goods. Buyers often had to wait for hours before they could bid on a coveted item. The time factor may have been critical in differentiating the collecting behavior of the merchant brothers Hendrick and Dirck van Os. Hendrick bought ten lots at three sales; Dirck is not known to have bought at any sale at all. Of the two, Dirck was the active partner in their joint business. Hendrick did little besides managing the brothers’ joint capital and occasionally helping Dirck out when the latter had to go out of town. The opportunity cost of time was evidently higher for Dirck than for Hendrick van Os who could more easily while away hours at auction.

Still another advantage dealers possessed stemmed from the convivial nature of auctions such as I have described at some length. If a relative, a neighbor, a fellow guild-member, or even a friend was inclined to bid at auction for what might be called sentimental reasons, the prices they paid must have been higher than amateurs would have bid strictly on the basis of intrinsic quality. The highest-quality dealers also bought at auction, but they tended to concentrate on occasional specialized sales – especially the so-called “voluntary sales” – where the “conviviality factor” did not play a major role. Wealthy collectors who could not attend these sales paid a moderate premium to dealers for the chance of getting choice items. As in the case of the present-day world, private buyers may also have been willing to pay dealers an extra margin for a guarantee of authenticity.