

The Hunt is Still Alive and Well for Collectors of British Sporting Pictures



Amongst Davidson's 275 lot Australian and International Art sale (Sunday 7 November) are six British sporting pictures with a combined pre-sale expectation of \$130,000. The four top works are by three well known proponents, whose production spans one hundred years of the genre.

Brookfield Mutlplex has indicated the rationale for sale is tied to stylistic concerns; the works won't suit the modern environment of their new premises, but in the new age of corporate social responsibility and political correctness, examples of this genre proffer disquieting sentiments. The works cover three recurring themes: gaming and gundogs; the thrills and spills of the fox hunt during steeplechases across otherwise tranquil English landscapes, where it is implied poor rural tenants are happy, and will always remain so; and the aristocratic, often regal pursuit of prizewinning horse races.

In 1977 The British Sporting Art Trust was founded as a registered charity to counter the prevailing opinion that British public institutions were failing to acknowledge and protect an important aspect of British cultural heritage. This was compounded by an ever growing interest in the genre from Americans, who, like other post-colonial industrialist inheritors, had wealth without obvious aristocratic emblems. Paul Mellon, for example, amassed a collection of British art now housed at Yale, including a group of sporting works acquired from the Duke of Gloucester. In 1986 the Trust opened a dedicated gallery located at the Newmarket National Horseracing Museum.

Although the number and caliber of sporting works in London dealer shows has fallen in recent years, British auction houses still hold regular sales devoted to the genre. The major works in the Davidson sale are by no means at the top of the genre, where individual sales have achieved over one million pounds. They do, however, carry strong provenance from high end London dealers Ackerman & Son and Richard Green. Ackerman has long since closed its doors, but Green still shows regular exhibitions of *Sporting and British Paintings* and is a keen scrutineer of Australian sales in the hope of profiting on repurchase by repatriating on the QT.

John Nost Sartorius (1759–1828) exhibited at the Free Society and the Royal Academy, and was prolific and widely reproduced. His work is characterised by strong composition and, for those looking for painterly redemption, occasional landscape features that give a nod to his contemporary, John Constable. It is widely held that the format of his hunting and racing pictures was the exemplar for Henry and Samuel Alken a generation later, whose work was distinguished by humour, and regularly reproduced among the pages of popular journals *The Sporting Magazine*, *New Sporting Magazine*, *The Sportsman* and *The Sporting Review*.

John Nost Sartorius (1759–1828) – (lot 235) \$30-40,000, and (lot 238) \$8-12,000.

Henry Thomas Alken (1785-1851) – (lot 236) \$30-40,000.

Samuel Henry Alken (1810–1894) – (lot 237) \$45-65,000 (4 paintings, depicted).

George Finch Mason (1850–1915) – (lot 234) \$3-5,000.

J Branscombe (attrib.) (fl.early 1800s) (lot 239) – \$800-1,200.

There are few options open for current generation Australians to act out aristocratic fantasies or act upon pretensions, except perhaps for those who buy into the theatre of that race held in Melbourne. If it doesn't end up back in England, it would seem that Alken's horse racing picture (Lot 236, depicted) 'Doncaster St Leger, The Start', with its narrative exploiting both aristocratic connections and thoroughbred bloodlines, might be a sure bet sale to a newly crowned and enriched Australian turf king.

For Australians wanting to bet on works of art with local populist narratives the sale includes thirteen works by Pro Hart, Darcy Doyle and Hugh Sawrey, as well as many other 20th century regulars such as David Boyd and Norman Lindsay, the novelty amongst the latter's representation being an original copper plate for an unpublished etching (Lot 2). The auction also features an array of contemporary works of art and an interesting sketch by William Dobell (Lot 26), 'Study of a man with wine bottle and towel'.

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