



The New Exemplariness of the Art Market

There were and are the art fairs in Seoul, London, Paris, Shanghai and Cologne. Then the auctions in London and New York. Likewise a number of important, sensationally impressive gallery exhibitions of work by Anne Imhof and Amy Sherald in London, and of Robert Longo in Paris. There are new and great private museums, such as the *Rubell Collection*, now showing in Washington D. C. Today's art market, featuring collections at the highest level, is making an incredibly powerful comeback. Themes of current political concern, such as strong sympathy for Ukraine, or support for the growing strength of people of color, or solidarity with the democracy movement in Iran, are brilliantly evident, and not only in the art. It is more than ever the strong artists themselves, together with their exhibition organizers, who are manifesting an ethically exemplary phenomenon. Clear positions, like those of Jenny Holzer or Shirin Neshat, are earning respect and success. Even as the global economy understandably fears the combined effects of the Russian-led war and of China's economic output, hampered by autocracy, high inflation and severely disrupted supply chains, the family foundation of the collector Paul Gardner Allen, who died in California in 2018, is celebrating a historic triumph with an auction of just sixty works. Allen's five paintings by Cézanne, Gauguin, van Gogh, Klimt and Seurat, all of great rarity, each sold for nine-figure prices in just one evening. Inclusive of the buyer's premium, the yield ranged from \$104 million to \$149 million per painting. Edward Steichen's famous photograph of the *Flatiron Building* on Broadway and Fifth Avenue in New York fetched \$11.8 million. Views of Venice by Canaletto and Edouard Manet also brought in between \$10.4 million and \$51.9 million. Bronzes by Bourgeois, Ernst, Hepworth, Giacometti, Lipchitz and Miró were also successful, two of them in the double-digit million range. In addition to Canaletto, works by Sandro Botticelli, Jan Bruegel the Younger and Giovanni Paolo Panini were offered for sale, so the art historical past also came into play. Other highlights of the auction included major works by Jasper Johns and Georgia O'Keeffe, Francis Bacon, David Hockney and Lucian Freud. The sale, entitled "Vision", generated an unprecedented \$1.5 billion. The follow-up auction, which also included works of considerable quality, brought in a three-digit million amount. Following the auctions dedicated to the collectors Yvon Lambert and David Rockefeller, the name and "nose" of Paul G. Allen seemed to work wonders.

Lucian Freud:
Large Interior, W11
(after Watteau)
1981–1983
Oil on canvas
185.4 × 198.1 cm
(detail)

As a co-founder of *Microsoft*, he lived in Seattle. His philanthropic achievements included an institute for brain science and one for artificial intelligence. He also funded a pop culture museum called the *Experience Music Project*. In 1988 he bought the *Portland Trail Blazers* basketball club and in 1996 the *Seattle Seahawks* football team. The *Seattle Art Museum* did not get the collection. After Allen's death in 2018, it showed individual works for one year at a time, such as a Botticelli or the glorious "Large Interior, W11" by Lucian Freud, which alludes to Antoine Watteau. In this painting, Freud depicts a youthful-looking man dressed in white, sitting next to several young family members. His clasped hands and lowered gaze make him appear passive and almost awkward. Close to him, as in the paintings of Watteau, who had developed the figure of *Pierrot* in a white garment, a young, relatively proud-looking woman, historically representing the *Inamorata*, is playing a stringed instrument. All the other women are also gazing pensively; perhaps they are just listening to the sound of the lute. **The solution to the riddle depicted in the scene is unknown. This is true not only of this painting but of the entire collection. The core of our life is not to be found. Instead, we are tasked with understanding more and more. Maybe we should become less prone to taking offense. Such a process of self-knowledge — and great art collecting involves nothing less than that — was exemplified by Paul Gardner Allen. He had a crystal clear love for important art. This is precisely why, and by no means merely because of his name, the auction succeeded so splendidly.** "Within every culture there are leading minorities who, through attraction and charisma, induce the majorities to go along with them," the scholar Ernst Robert Curtius wrote in 1947. Allen was one such figure. His biography, published in 2011, bore the title "Idea Man." If such figures were absent, Curtius wrote, the result could be a "loss of social unity." The strong art market shows that, despite some segmentation, a historical "wholeness" still prevails. The model for this in the Western world is the centuries-long mission of Rome to regard itself as "urbs," the city, at the center of "orbis," the world. "Urbi et orbi" is the blessing of the Catholic Church to this day. Territorial wholes, no matter their size and political stripe, must prove themselves in the course of history, be it through conquest, through wars, through policies, but above all through culture. We can no longer be ancient Romans, we can't all be Catholics. **Nevertheless, we register with pain the abrogation of the ancient civic rights in all too many places in the world. Somehow we believe, as certainly Allen did, in a world literature, ranging from Homer to Goethe, Dante, or Shakespeare; in parallel, the visual arts of the last millennia have expressed themselves less through thought than through unforgettable images.** The art market is further away than ever from a *secessio plebis*, a takeover of high culture by the so-called masses. Nevertheless, or perhaps consequently, we can find sustaining warmth in the magnificent masquerade that high art repeatedly offers us. It describes the path to self-knowledge, at the end of which, unfortunately, inevitably, impermanence has the last word.

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