

asian art

ROUND TABLE



- THE PANEL
- 1.** Based in London, **Abha Housego** is a modern and contemporary South Asian art specialist for Indian auction house Saffron Art

2. **Paul Roberts** is vice chairman of Lyon & Turnbull and the president of Freemans in Philadelphia

3. **Jonathan Tucker** is a specialist dealer in Indian, South East Asian and Chinese sculpture and author on the topic of the Silk Road

4. Based in Kensington Church Street, **Laurence Paul** is a dealer in Chinese antiques specialising in carved wood stands

5. **Conor Macklin** is director of the Grosvenor Gallery, specialising in Indian and Pakistani Modern and Contemporary art

6. **Roderick Wright**, a chartered accountant in private practice, is a collector of Chinese and Japanese porcelain

7. **Antonia Tozer** worked at Spink and Son before setting up her own gallery in St James's, London, with her husband Jonathan Tucker in 2000

8. **Dr Susann Dattenberg-Doyle** is a psychologist, management consultant and collector of African art

9. **Michael Cohen** trades in Chinese export porcelain with wife Eva as Cohen & Cohen in Jermyn Street, London

10. **Lee Young** is head of the Asian department at Lyon & Turnbull, Edinburgh

The meat and drink of the Asian art market

WHERE does the knowledge really lie in the Asian art sector? Do we focus too much on China and is a new and younger group of buyers emerging?

When, as a curtain-raiser to Asian Art in London in November, ATG laid on a three-course lunch at our central London offices for a unique gathering of specialist buyers and sellers, we asked only that they would sing for their supper...



AUCTION OR GALLERY?

PUT any group of dealers, auctioneers and collectors together and the conversation will turn to the merits or otherwise of buying at auction or through a gallery. But there are aspects of the Asian art market – particularly the preponderance of copies, homages and fakes – that bring this age-old point of discussion to the fore.

The panel disagreed over the ‘take’ of auctioneers – “forget consignors’ commission on major items, it doesn’t exist,” said Paul Roberts – and the levels of expertise you might find there. Some lamented they were no longer the source of great bargains.

But most parties conceded that – in the UK at least – the relationship is closer and more harmonious than is often portrayed.

Seasoned collector Roderick Wright sparked this lively discussion when he opened with the words every dealer would like to hear: “Once the trust is there I prefer to go to a dealer rather than the auction room. It’s horses for courses. You will go to where the knowledge is – or where you think it is.”

Jonathan Tucker: People buy at auction because there is still a prevailing perception that it’s cheaper. I have spent years trying to convince people that it’s not always cheaper or that the pieces will be of better quality, less restored, authentic and better researched.

I have collectors who will come in and interrogate me for a morning on the market values for Thai bronzes and then go and buy a fake at auction.

Michael Cohen: Dealers are filters. I buy or try to buy one in a hundred pieces I see. If I don’t get it I don’t get it, but it’s the

only piece I wanted. It is the only piece I am prepared to offer my clients.

The collectors who do go their own way often end up with a lot of pieces that are second rate or fakes. They simply do not handle sufficient material, whereas a dealer is sorting the good from the bad on a daily basis. The collectors that think they know best, often don’t.

Paul Roberts: We as auctioneers are dealing with an avalanche of things.

To an extent it is never going to be possible to be expert in the areas that a collector had chosen. There is a symbiosis

“Auctioneers are like general practitioners and like all good GPs you are sometimes going to have to call in a specialist”

rather than a conflict there.

The key word here is filter. Their filter is extremely fine. Ours by necessity has to be much wider. My experience is that we would be lost without you, the dealers, and you would be overwhelmed without us.

Abha Housego: In the Indian market new collectors feel more comfortable buying at auctions which tend to be more transparent than buying from a dealer.

There is the safety of authenticity guarantees that auctions provide. Also, the works in the auction have been carefully curated to include the best of each field. It can be an easier selection than a dealers’ inventory.

Susann Dattenberg-Doyle: I find in my subject area if I go to a shop the choice is small.

If I go to an auction I get a lot more things to look at and that is very enjoyable. At the end of the day it is about personalities. You find someone expert, you click and you build trust.

Conor Macklin: If a collector is buying on price then they love the auction room. If they are buying because they have an interest then they tend to go a dealer because they recognise a shared commitment.

Antonia Tozer: At auction the price only goes up once the bidding has begun. By contrast, when visiting a dealer a price is quoted and often this can come down if the dealer is willing to negotiate.

That’s exactly what I say to all my Chinese buyers. Sometimes people come into the gallery who only buy at auction.

They scoff at the prices we are asking because they simply don’t want to give us a profit. This can be frustrating as usually we aren’t asking more than the auction house.

Laurence Paul: I truly believe that in this market the knowledge lies with the dealers.

JT: The Chinese dealers often buy at auction because there is public benchmark

for prices. They can go their clients and say ‘this is what I paid and this is the profit I expect’. It is more transparent.

Roderick Wright: I used to have a view that curators of museums were the top of the podium. Quite completely and utterly wrong.

Their viewpoint is often extremely limited. The people who are really seeing a lot of material are the dealers.

Lee Young: Auctioneers are like general practitioners, and like all good GPs you are sometimes going to have to call in a specialist. And some of the greatest minds are dealers. We will come to the London trade and ask them ‘what do you think?’

Approaching the museum community for advice doesn’t really work. Generally speaking, they don’t see the volume of fakes that we or the dealers see.

In this area, perhaps more than any other, you never stop learning.

As has happened today, we have taken a piece to some of the greatest minds in London in this particular area – and the differing opinion on this particular piece is quite spectacular.

There is a strange relationship where the auction house is the enemy, if you like, yet the specialists at the auction houses are very often friends, people we see socially and discuss pieces with and they will call if they want some advice. It’s not as antagonistic as we make out.

RW: The private buyer will go to auction when the piece is simplistic in terms of what it is and its history. We go to the dealer when the subject is more complex and there is far less surety as to what we are doing.

I think in Asian art, particularly Chinese ceramics, the current situation is poisoned by the variety of fakes and the quality of the fakes. That makes this area quite separate from most other categories.



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ON THE DOMINANCE OF CHINA

JT: There is more of a balance across the categories now. Five years ago when the Chinese frenzy was at its full height it completely dominated, but I have felt a gradual shift.

RW: My history of collecting is that I start small and research, my tastes change, I go further back in time and the pieces become more expensive. The Chinese works of art that I liked were expensive and it coincided with the rise in the market.

So I started to look at Japanese art. My move was primarily cost but when I really started to look at Japanese porcelain I found in it a creativity, spontaneity – something alive – that was absent in the Chinese equivalent.



ON THE IVORY BACKLASH AND CITES

MC: It is gesture politics. It is ridiculous to try and backdate moral attitudes. These were made as great works of art. They remain great works of art and not one elephant is going to be saved by restricting their ownership or use.

I have a client who has a £500,000 collection of Chinese imperial mixed-media pieces with ivory in them that cannot be moved or sold.

PR: The cost of the bureaucracy across the world that the CITES agreements entails is titanic.

How much happier a place it would be if those resources were channelled directly into saving the elephants in Africa and we could continue to have beautiful works of art made from ivory generations ago.

LY: Unless you get something exceptional you don't really want to sell it [ivory]. Sadly it has almost become a bit of a dirty word. We are turning more and more ivory objects away.

But you have a 17th or 18th century rhino horn libation cup. It was made in a very different time. I am not going at it purely from a money point of view, but it is an amazing work of art. Do we not take that to a wider audience?

JT: To be fair to the authorities in New York, there were people trying to pass off modern ivory carvings as antique. That is why the blanket law came in, blunt edged and unfair as it is. They got fed up trying to differentiate.



ISSUES OF AUTHENTICITY

THIS is a field where the barriers to collecting are not simply financial, bureaucratic or the sheer size of the subject area.

Copies and homages have been part of the Chinese tradition for centuries and fakers have been active in the market since the time of the art-obsessed Emperor Qianlong. He would occasionally wax lyrical on an 'ancient' work of art later shown to be a copy.

However, the price levels of the 21st century market – in Indian as well as Chinese works of art – have seen trickle turn to flood.

Mistakes can be very expensive and the lack of confidence is impacting buying activity. According to export porcelain specialist Michael Cohen, "much of what is on the market now in Chinese taste is fake. You really need to know that you are buying".

Auctioneer, dealer and collector alike, issues of authenticity, and what this might mean for the market in the future, taxed the panel more than any other.

JT: Constantly people are coming unstuck at auctions especially in areas where they go outside their field of expertise.

People ask me all the time to write appraisals of things they have bought at auction which they are trying to return. I tend to refuse to do so because it has legal implications.

LY: We in the Asian department are unlike any other. My colleagues in the furniture department are not second guessing every piece of Victorian furniture. Every lot we pick up we have to question.

We had an experience as an auction house where we were offered a whole



“At the moment there are few catalogue raisonnés available in the Indian field – but it is about to happen”

collection of fakes. These people didn't just come to us with these treasures. We were taken to a home where we were shown 'grandmother's pieces.' It was all set up. Fortunately we smelt a rat.

MC: You really need to know that you are buying. The dealers are the only ones with the time, the knowledge and the accumulated expertise to do that.

Anyone who says they haven't been caught out has been caught out but doesn't know it.

CM: In the Modern and the Contemporary field, authenticity is a very big factor. The market [in India] is so far self-regulated by the dealers, unlike in the West, which is a mature established market, where there are for example catalogue raisonnés of most major modern artists.

At the moment there are very few available in the Indian field – but it is about to happen. This is a young market, one that has only really been going for 15 years. Give it time.

ON LONDON

RW: I cannot envisage this collection of people in any other city in the world. We happen to be in a completely unique place. The repository of material and knowledge that is in the UK is unmatched.

CM: We have talked about the various elements of AAL. It is very rare that you can go to an event where you can meet people with such a depth of knowledge. *Asian Art in London* is one of the few events where you can meet so many specialists.

The cost is quite low and it is spread over a longer time, unlike the fairs which are very expensive and bring tremendous pressure for the dealer and collector.

LP: I think London's importance in the market for Asian art will continue, providing there are enough exhibitions and auctions to attract the potential buyers.

As in everything, what you put in to London's Asian art market is what you get out.

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ECLECTIC ROUTES AND A NEW AUDIENCE

EACH of our panellists has taken quite different routes to the Asian art market.

Michael Cohen was a geneticist. Roderick Wright made his first 'acquisition' when visiting the site of the Verulamium excavations as boy in the 1950s.

Lee Young, an English and European furniture specialist for much of his career, had "put the head above the parapet" when his employers decided they should be holding dedicated sales in this field.

Laurence Paul was the only guest who had a family background in antiques.

"It was easy for me. I come from a family of antique dealers in the south of France. When I came to London I decided to specialise in Chinese art and discover my niche.

"When I started out, Christie's South Kensington had sales every week and they would sell boxes of stands. I would take them to Portobello on a Saturday. I was later very lucky to meet someone who taught me about the identification of Chinese wood.

"Over a period of time I learned other areas of Chinese art."

But 'who takes over from us?' – a question posed by Antonia Tozer – and how to attract the next generation of specialists and collectors to the market prompted plenty of discussion on issues of new technology, the closure of auction house specialist departments and the migration of expertise to the East.

CM: The Indian market over the last decade grew from the traditional auction and gallery system to very successful online market.

The online auctions managed to tap into the huge expat Indian community, as well as a tapping into the energy of young collectors and investors.

Now we are seeing a whole new fresh wave of collectors in India itself.

There are hundreds of new clients coming in via this route that you simply don't get access to in the West. My main collectors for Indian art are all my age, whereas my collectors for Modern British are all 20-30 years above them.

PR: The biggest change in the market has been a dramatic swing in the participation of private people in the auction market in the way that they never did before. That is a lot to do with the internet and communications.

And with this the principle of caveat emptor is disappearing out of the door.

AH: Online, which is how Saffron started, has been amazing. It has brought in a lot of new, younger clients to the market.

"They are not dealers, they don't spend any of their own money themselves, they just advise and they hold the collector's hand"

For our online-only sales, with strong online marketing, we often have 10-20% new bidders at the sale.

RW: There seems to be no shortage of dealers coming into the market. It may be a question of my age but most of them are younger than me!

CM: What is happening now is that there is a lot of art consultants about.

They are not dealers, they don't spend any of their own money themselves, they just advise and they hold the collector's



WHERE DO YOU SEE PARTICULAR VALUE IN THIS MARKET?

RW: As the question of value suggests knowledge of the future, my stock answer is 'My crystal ball is very clouded'. I do think however that, with the exception of special pieces with rock-solid provenance, Chinese ceramics are at or very near their peak, lunatic bidders excepted.

AH: Indian antiquities have great potential and have until now have been a relatively neglected sector in India. Clients have avoided it for the cumbersome legalities involved and for the insufficient level of scholarship.

Saffron are taking international expertise to India and been working to simplify legalities of owning antiquities, helping to open up that nascent market. We will be holding an inaugural auction in December for Classical Indian art, something to watch out for.

MC: I'm afraid the answer from pretty well every dealer will be that they see particular value within their own sector, so I'll give you a different answer.

The value is in a good dealer who knows their subject and can enthuse potential clients. Choose well from what is on offer in your speciality and be able to justify your choices and you will sell.

CM: After the massive speculative bubble and crash of the Indian art market eight years ago, the current market is now stable with more and more collectors coming in, as well as international and domestic museum interest.

So in the long term I am confident to be buying Indian and Pakistani Modern pictures.

hand. Their value is dubious, from my point of view.

JT: In the Indian and south east Asian field there are no experts coming through now. Christie's and Sotheby's stopped their sales in London almost 20 years ago, so there is no new generation.

All the young people coming through are Chinese specialists. They are going to museums or they are focused on the Contemporary market.

MC: The Chinese were starved of home-

grown information after the Cultural Revolution. But they are fast learners. That is where the new scholarship will come from.

LP: New people continue to enter the Chinese market. I believe more and more young people are starting to collect, as they are all interested in their culture and history.

I do see more of my clients starting collecting in different areas, less porcelain and more of the workshop arts including jades, bronzes and scholars' items.