

Auction

20th century Maltese art under the hammer

An outstanding collection of Maltese 20th century art is going under the hammer of Obelisk Auctions at Villa Licari, Triq L-Imdina, Balzan on May 30.

This is one of the largest collections of modern and contemporary 20th century Maltese art to come up for auction. It includes works by the major protagonists of modern Malta including Emvin Cremona, Willie Apap, Vincent Apap, Giuseppe Briffa, Antoine Camilleri, Giorgio Preca and Carmelo Mangion among others. Of considerable importance is a rare large academy oil on canvas female nude by Emvin Cremona and two other oil paintings of female nudes by Giuseppe Briffa and Willie Apap respectively.

Other works by Apap include a pair of ballerina paintings and a number of smaller works executed while the artist was in prison.

The collection boasts of a Christ by Carmelo Mangion, abstract works by Emvin Cremona and a portrait of the artist's wife by Antoine Camilleri. The latter is one of the first modernist portraits executed in Malta. There are also a number of female nudes by Joseph Bellia.

The auction includes a selection of Maltese early 18th century furniture, a rare Maltese clock, a fine



One of Willie Apap's works on auction.

collection of rare 16th, 17th and 18th century maps of Malta, and topographical views of Malta, including signed works by J. Schranz and N. Cammillieri.

Christie's trims Asia sales

James Pomfret

Auction house Christie's will scale back its spring sales of Asian art in Hong Kong, yet the tighter, more cheaply-priced lots are expected to bring fresh confidence to a fragile market, its COO said yesterday.

The upcoming spring sales in Hong Kong, often seen as a weather vane for the Chinese art market, are expected to fetch \$97 million in total sales this year - roughly a third of the tally last spring when a record \$310 million of artwork was sold.

"What we're looking for out of these sales... is that the market has found a new level of comfort with prices and activity," Christie's chief operating officer Andy Foster said on the eve of the sales which kick off tomorrow.

"It's not that we're suddenly going to reach, in this season, the sales levels of spring 2008 at the peak of the market. But we believe that what we're seeing is going to lead to a real feeling of confidence in the region that the market's back on track."

Since the financial crisis deepened last October, broader demand for Asian art has shrivelled, and valuations have fallen, particularly for once red-hot Chinese contemporary art.

Mr Foster admitted to difficulties in convincing collectors to sell right now, but said demand for top artwork remained strong and was growing, particularly among mainland Chinese collectors.

"High quality items of Chinese works of art can still achieve extremely high price points," he said.

The recent market slump hasn't however been the only headache for Christie's.

The world's biggest auction house was recently embroiled in a bitter spat with the Chinese government over the sale of two bronze animal heads looted by foreign troops from Beijing's Old Summer Palace or Yuanmingyuan in 1860.

The February sale of the looted treasures in Paris stirred up strong nationalistic feelings in China, and sparked protests from Chinese cultural officials who later imposed restrictions on the sourcing of high-end relics in and out of China by Christie's.

A French auction house was also berated last month by China for selling a looted jade imperial seal. Mr Foster declined extensive comment on the controversy, but stressed it was being worked through in a positive way.

"We continue to respect the sensitivity of the issue to the Chinese people," said Mr Foster, who also heads Christie's in Asia.

In the upcoming sales, Christie's will sell 1,600 lots including Asian contemporary artwork, Chinese inkbrush paintings and imperial ceramics, as well as jewellery and watches.

While there aren't any truly blockbuster items this time round, highlights include a rare collection of Chinese furniture crafted from Huanghuali wood; a painting by Zao Wou-ki entitled *Nous Deux* (We Two) which could sell for up to HK\$15 million, and a Jiajing Ming period blue-and-white Boys Jar, depicting sixteen lively boys at play which could fetch over HK\$10 million. (Reuters)

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