



SOTHEBY'S: PORTRAIT OF AN AUCTION HOUSE by Frank Herrmann

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ART FOR TRADE AND ART FOR SALE

SOTHEBY'S: PORTRAIT OF AN AUCTION HOUSE/Frank Herrmann.—London: Chatto & Windus; New York: Norton, 1980.—468 p.: ill. (some col.).—ISBN 0-7011-2246-3 (GB); 0-393-01424-X (US); no LC: \$29.95.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the world of collecting is auctioneering. Auctioneers have always held a certain fascination for both the professional and the layman, and this book is a history of one of the world's two most famous auctioneering firms, Sotheby's of London.

Frank Herrmann, who is well-known for his acclaimed book, *The English as Collectors*, has spent seven years researching Sotheby's history. It has not been an easy undertaking, because the early records, which were far from substantial, were burned in an 1865 fire and it was only at the beginning of this century that record-keeping became more systematic. Mr. Herrmann has also interviewed members of the staff, searched various family papers, contemporary literature and newspaper accounts dealing with art and book collections and the market. His painstaking research has resulted in a witty history of Sotheby's from its foundation by Samuel Baker, who published his first sale catalog in 1733, to the present day. However, it should not be mistaken for light reading. It is full of facts and figures interwoven, sometime almost to the point of distraction, with the cultural and economic conditions of the period discussed. The book is not merely a history of Sotheby's, but a chronicle of the taste and pattern of collecting, both in art and books, from the 18th century to the present. It is a gold mine of information on the development of the book trade and its methods, and on leading figures like Quaritch, George Smith and others. Moreover, besides the almost legendary figures of Samuel Baker, George Leigh, John Sotheby and the later generations of Sotheby's men, a vivid picture develops before the reader's eyes of the famous collectors of almost 250 years, glimpses of their traits and habits as collectors and individuals.

Sotheby's Portrait is a chronological account of the firm's history through trials and achievements, events which led to a crossing of paths with their great rival, Christie's. The book also provides a good account of the development and structure of the firm, which should be enlightening to professionals dealing with auction houses on a day-to-day basis. The description of the development and makeup of the sales catalog, the machinery of actual auctioneering, the colorful personality of the auctioneers, and specialized auctions, like country house sales, provide a factual picture to understanding the overall process which is the backbone of the colorful, so often maddeningly illogical art market. *Sotheby's Portrait* should be regarded with special interest by museum professionals who study the development of the art market, especially this century's, through the facts and figures which are many times not easily available in other sources. It can also be illuminating to follow an object's progress from one collection to the other.

However, a point has to be made on the matter of bibliography. As the author points out, sources are footnoted on each page. Unfortunately, they are far from complete and, as the reviewer found it, in many instances neglected. A traditional bibliography at the end of the book is sadly lacking. This omission can be a hindrance for the researcher. Especially unfortunate is the complete lack of any bibliographical reference to auctions and auctioneers of the earlier part of the 18th century. The author has covered a large segment of an area of prime sources.

Throughout the book there are many illustrations of old sales catalogs, photographs, some in color, and there is a very good index.

This publication of Sotheby's history can easily tempt some to compare it with the *Memorials of Christie's* by William Roberts (London, 1897) which would be a mistake for several reasons. First of all, the two books are 84 years apart, and, while *Sotheby's Portrait* brings the reader to our days, the *Memorials of Christie's* ends with 1896. The intention of the two books is also completely different. While Herrmann's aim is to present a history of the firm, Roberts, as the subtitle also indicates, intended to present a "résumé of the chief public sales which have been held at Chris-

tie's..." (v.1, p.vi). Herrmann places the sales within the cultural and economic framework of their time, an approach not attempted by Roberts. When we come to compare the treatment of the collectors, the difference is again quite evident. The *Memorials of Christie's* attempted to provide only a few longer biographical discussions of collectors who could most easily be categorized. His selectivity is in complete opposition to Mr. Herrmann's well-rounded treatment of collectors, large and small, prominent or obscure, who have been chosen on basis of their enduring influence on the tastes and history of art collecting. In all fairness, it should be made very clear in drawing analogies between the two books, that they served different purposes in different times.

The other, more logical, comparison would be *Christie's 1766 to 1925* by Henry C. Marillier (London, 1926). Oddly enough, however, Herrmann made no mention of this book. It has many features similar to *Sotheby's Portrait*, but it does not have the same depth. Understandably enough, the Marillier book was an early attempt in the same direction but with less perception. For its time, it was a commendable accomplishment and served as the forerunner to *Sotheby's Portrait*.

Mr. Herrmann has written a well-researched book in a vivid style and at the same time has provided a treasury of information. This book fills a long over-due gap in the history of auctioneering.

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ARTS & CRAFTS REDISCOVERED (LATEST INSTALLMENT)

UTOPIAN CRAFTSMEN: THE ARTS AND CRAFTS MOVEMENT FROM THE COTSWOLDS TO CHICAGO/Lionel Lambourne.—Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1980.—218 p.: ill. (some col.).—ISBN 0-87905-080-2: \$27.95.

FURNITURE OF THE AMERICAN ARTS AND CRAFTS MOVEMENT: STICKLEY AND ROYCROFT MISSION OAK/David M. Cathers.—New York: NAL Books, 1981.—145 p.: ill.—ISBN 0-453-00397-4: \$19.95.

MISSION FURNITURE: MAKING IT, DECORATING WITH IT, ITS HISTORY AND PLACE IN THE ANTIQUE MARKET/Jerome and Cynthia Rubin.—San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1980.—131 p.: ill. (some col.).—ISBN 0-87701-169-9: \$8.95.

THE CALIFORNIA BUNGALOW/Robert Winter.—Los Angeles: Hennessey & Ingalls, 1980.—95 p.: ill.—(California Architecture and Architects/David Gebhard, editor; 1).—ISBN 0-912158-85-9: \$14.95.

The Arts and Crafts boom continues. Collectors are busy collecting, dealers dealing, authors writing, and publishers publishing. With reference to the latter, like Arts and Crafts wares themselves, there is much that is good and some that is bad. Discriminating between the two requires a practiced eye, and practice is particularly important given the peculiarly indefinable and elusive character of Arts and Crafts architecture, furniture, ceramics, silver, and glassware. Everyone knows an Arts and Crafts product when he or she sees it, but most of us are hard-pressed when asked to supply a precise definition of just what characteristics belong to the style. Nevertheless, there does not seem to be any lack of people and publishers willing to try.

Still the best general survey of the topic from its English origins is Gillian Naylor's scholarly *The Arts and Crafts Movement*, first published in 1971. For the American side of the story there still remains only Robert Judson Clark's 1972 exhibition catalog, *The Arts and Crafts Movement in America, 1876-1916*. Claiming to cover both the English and the American developments are Isabelle Anscombe's and Charlotte Gere's *The Arts and Crafts in England and America*, published in 1978, and Lionel Lambourne's *Utopian Craftsmen*, issued last year in England and reprinted in America by Peregrine Smith.

Like Naylor, Lambourne begins with A.W.N. Pugin and John Ruskin, but he carries the story up to the present day, trying to show the impact and influence of Arts and Crafts ideas on modern industrial design and the decorative arts. In interpreting the origins of the movement, Lambourne says that there were three paths or