

# J'aime Paris



Michael Smither, *The Family in the Van*, 1971, oil on board. This work sold for \$234,500, a record price at auction for this artist's work

*Attending an auction can be an experience that's as dramatic, exciting and nail-biting as watching a spectator sport, muses John Perry. The recent Les and Milly Paris Collection auction was no exception.*

As we head into the summer season, and the last group of art auctions for the year, I'd like to reflect on the fine art of the auction itself, and to focus on a unique event in the auction scene recently, which shattered several records and set the metaphorical bar just a little higher.

Halfway through the year the news was out that Art + Object had been chosen to sell the large and legendary Les and Milly Paris Collection. This collection was started by the Wellington couple in 1963, and spans the most productive period New Zealand art has ever experienced. The Paris Collection had also been one of the most accessible private collections in the country, with key works exhibited in most of the public galleries in the country, so many of the paintings had gained iconic status already. I believe the opportunity to sell the collection was eagerly contested by a number of leading auction houses, and Art + Object's success may well have been helped by its proposal to undertake several initiatives during the lead-up to the September auction days.

During the three months prior to the auctions, Art + Object launched the catalogue and showed several collection highlights at Wellington's 30 Upstairs project space; Auckland gallery Gow Langsford exhibited part of the collection, and media coverage included *Campbell Live*, *Nightline*, *The Listener* and *The New Zealand Herald*, which ensured a large, expectant crowd was assembled on the first night. It was clear this was going to be a red letter day for all and sundry. The high quality catalogue set a benchmark in publication production with sharp and clear illustrations, extensive essays and detailed provenance of all works.

Auctioneer Ben Plumbly was in complete control, proving beyond doubt that he's a master in the art of selling cultural property under the hammer. Once the scene was set, auction records kept on tumbling, one after another – record prices at auction were paid for works by Gordon Walters, Michael Illingworth, Allen Maddox, Michael Smither, Peter Robinson, Philip Clairmont, Seraphine Pick and Brent Wong – the list goes on.

The atmosphere was highly charged and by the time 72 major paintings and sculptures had been sold on the

first night, there were big smiles all round, and not just in the room. The event had been streamed live online, so Milly Paris watched from a comfortable armchair nearby, and bloggers Jim and Mary Barr tweeted the whole event live. History was made and when the maths was done a whole raft of records had been smashed – and that was only the first night.

On the second night the equally large crowd who attended the photography, works on paper, and smaller works auction, hoping to get a bargain, came away disappointed. Now, 'bargain' may not be the best word to employ on an occasion like this, as there were few to be found – the competition to own a work from this collection was considerable and most works found new owners.

When the dust settled, a grand total of \$4,650,000 worth of quality New Zealand artwork had changed hands over the two-day sale, and the highest price paid for an individual work was \$433,000 – for Gordon Walters' *Painting No. 7*. Over 90 percent of works in the collection sold and numerous records for painting, photography, prints and three-dimensional works were broken. Without doubt it was a very memorable and historic occasion to have been part of. It showed you don't have to go to auctions to buy – auctions can be a spectator sport, like rugby or cricket, and a good auction is like a wonder-filled lecture – you come away enlightened and enriched.

Switching locations, I'd like to put these landmark events into an international perspective. As this issue of *Art News* hits the newsstands, over in the Big Apple Christie's New York auction house will sell a seminal work by Andy Warhol, *Statue of Liberty*, a silkscreen work on canvas produced in the late 1960s. To facilitate the sale of this single work they've produced an extensive and informative catalogue dealing with many aspects of this iconic American artwork. In the catalogue the pre-sale estimate was "POA", so I fired off an email asking what they were expecting the work to fetch. This morning I had a reply: \$US36,000,000. That's nearly ten times the total amount achieved by the Les and Milly Paris Collection auction, and I believe the pre-sale estimate is a little on the light side... I will keep you posted.