

Auction Fever: Record prices predicted for contemporary art

By Suzanne McGee, Barron's Online, May 2005

RAISING \$100 MILLION from a contemporary-art sale once seemed an impossible goal. But Christie's expects the 76 lots it will auction off Wednesday evening to fetch a record \$107 million, and possibly more than \$140 million. Rival Sotheby's figures its auction, planned for Tuesday night, will generate anywhere from \$82 million to \$113 million.

"Anything could happen," says Tobias Meyer, chief auctioneer and head of the contemporary-art department at Sotheby's. "The quality of the work available is so good that if the bidding is competitive, our estimates could be far too conservative."

The market for contemporary art has been booming for four years, and prices have continued to escalate since last spring, when *Barron's* wrote a cover story about the new generation of collectors ("Cool Art, Hot Prices," May 10, 2004). High prices are tempting veteran collectors to sell some of their holdings, including rare items. Sotheby's will handle the sale of several Roy Lichtenstein oils formerly in Gianni Versace's collection, and two Chuck Close portraits, while Christie's is selling the Edward Hopper painting *Chair Car*.

Also up for grabs at Christie's is a taxidermied ostrich by Maurizio Cattelan, which the auction house declares "a comic look at the nature of success." Christie's predicts the ostrich could fetch as much as \$1.6 million.

Christie's also will auction part of the collection of abstract-expressionist art assembled by New York businessman Donald Jonas and his wife Barbara in the 1960s and 1970s, including a de Kooning that may fetch up to \$12 million. The Jonases hope to start a trend by auctioning these works for the benefit of a foundation they have established through the philanthropic **Jewish Communal Fund**.

"We built this collection slowly and with great thought. Now we want to see the sale of these works benefit the causes that are close to our hearts," says Barbara Jonas.

The couple could raise as much as \$43 million from the sale, which they will use to support educational and medical causes. "This seemed like the best time for us to sell," says Barbara Jonas. "The market is certainly flourishing."

Amy Cappellazzo, who will oversee the sale of the Jonas collection along with 63 other items, agrees, noting that "the market just seems to get broader and deeper. A lot of people are wary of financial assets, and quality durable goods like a fabulous home in Aspen or a Rothko painting look like attractive acquisitions right now."

No one is ready -- or willing -- to predict an end to the current boom. "This is not the last hurrah," says Cappellazzo. The only thing that seems certain is the sense of anticlimax that will ripple through the art world when the gavel falls for the last time this week.