

First Steps in Buying Art - Drawings

by Chris Murray

The Market

Drawings provide a wonderfully varied and inexpensive introduction to buying art, with starting prices of around £20. They are often neglected and undervalued (which is good news for the bargain hunter), and though drawings by important artist can command high prices, even these are far less expensive than paintings or sculptures by the same artist. A Stanley Spencer drawing related to one of his famous paintings might cost as much as £25,000, one of his paintings very much more. But a pencil portrait by Spencer (and he was a supreme draughtsman) might be found for as little as £1,200.

Drawings are also plentiful: the general art market has drawings from the Baroque to the present day, and in all styles, subjects, media and types, from quick sketches and preparatory studies to finely detailed finished works. More recent forms include caricatures and cartoons, fashion designs, and artwork for books, a genre that includes works by artists such as Edward Ardizzone, Ronald Searle and Ernest Shepard. An original Shepard drawing of Pooh Bear can cost well over £20,000, but there are huge number of fine illustrators whose drawings can be bought for very little. Other specialist interests include botanical studies and architectural drawings. The British tradition is a strong one, and is kept very much alive by artists like Lucian Freud and David Hockney.

There are four main issues to consider when buying: artist, condition, subject and quality.

Artist.

Works by a know artist are strongly favoured by the market, and provide the collector with both a biographical context and also a body of work into which to set a drawing. But a great many quality drawings are unattributed yet still very collectable and far less expensive. Drawing by those associated with a well-known artist, described as 'school of,' 'circle of,' 'follower of' and so on, can provide rich pickings for the beginner. The drawing described as 'Follower of Thomas Rowlandson' (opposite page) was probably by an eighteenth century artist trying to cash in on the Rowlandson's popularity. And even though it may not have the vitality or originality of a Rowlandson, it's still a delightfully naughty and interesting addition to a collection. The genuine article would cost £2,000-£5,000.

If you are determined to buy works by specific artists, it's important to remember that both an attribution and a signature may be questionable. I regularly see newcomers to the market buying drawings signed LS Lowry, Augustus John or Laura Knight (and others) that are clearly not by those artists. This is often because the buyer fails to understand that the catalogue description 'bears the signature A' in fact means that (in the opinion of an auction house) the signature was 'added by another hand' (note that the Rowlandson opposite is signed Rowlandson but was not sold as such). So do your research, ask questions, assess provenance carefully, seek advice.

Drawing by celebrities can also be very collectable. In 2000, a schoolboy pen-and-ink drawing by Winston Churchill of a boxer sold for £11,000.

Condition

Drawings are easily creased, torn, smudged, foxed (affected by small rust-coloured spots), or have nibbled corners where drawing pins or tape have been used. Good condition is important but clearly a drawing 300 years old will show its age and this will add to its appeal. Restoration can be carried out, but has to be done professionally. Take care with modern papers and media such as ballpoint and felt-tip. These media, strong and vivid when first used, can fade very quickly, and modern papers often turn brown and brittle.

Subject

The choice of subject is personal, but if you are collecting for investment as well as pleasure, it's important to recognize that some subjects are more appealing than others: an old windmill more than a rainy council estate; a young women more than a man or older women, unless they are famous, or the man is in a fine uniform. The question is: How many people would hang this in their home? The exception to this general rule is that some subjects without popular appeal do have a small but very keen body of collectors, and so may command good prices. Medical drawing are a good example.

Quality

Quality tells. Initially, expert opinion is the best guide, but to collect drawings successfully you'll need to get to know them well. The best way to start, as with any collecting, is to look attentively, questioningly, at as many good examples as you can. Museums and galleries often have good collections (they usually keep them in storage, so you'll need to ask what they have), and drawings often feature in art college exhibitions. Visit commercial galleries and auctions and discuss the drawings for sale. And (odd as this may sound) study poor drawings as well, what is it about them that does not work? Finally, become familiar with the many media and techniques, an excellent guide is Ian Simpson's *Encyclopaedia of Drawing Techniques* (1987). And when you've bought your first drawings, study them carefully, close up and at leisure. A guide to understanding drawings is Philip Rawson's *Drawing* (1969).

Examples from recent sales

Just a glance at the brief selection on the opposite page shows the variety, ranging from a subtle character study in chalk (18thC Italian School) to an abstract ink drawing influenced by Eastern calligraphy (William Johnstone), and from quiet rural scenes (Anton Mauve and Camplin) to powerful fantasies of modern life (Peter Howson and Rod Judkins). The 'Dutch School 18thC' is a good example of the many anonymous early drawings to be found, not of high artistic merit perhaps, but wonderfully naïve and full of life. The Robert Leman sketch shows just how little you can pay. Notice that drawings are often sold in groups. Even if only a few of the other works sold with the striking portrait by Dorothy Colles are of equal quality, the price was still great value.

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For the diary:

Watercolours and Drawings Fair, Royal Academy, 1-4 Feb
01798 861815, info@watercoloursfair.com
Art on Paper Fair, Royal College of Art, 2-5 Feb
020 8742 1611, organisers@artfairs.demon.co.uk
Master Drawings in London Week, July
0207 439 2822, www.masterdrawingsinlondon.co.uk



Peter Howson, pastel 'Light', signed, 24 x 18in. Great Western Auctions, Glasgow. Mar 06. HP: £1,700. ABP: £1,999.



18thC Italian School, Sanguine drawing, Study of the head of a man, 7.25 x 8.25in, inscribed in pen to lower right corner 'Guerrino', modern gilt moulded frame, glazed. Canterbury Auction Galleries, Kent. Feb 06. HP: £600. ABP: £705.



Donald Bain 1904-79, pastel 'French Landscape', signed and dated 1944. Great Western Auctions, Glasgow. Aug 05. HP: £350. ABP: £411.



Anton Mauve, 1838-1888, Cattle watering, pencil, signed with monogram, 9.6 x 12.4cm, with two other pencil drawings of farm scenes by the same hand, both similarly signed, 10.5 x 14 and 6.3 x 11.5cm., (3) (unframed) Rosebery's, London. Mar 06. HP: £320. ABP: £376.



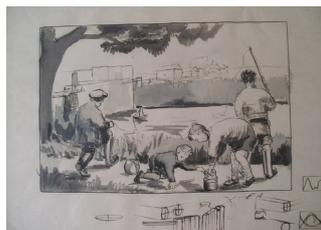
Capelin, French School 19thC, Young couple picking apples, red chalk, 30.3 x 19cm, with nine other studies of figures in pencil and black chalk and crayon by the same hand. (10) (unframed) Rosebery's, London. Sep 04. HP: £230. ABP: £270.



Robert Leman 1799-1863, River landscape, pencil, signed, 19 x 23.5cm, J. V. Barber, 19thC, Allmoore's, Aston, pen/black ink, signed with initials, titled and dated July 23 1882, 19.5 x 24cm.. (2) (unframed) Rosebery's, London. Aug 06. HP: £15. ABP: £17.



William Johnstone, brush drawing, signed with monogram, 30.5 x 22.5in. Great Western Auctions, Glasgow. Jun 06. HP: £220. ABP: £258.



Edward Ardizzone, pen, ink and wash drawing of boys playing at the water's edge. Cotswold Auction Company, Cirencester. Feb 06. HP: £300. ABP: £352.



Tom Merrifield (b.1932) Two pencil drawings, signed, 53 x 41cm and 34 x 41cm. Sworders, Stansted Mountfitchet. Apr 06. HP: £85. ABP: £99.



Dorothy Colles, PS, (b.1917-) Girl in a striped dress, pastel on board, signed/dated verso 1984, 74 x 50cm, a further 12 pastel portrait studies, and a collection of unframed water-colour portraits by the same hand, various sizes, Heather Child, 1911-97, Botanical study, watercolour/pencil, dated 20.1.59, with a collection of similar watercolour/pencil studies by the same or related hands, (a lot) (unframed) Rosebery's, London. Jan 06. HP: £480. ABP: £564.



Margaret Carpenter (1793-1872), charcoal and coloured chalks, Portrait of Mrs Charles Curtis, signed, inscribed and dated 1826, 70 x 52cm, with a companion portrait of Mr Charles Curtis, charcoal drawing, signed and dated July 1830, 73 x 53cm. Gorrings, Bexhill. Dec 05. HP: £160. ABP: £188.



Rod Judkins, b1956, 'Statues', black & coloured crayon, signed, titled and dated 84, 77 x 102cm. Lynda Flower, late 20thC, 'Getting Dressed', mixed technique on paper, signed/dated 80, another work on paper by same hand titled 'Sublimation', signed/dated 81 and another work on paper by Ashton titled 'Family Sculpture', signed and dated 1980. (4) Rosebery's, London. May 06. HP: £100. ABP: £117.



Dutch School 18thC, Figures with animals (recto), Figures in a boat (verso), pen and ink, 9 x 13cm. Rosebery's, London. Aug 06. HP: £70. ABP: £82.



French School, 1900, Caricature of a gentleman, standing full-length in a top hat and overcoat, pen, ink and wash, signed with initials S.E.M., inscribed 'Auteuil' & dated Novembre 1900, 46.7 x 30cm. Rosebery's, London. Jun 05. HP: £140. ABP: £164.



Follower of Thomas Rowlandson, A Lady putting on her Stockings, bears signature, pen, ink and watercolour, 22 x 18cm. Sworders, Stansted Mountfitchet. Apr 05. HP: £140. ABP: £164.