

THE HUMAN FACE CAPTIVATES AGAIN THE WORLD OF ART: A PORTRAIT BY BOTTICELLI SURPRISES ONE AND ALL

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As the economic situation grows, the Old Masters seem to rise up, so as to infuse its figurative hallmark, in a moment in which, the world of art feels a kind of creative satiety and the market shows signs of uncertainty. In our February blog we have already pointed out that something positive was moving in the Old Master 's segment of the market, according to the good results of Christie 's December London sale and to Sotheby's January New York sale. Covid 19's crisis has confirmed this favourable trend.

Though we shudder at the thought, over the past few years we assist to a dismemberment of historical collections of Old Masters and an increase in the offer of works of a particular importance, just at the same time as new buyers, with an eclectic taste, are emerging focused on purchasing unique works in all types of arts. Monographic sales of old Masters collections present high quality works of art fresh to the market that can be distinguished as remarkable examples of refined taste, good state of condition and remarkable provenance. They alternate in the auction calendar with "cross categories" sales where stand out as jewels the old masterpieces in lively dialogue with modernity. The best example of this convergence of an increasing offer and a renovate audience is the sale to a new collector of the self-portrait by Rembrandt at Sotheby's in July 2020, though at a lower price than could be expected for a painting of this category.

However, if there is a genre which has risen from its ashes, that is the Portrait, a field reserved not so long ago just for connoisseur collectors and that, even those who were guided by aesthetic criteria, declined their possession because it gave a certain air of pomposity to their homes. On the contrary, nowadays the human face enjoys a revival; following the path established by the "Salvator Mundi "of Leonardo, good results are achieved in auction by paintings representing images of Christ by the circle of Petrus Christius and Quentin Metsys and portraits by Rubens and Van Dyck or tronies by Rembrandt and his followers are among the highlights of the Old masters sales. Portraits by the great artists of XX century as, by Picasso, Hockney and Basquiat have recently been sold at Christies in October in high prices; All of them offer us different artistic interpretations of human figure and how new collectors have understood the real artistic value of this genre which transmits in a superb manner the values of an epoch expressed through the

individual mood of the sitter, with whom the viewer has a kind of psychological symbiosis.

Moreover, what is significant and new is the increasing interest in portraits by Renaissance painters. Those who, inspired in Roman busts, have invented this genre. A good example of this trend which demonstrates the level of interest in early portraits, is the outstanding portrait attributed to the "bourguignonne" school which rose fourteen times its estimate, selling at 1,4 M£ at Christie's in July evening sale.

In this context Sotheby's surprise one and all presenting as a highlight of its January New York old Masters sale a paradigmatic portrait of a young man holding a roundel by Sandro Botticelli, one of the dozen existing portraits by the Master. Painted between in 1470 / 80, his best period, it expresses in an unsurpassable way the quintessence of the "Quattrocento Fiorentino", embodying the conquest of the representation of Man in Art. An image of a young man of not more than 20 years with porcelain complexion and verdigris coloured eyes, that, due to his eternal beauty, his shocking modernity and iconic character, is destined to become a symbol of the strength of Art in times of crisis and to break records, as the "Salvator Mundi" of Leonardo did years ago, in a different moment, when only we could foretell the abyss. In this sense, we should be satisfied that a masterpiece of the Renaissance assumes this role, because it would mean, that Art needs images of impressive beauty and permanent canons, so as to fight against the sentiment of void that invade human beings when personal live is shattered.

The World of Art needs to send a clear and positive message in order to maintain the mood of the collectors, so that they do not abandon the market. However, it is a paradox and, in my opinion, a very encouraging fact, that in a background so focused by Contemporary Art, Old Masterpieces are among the unique works selected to instil confidence and in a way become the "porte parole" of the whole market. On the hand, it is also surprising that an image of beauty embodied in a youth with a gaze that invites to have confidence in future, is the work selected to exert as "Salvator Mundi" of a dehumanized artistic world "au bord du précipice"; a face on the opposite side of the skulls of Basquiat, symbols of an age already passed in which we lived with opulence a fragile vital frenzy.

The Human nature is so contradictory and full of contrasts, that in a moment where prevails the distrust of man's capacity to face a kind of apocalypse, it grasps to all the values that Botticelli represents in an iconic manner. The vitality of Man, the sweet bloom of youth, the permanent sense of beauty...

The announcement of the presentation for sale of a Botticelli of this category has spread in the mediums as gunpowder, creating an unusual optimism in the market and world of art, as it is regarded as a winning bet and a sign that the taste of collectors may return at last to the human figure. This kind of courageous actions, achieved during a crisis, gives confidence to the market and, infuses passion to collectors, promoting a favourable trend for the change that Art needs and all the lovers of beauty yearn.

The portrait of a young man by Botticelli rise as a star that guides the return of Art to eternal values of ineffable beauty, exquisite technique and search of modernity through the human figure, authentic pillars of Renaissance Art. The Beauty, that is revealed by the lineal manner in which the master renders the features of the young man and the subtle touch that distils the demeanour of the personage, standing out from a symmetrical background and impressive colour; the Modernity, due to its overall immediacy, simplicity and brevity of its message; the exquisite technique, that appears in all its splendour in the incredible "trompe l'oeil" of optical illusion which is shown through the delicate gesture of the hands; granting all this the clear and outstanding significance that only unique works of art can have.

This portrait could have stood as the jewel which would have gleamed in a "cross categories" sale or as a brooch in a contemporary art auction, because it would perfectly dialogue with masterpieces of all times, breaking boundaries. However, Sotheby's, demonstrating its everlasting traditionalism, its clairvoyance and utmost care in selecting scenarios for his highlights, decided to reserve a special place in its January New York old Masters sale. Certainly, a quite acute and brave decision as it would serve to test the eagerness of all the new buyers that Sotheby's has been attracting to the Old master field a long these last months; collectors who search the best works in all types of art. This would represent a great success, all the more it has been a target they have always failed to achieve during last years, in spite of all their efforts.

Furthermore, this announcement appears in a timely moment, when other periods of art highly considered by the market begin to show a slowdown. Impressionism is not so appreciated as before, not only due to a lack of offer of masterpieces, but also because it does not radiates the powerful expressiveness required nowadays; Picasso does not seem to stimulate the buyers mood like previously, as collectors and investors begin to be aware of the inevitable pictorial unevenness of such an immense corpus; Contemporary art remains the most active segment of the market, but at

present is quite self-conscious with the astronomical figures achieved during last years, showing a kind of panic at testing the market.

Has the time come to question why old masterpieces of our history are value three or four times less than a top contemporary work of art?

I really hope so....

The market is strong, the demand of millionaire lots is still there and the new technology novelties have made accessible the old masters to new potential buyers who at present stay at home, feeling their compulsion to purchase and to enjoy only what they like, certainly what is more immediate and intelligible to their sense and knowledge, as for example a Portrait

We shall see the conclusion of this story at Sotheby's January Old Masters New York sale, where the Botticelli painting should rise above the 100 M\$, so as to be consecrated by the market.