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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

ART & AUCTIONS

## In London, Collectors Get Fired Up for Ceramics

Pottery takes center stage at Frieze and auctions;  
'there's a lot of cross-pollination going on'



Pablo Picasso, Grand vase aux femmes voilées ( A.R. 116) CHRISTIE'S IMAGES LTD.

By *Kelly Crow*

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Asian collectors have long prized porcelain vases as much as paintings, but until recently, art lovers elsewhere largely treated ceramics like a second-class craft. Now, the global art market is trying to elevate clay art into the realm of the blue chip.

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Christie's and Phillips for the first time added stand-alone auctions of 20th-century and contemporary ceramics to their high-profile set of evening sales in London with examples by artists like Paul Gauguin, Lucio Fontana and Thomas Schütte. All but three of the 36 pieces in Christie's \$4 million "Un/Breakable" sale on Tuesday found buyers.

Across town at the art fair Frieze London, which overlapped with the week's auctions, at least half a dozen galleries also offered ceramic works in their booths, including Robert Arneson's 1983 bust of his wife Sandra Shannonhouse, "Woman in Gold," at Venus Over Manhattan's booth. It was priced at \$650,000.

Another highlight: Spanish-Egyptian artist Teresa Solar Abboud's 2018 "Everything Is OK," a salmon-colored column of lumpen ceramic bowls that evoke an intestinal tract, priced for around \$5,800. As of Friday afternoon, Ms. Solar Abboud's piece was still available, and Venus Over Manhattan declined to divulge the status of Mr. Arneson's piece. The fair concludes Sunday.

Elsewhere this season, several tastemaker galleries and museums are also playing up pottery. Gagosian's gallery in Geneva, Switzerland, has a "Fire and Clay" show running until Dec. 15 that includes potters Shio Kusaka, who is based in Los Angeles, and Ron Nagle, who is from San Francisco. In New York, the Museum of Arts and Design just opened an exhibit of apocalyptic ceramics by Los Angeles's Sterling Ruby. It runs through March.

Pablo Picasso's granddaughter Marina Picasso gave the contemporary ceramics market a jolt three years ago when she enlisted Sotheby's to sell off a portion of her inherited trove of the artist's playful pottery. Collectors over the course of three sales bought every ceramic piece, in some cases paying six-figure sums that would have been unthinkable a decade ago. "Jurassic Park" actor Richard Attenborough's estate sale of Picasso ceramics at Christie's two years ago stoked a similar buy-it-all frenzy, with a Picasso vase selling for \$909,407.

The canny push from auction houses also comes at a time when collector confidence remains highest in the middle of the market where pieces typically sell for between \$500,000 to \$5 million as opposed to the trophy top of the market where pieces can top \$100 million, according to the auction-tracking firm ArtTactic's Contemporary Art Market Confidence Report issued Tuesday.

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Trophies are still selling at Sotheby's, though: On Friday, its sale of part of New Jersey management consultant David Teiger's estate included a \$12.4 million Jenny Saville, "Propped," that reset the record for a living female artist at auction.

The mood has nudged collectors to bolster ceramic pieces for dozens of artists like Peter Voukos, whose 1958 stoneware abstract, "Rondena," sold at Phillips last December for \$915,000, over its \$500,000 high estimate. The sale also established a new auction high bar for a 20th-century ceramic made by a U.S. artist.

That price still pales in comparison with the \$38 million paid for a Chinese ceramic at auction—Sotheby's sold a Northern Song-era vessel for washing paintbrushes—but the overall recalibration could expand the collector base. Watch for prices to rise for modern ceramists like George Ohr—the self-proclaimed "Mad Potter of Biloxi"—as well as postwar potters Lucie Rie and Hans Coper. Their works have long been funneled into decorative-art sales alongside lamps and sofas, rather than with paintings, sculptures and other fine art, but Christie's expert Leonie Mir said such designations are blurring because younger contemporary collectors don't sift or rank artworks strictly by medium anymore.

Neither do contemporary artists like Ai Weiwei, who incorporates all sorts of materials in his work. Among his recent installations: Room-size piles of hand-painted porcelain sunflower seeds and river crabs.

"There's a lot of cross-pollination going on," said Meaghan Roddy, a senior international specialist at Phillips, who sold the river crabs, or "He Xie," for \$793,000 on Friday.

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