

Auctions // News

Kicking off New York November sales, Christie's nets healthy \$690m from double-header 20th-century auction

The house's total is up 42% from last year's equivalent sale, and it set new auction records for Leonor Fini and Beauford Delaney

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Adrien Meyer sells Mark Rothko's No 31 (Yellow Stripe) (1958) at Christie's sale of the collection of Robert F. and Patricia G Ross Weis, on 17 November in New York
Courtesy of Christie's

Last night (17 November), Christie's kicked off New York's marquee November auctions with its 20th-century evening sale, plus top-notch offerings from a virtually unknown single-owner American collection. The auction house racked up \$574.7m from both sales, which rises to \$690m with fees. The result well surpassed last November's \$485.9m total (with fees), indicating that the market is regaining confidence. It also lands squarely within its pre-sale estimate of \$358m to \$533m (all estimates calculated without fees).

Of the 80 lots offered, 59 were backed by third-party and house guarantees. Two artist records were set, including for Leonor Fini, whose *Dans la tour* (*Autoportrait avec Constantin Jeleński*) made \$2.5m (with fees), besting the \$2.1m set at Sotheby's in May 2021.



Max Ernst's *Le roi jouant avec la reine* (1961 cast)

Of the three sculptures from the Weis collection, Max Ernst's chocolate brown bronze, *Le roi jouant avec la reine* from a 1961 cast, reflective of the artist's chess obsession and Surrealist roots, sold to the New York- and Las Vegas-based advisor Ralph DeLuca, who is also Sotheby's vice-chairman of popular culture, for \$17m (\$20.1m with fees).

There was no shortage of Modernist masterworks last night, as Piet Mondrian's sleek and geometric *Composition with Red and Blue* (1939-41) sold to another telephone bidder for \$19.5m (\$23m with fees).

The star lot of the evening was Mark Rothko's luminous abstraction *No. 31 (Yellow Stripe)* from 1958, which made \$53.5m (\$62.1m with fees). The unpublished estimate was accurately pegged as in the region of \$50m.

The Weis collection tallied \$184.5m (\$218m with fees), just making its \$183m pre-sale low estimate.

The 20th Century various owners cavalcade followed Weis with a kind of Whitman's Sampler of top-tier works, among them Beauford Delaney's mosaic-patterned *The Sage Black*, a 1967 portrait of his close friend and fellow Paris exile James Baldwin that brought the artist's record, at \$1.2m (\$1.5m with fees).



Beauford Delaney, *The Sage Black* (1967)

The Delaney was followed by John Singer Sargent's richly atmospheric *Gondolier's Siesta* (around 1902-03) in gouache and watercolour on paper that floated to \$6m (\$7.3m with fees), bought by New York dealer Ray Waterhouse on behalf of an American client.

"The seller," said Waterhouse, buttonholed later in the evening as he exited the Rockefeller Center salesroom, "paid \$7.5m for it, so in a sense we paid about the same. I could have gone higher." The Sargent was in the minority of offerings that came to market without a guarantee.

The big guns started booming for the majestic wall power of Joan Mitchell's *Sunflower V* from 1969 from the collection of the late casino diva Elaine Wynn that sold to Madison Avenue dealer Jonathan Boos for \$14m (\$16.7m with fees). Wynn acquired it at Christie's New York in November 2005 for \$1.5m with fees.

Another Wynn entry, Richard Diebenkorn's iconic abstraction suffused with his sophisticated brew of gridded geometries, *Ocean Park #40* from 1971, went for \$14.8m (\$17m with fees). Wynn acquired it from the Anne Marion sale at Sotheby's New York in May 2021, when it fetched \$27.2m with fees, meaning last night's buyer received a serious bargain.

Still on the Wynn trail, Lucian Freud's action packed and humorously titled *The Painter Surprised by a Naked Admirer* (2004-05) sold for \$12m (\$14.4m with fees). Skipping back a few centuries to another side of Wynn's eclectic taste, J.M.W Turner's *The Bright Stone of Honour and the Tomb of Marceau*, from Byron's "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage", realised \$9.8m (\$11.9m with fees). Wynn acquired the Turner at Sotheby's London in July 2017 for £18.5m/\$23.9 million with fees. The Wynn grouping made \$77.8m with fees.

Beyond Wynn, a cluster of classic works from the recently shuttered Kawamura Memorial DIC Museum of Art in Sakura Japan ranged from Claude Monet's signed and dated *Nymphs* from 1907 that brought \$39m (\$45.4m with fees) against an estimate of

\$40m to \$60m, to Pierre-Auguste Renoir's fleshy *Baigneuse* from 1891, first exhibited at Galerie Durand-Ruel in 1892, which sold for \$8.5m (\$10.4m with fees).

The museum, founded by chemicals magnate Katsumi Kawamura in 1990 and now controlled by a Hong Kong-based hedge fund, is studded with masterworks and tonight's sampler is just the tip of that colossal art iceberg.

Another Kawamura highlight was Marc Chagall's massive and multi-figured composition in oil, tempera and sawdust from 1966, *Le Songe du Roi David* from 1949, soared to \$22.5 million (\$26,510,000 with fees) and sold to advisor DeLuca.

Reflecting on the strong prices for the likes of Renoir and Chagall, Max Carter, Christie's chairman of 20th/21st Century Art, Americas, said, "it felt like 1990 again." The Kawamura group tallied \$106.4m with fees.

Among the heap of stellar offerings, Alexander Calder's painted wood, string and wire mobile "Painted Wood" from 1943 and sold by philanthropist and ardent collector Patricia Phelps de Cisneros rose to \$17.2 million (\$20.4m with fees). Created during the Second World War, when metal was scarce for civilians, the hand carved elements bear a wing span of 198cm.

It last appeared at auction at Sotheby's New York in May 1986 when it sold for \$180,000 hammer and was followed by several private transactions until Cisneros's acquisition in 1993.

Another standout was Fernand Leger's *Composition (Nature morte)* from 1914 and better known as his experimental series *Contrastes de forms*, which sold to another telephone bidder for \$16.5m. It was once owned by the noted Cubist art collector Douglas Cooper and sold in 1980 to the late philanthropists/ collectors Arnold and Joan Saltzman whose entries tonight were marketed by Christie's as "Birth of the Modern."



David Hockney, *Christopher Isherwood and Don Bachardy* (1968)

Of all the entries from this sale, none had quite the market buzz as David Hockney's cinematically scaled double-portrait, *Christopher Isherwood and Don Bachardy* from 1968 and long celebrated as the first in his storied double-portrait series. It fetched \$38 million (\$44,335,000 with fees). The painting carried an unpublished estimate in the region of \$40 million.

The painting last came up at auction as the cover lot at Sotheby's New York in November 1985 when it bought in at under its \$625,000 reserve.