

## *Fair-Warning: The Art of Comparative Shopping for Auction Catalogues*

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First of all, I'm delighted to have this opportunity to talk a little bit about what all collections development professionals love most – vicarious travel (in this case time travel) and the treasure hunt, and I thank Terri very much for organizing this forum. For us at the Frick Art Reference Library retrospective acquisitions of auction catalogues is a great luxury, because we are building on enormous strength, polishing one of the jewels in the crown of our prized collections. With more than 80,000 catalogues on our shelves and current subscriptions to nearly 200 houses on four continents, we stake our claim to exceptional depth of coverage that began with the Library's founding 88 years ago.

Whereas a library just starting out would have to purchase whole collections *en bloc* – as the Frick did in 1920, buying the entire collection of auction catalogues owned by the Dutch antiquarian Anton Mensing and a cache of 3500 catalogues – mostly from the 18<sup>th</sup> century – the same year—the Frick now can pick and choose how and when to fill in gaps in the collection. So during the next few minutes, I'd like to outline for you just how our team – and we really do work very much as a team – picks and chooses what we want – and can afford to add, and how our approach to retrospective acquisitions has changed as a result of new technologies available. In doing so, I will offer a handful of case studies to illustrate our methods.

It's not really rocket science and in essence, we still do a lot of the selection and acquiring the old fashioned way, poring over book catalogues of antiquarian dealers. Debbie Kempe is particularly game to do this – often eschewing the crossword puzzle on her commute to work in favor of a catalogue from Cornstock Books in Sydney Australia or some equally remote outlet – and I marvel at some of the arcane and exceptionally rare titles she has ferreted out over the years. In all, during the past three years, for example, we've acquired no less than 138 catalogues for auctions that took place from the 1940s through the 1970s at the James Lawson auction house in Sydney, and we are told by

reliable Australian sources, that our collection now includes dozens of titles not held in any library Down-Under.

Christina Peter and Eric Fabianich – as well as Debbie – have marked great success in finding rare catalogues online. More often than not, the starting point is ABE Books, and if I could point to the single-most significant contribution that has resulted from the creative and judicious application of technology in the book trade it would be ABE Books. This agglomeration of sellers' inventories (they now show records for more 110 million books offered by more than 13,500 book sellers worldwide) makes for one-stop shopping and, by definition, ensures the kind of keen competition among sellers that will keep the prices realistic, if not as low as we'd like. Moreover, finding one catalogue listing in ABE books can lead to further discoveries in that bookseller's inventory, making the virtual bookshop very like the bricks and mortar one in which the proprietor keenly observes what you like and then asks if you might be interested in something else he has in his back room. And lastly, if you don't find what you are looking for on your first visit to ABE's site, you can establish a 'wish list' that promises that you will be notified if one of ABE's booksellers eventually lists a copy of your desideratum.

A perfect example of one of our recent acquisitions that resulted from ABE book searches is a cache of 53 catalogues the Library purchased in 2007 for approximately \$1,500 from Courant d'art, Paris. The catalogues were mostly from German houses and included auctions held at the well-known and ultimately notorious Paul Graupe house in Berlin. In another instance, Eric Fabianich's web searches led us to additional German and Scandinavian catalogues of interest, from houses such as Bukowski in Stockholm, Lempertz in Cologne, Dorotheum in Vienna, Hugo Helbing in Munich, and– all from the 1920s and early '30s. These came from Antiquariat Weinek; Hatt Rare Books; Antiquariat Kastanienhof; and Versandbuchhandlung Kurt Gotz, respectively – so not exactly dealers that are household names to most of us, but do list their inventories in ABE. Since 2004, we have strengthened our efforts to flesh out our holdings of catalogues dealing with the decorative arts, resulting in acquisitions listed by ABE books including a catalogue for the sale of the Roquigny collection of Fainces in 1931 and that

of an anonymous collector “Madame “J”... of French porcelains and tapestries in 1927, purchased from the Librarie Solstices in Paris.

In another case, we got a “tip” of sorts by browsing ABE’s website, because there we found that the Leo Baeck Institute was selling a number of books from its library, including auction catalogues. Knowing that the institute is just blocks away from the Frick, we then contacted them directly and selected a handful of auction catalogues to add to our collection, many of them also for German auctions such as the one from Jacob Hecht in Berlin.

Yet, for all the wonders of the web – and there certainly are many – we have found that there is still no substitute for having good and close contacts with trusted antiquarian book dealers. Never was this more conclusively demonstrated than in 2005, when one of our most reliable London-based dealers called me at home on a Saturday morning to tell me about a sale that would be taking place in a matter of days in the Parisian suburb of Nogent. He underscored that we had no time to waste – Indeed – he promised me this would be the sale of the century for auction catalogues (and with 95 more years to go this was obviously quite a statement!). He was right, of course, because the sale – that was inexplicably *under* publicized, especially to potential American buyers – presented a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. It was the court-ordered bankruptcy sale of the library of the Heim Gallery – described on the title page as the “Bibliothèque d’art d’un grand marchand parisien” and the wealth of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century catalogues was spectacular. But with a collection like the Frick’s, so complete in this area, we had to be highly circumspect about needlessly acquiring costly duplicates.

We therefore needed all hands on deck and normal activities in the Book Department ceased for several days. No external online resource could help us here, but having 100% of our auction catalogue records in SCIPPIO certainly did.

First, I checked those items that I thought would be of interest to us, marking them as high, medium, or low priority. The catalogue was then circulated with these notations to

the members of our Book Selection Committee (consisting of DK, the chief of collections management and access, as well as the head of the Book Department; Lydia Dufour, Chief of Public Services; and Christina Peter, Manager of Acquisitions). Once the wish-list was in place, our team of cataloguers and acquisitions assistants methodically checked SCIPIO to verify if we did or did not have the desired lots.

Thankfully, we already owned the vast majority of them and we breathed a sigh of relief. But several hundred remained, and those then were checked against ART SALES ONLINE – a subscription offered to Frick users that consists of a database with full-text catalogues ranging in date from 1625 to 1860, about which I'll say more in a moment. Our policy was that if a catalogue was held in the ART SALES collections and available in full text, we would not attempt to buy that catalogue – at least not unless extensive price and buyer notations would essentially render it a unique acquisition.

When it came time for the five-day auction, our agent was physically present in Nogent and in regular contact with us, advising us on which lots would be ours and which ones we had lost to higher bidders. As our man on the spot, he was also able to safeguard us from costly mistakes, such as purchasing an item that would not likely be granted an export license. In the end we purchased 112 auction catalogues at that sale, spending more than \$30,000 to do so. One or two of these were collection or dealer catalogues, not strictly speaking records of auctions, but that category, too, is a specialty of the Frick Art Reference Library and essential to the object-oriented research that we support.

This brings up the question of funding such unexpected and often costly retrospective acquisitions. In our case, we can usually tap into special funds for retrospective book acquisitions – one of these is endowed, while another is a board-designated fund. But for the Heim sale in Nogent, the number was too high and we are ever grateful to our Director Anne Poulet, who recognized the importance of quick action and, therefore authorized the purchase, determining that we would ultimately be able to raise special funds for such a worthwhile and momentous acquisition. She was right, and in time we

were able to acquire the catalogues without diminishing either the funds allocated either for current imprints or the funds for occasional retrospective purchases.

This was unquestionably the largest and most important single purchase of older auction catalogues we have made since I became the Chief of Research Collections and Programs thirteen years ago, but there have been others, too, that have been the direct result of good relations with dealers. And it's worth noting that the electronic age has made it much easier for dealers to approach us with potential purchases. This is because they can search our online catalogue **FRESCO** **before** approaching us and thereby narrow the selections to materials they can be fairly sure we want and certain that we don't have. In such a way, one of our favorite New York-based dealers has approached us more than once with an array of catalogues, usually from Central Europe, that would fill in important gaps. In 2006 alone, we purchased \$2000 worth of catalogues from this dealer, mostly auctions that took place in Vienna just before or after the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Parenthetically, I should note that the online element of this transaction is a one-way street, because this particular dealer does not list his inventory on ABE books but does carefully check it against our online catalogue.

In another case, the dealer was NOT a person with whom we had a history, Adam Smith. In 2006 he approached us with a selection of catalogues from which we chose approximately 18 for acquisition, because they would help us fill in gaps for sales concerned primarily with decorative arts in categories held in The Frick Collection. Here, we can only credit the extraordinary reputation of the Frick Library as the matchmaking catalyst. This I might add is a mixed blessing, because we do receive countless phone calls, emails and letters all the time from people eager to sell us run-of-the-mill catalogues that we already have, just because they are aware of the Library's renown as one of the country's most important collections of material on "the commerce of art."

A moment ago I mentioned the ART SALES ONLINE resource, which you may or may not be familiar with. Very few libraries in America subscribe to this database, mostly because of cost. In our case, because the Library had purchased the microfiche sets from

which the database derives, and because of the high usage they got from our readers, we knew that this would be an expense that we could justify. Indeed, readers' natural antipathy to using fiche and the new searchability the database could offer over the microform collections that had been growing since 1987, meant that we could hardly justify NOT subscribing. At first, we were the only library in the New York area to offer this resource, but now it is also available at The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

For those of you who are not familiar with this resource, ART SALES ONLINE, offers records for all auction catalogues listed in Frits Lugt's *Repertoire des catalogues de ventes publiques* published in the 1930s. Ultimately, it aims to provide searchable information about more than 28,000 catalogues from 1625 to 1900.

As you know, the variances in annotations in auction catalogues can be considerable, thus making each annotated copy a unique historical document. Therefore, just as the Frick will acquire a second copy of a catalogue if it bears price and buyer notations, so too did IDC, the company that developed ART SALES ONLINE, include full-text PDFs of ALL annotated catalogues, not just one. As many as four might be available for online consultation.

The one catch about ART SALES, is that not every single catalogue listed in LUgt is included as a full-text pdf. Therefore, you might still have to actually GO to a library to consult the catalogue.

Can that really be such a disadvantage, though? Yes, of course, the scholar in a hurry (oxymoron though it may sound) – who wanted the materials delivered to him “yesterday” will be undone by the omission in ART SALES and will be justifiably upset if the catalogue exists only an ocean away and/or in a library that cannot or will not deliver it through interlibrary loan. But I for one, would still advocate occasional contact with these remarkable artifacts. Showing annotated 18<sup>th</sup> century catalogues to even the most jaded graduate students; indicating to them how these little time capsules help us learn the history – really the experiences of the works of art as objects; and calling

attention to commentaries penned in these small volumes that reflect the values of another age all underscores the value of the book itself, even as the online surrogate can be indispensable at times.

Thus, even as we must be practical about online access and even as we will be ever grateful for new technological advances for book buying itself, I for one am still grateful that sometimes we still have to do our retrospective acquisitions of auction catalogues the old fashioned way, tapping good personal relations to ensure that our Library continues to acquire these precious artifacts, so important to our research community.

#### **To 'Bay or Not to 'Bay (EBay that is!): Maximizing Online Collection Development for the Savvy Shopper**

Until recently, retrospective collection development in art research libraries was limited to specific title searching among a select group of out-of-print book dealers. In this session, acquisitions and collection development librarians from major art research facilities will provide detailed and practical information on various methods to enrich collections by strategically utilizing electronic sources to acquire out-of-print material. Topics to be covered will include best practices for purchasing current and out-of-print material via the Internet, various methods to acquire auction catalogues via the Internet, and subject-specific retrospective collection development.

Speakers:

**Terri Boccia**, Acquisitions librarian, Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute  
*Order Now and Get a Free Ginsu Knife! - Strategies for Stretching Your Acquisitions Budget*

**Inge Reist**, Chief of Research Collections and Programs, and Director of the Center for the History of Collecting in America, Frick Art Reference Library  
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**Laura Harris**, Associate Museum Librarian, Joyce F. Menschel Photography Library, Metropolitan Museum of Art  
*Snapshot on the Market: Acquiring Photography Books Today*