

Anna Seaman "Christie's and Sotheby's make a bid to boost Middle East art." *The National*. (October 2016).

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Michael Jeha, right, the managing director of Christie's Middle East, during an art auction in Dubai.
Satish Kumar / The National

Christie's and Sotheby's make a bid to boost Middle East art

A mother and child sit astride a donkey on the banks of the Nile. In the background, there are laden palm trees and a spartan dwelling.

This is the scene in an exquisite 1927 painting by Egyptian master Mahmoud Said. The work, *L'île Heureuse*, appeared at auction for the first time this month, at the Bonham's Modern and Contemporary Middle Eastern Art sale in London last week.

It sold for £1.2 million (Dh5.3m) – more than four times the pre-sale estimate. This was a record price for an Arab artwork in the past five years, and the highest price ever achieved by a modern Middle Eastern piece sold outside the region.

The auction house reported total sales of £2.07m, hailing this as confirmation of a strong market for Middle Eastern artwork. However, a closer look at the October 12 sale also reveals that several works failed to find buyers.

This week, Sotheby's in London will hold four auctions of art from the Middle East and India.

And tonight in Dubai, Christie's will host its semi-annual Modern and Contemporary Art from the Middle East sale.

Both auction houses have the potential to knock out some big sales, with several notable pieces up for grabs.

One highlight is Christie's presentation of work from the Saqqakhaneh School in Iran, where rare pieces from Parviz Tanavoli and Faramarz Pilaram lead the catalogue.

However, in the current commercial climate, big sales might best be viewed as an anomaly. According to many industry insiders, this has been a difficult year.

"The overall art market has consolidated this year and we anticipated a weakening in sale totals," says Michael Jeha, the managing director of Christie's Middle East.

"However, the drop is mainly due to the effect of less supply in works above £20m. Our core market continues to perform well."

Edward Gibbs, Sotheby's head of department for Middle East and India, echoes these sentiments.

"We have been in a period of significant growth up until this year, and it is not uncommon to see an adjustment after a period of growth," he says.

In other words, sales figures and percentages used as yardsticks to measure the performance of auction houses must be viewed in the correct context.

"The well-established auction salesrooms, such as New York, London and Hong Kong, will always be super strong and will rise incrementally every year," says James Khazaei, one of the region's biggest collectors of Middle Eastern art. "But in the Middle East, we are still in a developing market."

"When I started 15 years ago, there were very few collectors but the pace picked up very quickly – it was like a jump-start. There is a greater depth in the market now and the collector base has expanded, not just regionally but globally."

"The only reason the figures are slightly down is because we have had stellar years running up to this and it is definitely a buyer's market."

Another prominent collector, Ramin Salsali, the owner of the Salsali Private Museum in Dubai, describes the current state of the market as the start of a new phase.

"The first phase was all about hype and, unfortunately, there was a lot of manipulating the market where unreasonable prices were put on works by emerging artists," he says.

"This was artificial value and now prices are falling because of that. However, the next stage, which is much more important, is focused on quality."

Khazaei, a partner in Dubai's Leila Heller Gallery, also emphasises the importance of quality.

"In order to have a good sale, you have to have the right product," he says. "In my opinion, at the moment the consignors or collectors are not willing to let go of their grade A pieces because they know the value that these pieces may reach in the future and are happy to hold. Other works are not necessarily selling as well."

That is not to say sales are not being made. Khazaei points out that some take place behind closed doors – either in private transactions within the auction houses or at galleries – that have reached higher figures but not been publicly recorded.

"There are many reasons and personal preferences as to why people choose not to buy art at auction, not just because of the works available," he says.

"Some don't like to pay the premium, some don't like buying on a public platform, and for others, it is question of timing."

William Lawrie, the owner of Lawrie Shabibi gallery in Dubai's Alserkal Avenue, agrees.

"Auctions are only part of the overall picture," he says. "They are a big part of it but in my opinion there are certain sets of buyers: those who buy at auction, and those who buy from galleries, art fairs and online respectively. And while there is some overlap in the case of top pieces, they can be quite distinct."

Opening the market

Like any commercial market, the art world thrives on competition. This year, Sotheby's announced that it would be opening an office in Dubai imminently. Their space in Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC), just a stone's throw from Christie's Middle East headquarters, will be up and running by the end of the year, as will a private gallery for exhibition previews ahead of international sales.

"We have many long-standing and valid relationships in this region and many important clients," says Gibbs.

be a tailored service."

Sotheby's arrival has been welcomed for helping to open the Gulf market even further.

"To date, Christie's have dominated the market in Dubai so I think it is very healthy that Sotheby's have come to challenge this," says Khazaei.

"It is a fresh sign in the market that a major player has come, and shows the demand is there."

While healthy competition should have a wide effect, Lawrie says that as a gallerist focusing primarily on cutting-edge contemporary art, the move will not greatly affect his business.

"Sotheby's coming to Dubai is a positive sign, but currently our focus as a contemporary gallery is so different to that of the auction houses that there is not always such a large degree of overlap," he says. "You don't see so much contemporary art in the auctions these days, which is unfortunate because the past decade has been a particularly rich period for the production of contemporary art in the region."

Education is key

This underlines his point that auction prices should not be viewed as the sole measure of the health of the regional arts scene.

Khazaei points out that educating people about art is just as important.

"Education of the market began with the galleries and the belief that they had in emerging artists," he says. "They nurtured them, understood them and developed them, giving back to the community as a result."

"Dubai is a very small city and there is almost a common goal among the galleries to give these artists an elevated platform, which is reflected in the supportive environment that has grown up in Alserkal Avenue."

It is an environment that not only nurtures artists but also prospective buyers. Learning about new artists and seeing them presented in consistently top-quality exhibitions can be a catalyst that turns an art enthusiast into a collector.

The auction houses also place a great emphasis on education, which is commendable. Every Christie's catalogue is a gold mine of information.

"We have documented more than 3,000 works of art in 10 years," says Hala Khayat, the head of sales at Christie's Middle East. "We are building the market from an art-history perspective and that is something I am really proud of."

From a market perspective, there will always be fluctuations in sales, but if there is first-rate art, buyers will seek it out.

The key, then, is to develop the region from an emerging market to a global player – and that comes from focusing on creating future collectors, through the combined efforts of galleries that put on excellent shows and auction houses educating their clients.