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## Art auctions go online

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2000-09-28 17:40:00

The world of art auctioning has headed into cyberspace. Instead of waving a bidding paddle in a crowded auction room, collectors and dealers need only click a computer mouse for access to relatively cheap collectables.

Paintings, prints and photographs, books and manuscripts, ceramics and glass, furniture and decorative art, jewellery and silver go under virtual hammers daily on the web.

Among the world's bigtime auction houses, only Sotheby's has set up an online sales site, although a couple of Australia's smaller firms and now a Sydney company have also moved into the field. ArtSell Art Market, claims to be the first Australian site to run weekly art auctions through a deal with the Fairfax-owned (publishers of The Age) [Sold.com.au](http://Sold.com.au). ArtSell.com was developed by Sydney dealer Chris Michael and Jarrod McGrath, who has a background in sales and business systems. They list at least 25 lots of fine art on the Sold.com site every Monday. Each painting or print is described and illustrated, along with the minimum bid required.

McGrath says the company guarantees the authenticity of all works and, unlike Sotheby's, does not charge a buyer's premium. A seller's commission of 10percent does apply.

The two partners say that by auctioning works on Sold.com they are making "highquality investment art" available to the general public at up to half the normal retail price. The top sale achieved after four months is \$12,000 for an Andy Warhol print of Marilyn Monroe, which was sold to a Sydney collector recently. Most other sales have been well below \$1000.

Fewer than half the lots sell each week but McGrath believes this will improve as consumer confidence in the Internet grows and more investors discover "the convenient service and great prices".

Last year, Sotheby's decided it was losing out on millions of dollars of lowvalue art works that were going to other firms' auctions. In January, the firm signed a 10year deal with online bookseller Amazon.com to set up an online art auction business. The system is restricted to America, Canada, Britain and Germany but

the firm's Australian managing director, Paul Sumner, says the Asia Pacific region should become involved by early next year.

"We've already signed up a large number of associates who will act on our behalf," Sumner says. These "associates" are among 4500 reputable dealers around the world. Turnaround time from posting a work on the web and its sale varies from 12 to 20 days. The current average price of lots sold is \$US1600 (about \$A2900).

The authenticity, condition, and delivery of items sold are guaranteed but the buyer's premium of 10per cent applies on top of a successful bid. Associates pay a "transaction" fee of \$US8 (about \$A14.50) plus a commission of 2.95per cent and they then impose their own charges before paying the seller.

"At present, we have only two decorative art and jewellery sales in Australia a year," Sumner says. "So the new system gives clients the opportunity to put their works in front of millions of possible buyers and sell them much more quickly - particularly things in the \$500 to \$2000 price range we wouldn't normally handle."

Sydney saleroom Lawson's beat Sotheby's to the online world after joining American Internet auctioneers eBay last October. eBay claims to have 5million registered users who visit its "great collections" artauction site. Lawson's managing director James Badgery says the company is among 15 auction houses around the world in partnership with eBay.

Unlike Sotheby's and Christie's, Lawson's holds weekly auctions as well as periodic fine art sales. But Badgery says the firm believes the "great collections" site offers its vendors access to the world market.

"I must say, though, that our clients have shown very little interest. We're still trying to work out what sells best online and so far we haven't had a great deal of success with pictures."

eBay does not charge a buyer's premium and Badgery says sellers' commissions are much the same as the firm normally charges. Lawson's is upgrading its local web page to include catalogues and may establish a separate Australian online auction site, he says.

Christie's and DeutscherMenzies have opted out of online selling, with Christie's claiming it abandoned the idea because "it was only concerned with the top end of the art market". The firm's Londonbased head office puts sales catalogues online and offers other resources to clients over the Net but does not auction goods.

Although Jarrod McGrath is confident of the success of artsell.com, online auctioning has yet to prove highly profitable.

ArtSell Art Market auctions are listed at [www.Sold.com.au/artsell.asp](http://www.Sold.com.au/artsell.asp) or follow the links on [www.ArtSell.com](http://www.ArtSell.com). Lawsons' Great Collections site is at [www.ebaygreatcollections.com/index2.html](http://www.ebaygreatcollections.com/index2.html) while Sotheby's can be found at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) and at [www.Sotheby's.com](http://www.Sotheby's.com)

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