

# CORRESPONDENCE

## London Letter

From time to time I have contributed to the magazine brief reports on the London art market as revealed in the summer season (*Arts of Asia* September–October 2010, pages 140–145; and September–October 2013, page 8). As a result several readers contacted me to say that they really appreciated this information. The purpose of this letter is to summarise the state of the London market in 2015 and to identify future trends where that is possible.

As in previous years, three major fairs played a dominant role in the season. **Art Antiques London (AAL)** was the first to open its doors, running from 11th to 18th June in the glorious setting of Kensington Gardens. This is the fair created by Brian and Anna Haughton and now in its sixth year. The Haughtons are widely considered the world's best fair organisers and here they created a stylish—and very British—event. Exhibitors included Marchant, D. and M. Freedman, and Jonathan Hope, who did very well with his fine quality Indonesian pieces. Berwald Oriental Art, Gibson Antiques and Jacqueline Simcox combined to create a spectacular display and, as a trio, enjoyed a successful fair.

**The Olympia International Art and Antiques Fair**, now in its 43rd year, ran from 18th to 28th June. Visitor numbers here were up 11% on 2014 at a record 29,473. The Fair Director, Mary Claire Boyd, emphasised that the change of date in 2015 was crucial to the fair's success, bringing Olympia into line with Masterpiece and other important events. I noticed that this year many of the regular Oriental art dealers had moved to the other fairs, so that there was a limited selection of Chinese and Japanese art on view. To compensate for this, 2015 saw the welcome return of HALI to Olympia, after a ten-year absence, and there were fine carpets, rugs and tribal textiles to be seen, for example at the stand of Galerie Arabesque.

**Masterpiece**, the grandest of the London fairs, ran from 24th June to 1st July. In its early years this fair suffered from a certain ambiguity: was this a luxury lifestyle event or a serious art fair on the lines of Maastricht? I felt that in this sixth edition CEO Nazy Vassegh had struck the right balance; some very serious players, such as picture dealer Richard Green, had come on board. During the Preview I noted Javanese gold jewellery at Susan Ollemans; jade dagger handles with Amir Mohtashemi; contemporary Chinese art at Michael Goedhuis; and an elegant combination of Oriental and Tribal objects at P. and O. Mestdagh. Hong Kong collectors should be aware that Martyn Gregory offered some remarkable artists' views charting the development of Hong Kong from 1846 to 1970. Finally, Asian Art in London had a special showcase featuring participants in their forthcoming autumn event (5th to 14th November 2015).

What was the overall feeling created by these three fairs? I would say that the very best and rarest pieces were actively competed for and even achieved record prices. As with the London salerooms, the middle market remains



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Ivory *sarinda* from Bijapur, India. 17th century. Length 36 cm. Oliver Hoare



Junks and sampans at Canton. 18th century. Gouache. 50 x 81 cm. Martyn Gregory

fragile and many dealers operating in this area are experiencing difficult times.

A striking feature of London in 2015 has been a plethora of smaller fairs and other events. This is especially true of the photography market which continues to show a dramatic increase in demand for both vintage and contemporary photographs. During May there were no fewer than three photography fairs. The star event, attracting some 20,000 visitors, was Photo London, held at Somerset House from 20th to 24th May.

In my view the most fascinating of London's summer events was the eclectic gathering of treasures assembled by Oliver Hoare and entitled *Every Object Tells a Story*. This show was presented in the elegant venue of 33 Fitzroy Square from 6th May to 26th June. In his early twenties Hoare became Christie's first Islamic Art expert and in this role his area of expertise stretched from Spain to China. His exhibition included a wealth of treasures from this vast area. I especially admired the 13th Dalai Lama's double bass (he was an avid jazz enthusiast); an array of coco-de-mer containers, including a wonderful example carved in Burma; a Chinese 17th century foot-massager; and the first European plans of Mecca and Medina (1664–1680 AD). In addition, there were curiosities and rarities of all kinds from

the natural world, including a bone of the Dodo and a lovely green jade pebble from Khotan, China.

For *Arts of Asia* readers who missed Oliver Hoare's show the sumptuous catalogue (a work of art in itself) is highly recommended. Here is real scholarship, lightly worn, and laced with good-humoured wit and wisdom. The catalogue also contains a moving tribute to a man who was arguably the most remarkable and idiosyncratic art collector of our time. Sheikh Saoud bin Mohammed bin Ali Al-Thani was based in London and died on 9th November 2014 at the age of only 48. He was appointed Qatar's Minister of Culture, Arts and Heritage from 1997 and set about collecting for the state-owned museums—and for himself—with relentless passion and energy. His enthusiasms included Islamic art, Pacific fish hooks, Chinese antiquities, Amazonian parrots, netsuke, antique bicycles, rare photographs, and much much more...

It has been widely reported that within a few years the Sheikh spent at least US\$1.5 billion on his collections. His passing has been a considerable blow to the London art market, but by no means a fatal one, as this summer's events have confirmed.

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