

How has the Covid-19 pandemic impacted on the business and the industry as a whole?

DB: "This situation has impacted everyone within the wider art community and we must work collaboratively and support one another to shape the future. At Christie's, we have already begun to play our part. For example, in October in London we are collaborating with

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"Art fairs, which have thrived in a culture of lightning-pace, multi-tasking, no-time-to-chat convenience now seem like fairytales; and I think this will have a great impact on the quality of work being produced and seen.

"The gallery system that is so often pre-occupied with scale as a measure of success (the more galleries you have and the more you do, the better) is also adjusting its focus back

BIG QUESTIONS

the African art fair 1-54 to help power them online and hold a physical exhibition opening in our King Street saleroom on October 6. We have also been involved with charity initiatives through the summer, including ones being held online in September with Smart Works and Marie Curie.

"As a business, we are looking at the positives and opportunities and also have significantly accelerated digital innovation – 109 online sales have been held so far this year (to August 2020) – 99 of which have been since lockdown, and this is already more than we held across the whole of 2019."

LG: "The main impact on our industry is that travel has been restricted. Collectors and curators who would normally travel around the world to see and buy art can no longer just book a ticket to come to London, see what's on offer and return home with their purchases within hours or days. It also had an impact on the secondary market, as dealers of pre-contemporary art, in particular, tend to rely on auctions and visiting collectors to acquire artworks for their stock."

JK: "It's had a seismic impact in shifting people's understanding of what is really necessary. As the world has taken a collective deep breath in, artists have been able to slow down and focus on their practice and what it really means to them, rather than simply producing enough to fill the ever-mounting demand of gallery shows, commissions and art fairs.

Covid-19 has brought huge challenges to the art world. Galleries have been forced to close their doors, postpone art fairs and work to establish new ways of doing business. Reyhaan Day hosts a virtual roundtable with some of Mayfair and St James's prominent art experts to ask how the industry is traversing the current landscape – and finds much to be hopeful about

to quality over quantity, and reconciling with the fact that both fiscally and practically, you don't necessarily need five-plus galleries worldwide to make a significant impact for your artists."

TS: "Initially, the pandemic halted business completely, as we all tried to comprehend what was happening and how we could keep safe in business and at home. However, it became clear that business was going ahead and clients were actively looking for works of art. We are fortunate to have a good online presence through our own website and the various organisations and art fairs we belong to.

"Lockdown gave us the opportunity to enhance this and learn new ways to showcase our works online. Since the gallery has opened again, we have continued to show virtual tours online of all exhibitions and regularly take works on approval to clients who are unable to come to the gallery."

SO: "The biggest change for the gallery as a result of the pandemic has probably been to our schedule, and this extends to the rest of the industry as well. There is a certain pace to each year in the art world, as every season brings a new edition of annual fairs, sales and exhibitions, which usually coincide all at once and lead to hundreds of collectors, curators and connoisseurs darting around the city to take it all in.

"With the restrictions on travel and group sizes that have been, and continue to be, in place, the art world was forced

At the 'table'

to adapt to the changing times – and to find a way to meet their visitors in a new space, mainly their homes. So, as the fairs have moved online, the tempo of our autumn season has shifted quite considerably.”

Do you think the way people discover and consume art will be changed because of the crisis?

DB: “This time has enabled Christie’s new opportunities to actively engage with collectors virtually, on a global scale like never before, allowing specialists to ‘gather’ collectors across time zones through digital innovations, auctions, webinars and social media platforms. We had to move our business online during lockdown, but are looking forward to a strong set of live sales in London.

“Going forward, there will be a balanced approach to live and online auctions, tailoring sales to meet our clients’ wishes, and helping them engage and interact with objects as they wish. During lockdown, we held some strong online sales with 31 per cent of all buyers being existing clients in our traditional auctions, who bought in our online channel for the first time – their average spend was \$44,000. This shows that their buying habits are flexible and they are happy to transact at the top level. Many of our clients already purchase sight-unseen, thanks to the meaningful relationships our specialists at Christie’s have built with clients; and thereby our clients trust in the pieces that we offer for sale. Many can comfortably transact without seeing pieces in person.”

LG: “Certainly, the discovery process has changed. It would have changed anyway, but the pandemic has turned digital platforms into our favourite destinations to browse art –

with a familiar, friendly and accessible quality that perhaps was missing before.

“Some of the initiatives were a mere experiment for cutting-edge galleries only a few months ago, but are now being adapted and embraced by most galleries, irrespective of the age of the art they are trying to sell.

“I think buyers of pre-contemporary art will probably still need to get used to the new way of buying – but, ultimately, it only really changes the discovery process. Most collectors or museums wouldn’t just walk into a gallery and buy something the first time they see it. Now, they see art from the comfort of their own space; they can read all the essays and watch videos that come with it; they can spend time doing their own research and can then

approach the dealer to arrange how to see the work and make a purchase. The buying process may take some time – but probably not much longer than in the past.”

JK: “Yes – social media will play a bigger role and local galleries and institutions will be able to thrive again, as people are less quick to jump on a 12-hour flight to see a show across the other side of the world.”

TS: “Yes I believe so. Clients have really enjoyed the videos and added content; however, experiencing a work of art is visceral. All the above can enable a client to decide whether they would like to view the work – but, unless it is very similar to something they have already seen, it is almost impossible to duplicate the experience of seeing it in the flesh. We are, therefore, making it much easier for clients who cannot come to the gallery to view works of art at home.”

SO: “Yes and no. It is undeniable that the art world, like many other industries, will be forever changed as a result of the pandemic – but not necessarily in a totally negative way. The ability to discover artworks has become even

more accessible during this period, as many institutions have also made the choice to further their digital outreach alongside the efforts of the commercial

art world. Thus, the opportunities for discovery are endless. Yet, when it comes to

the consumption of art, digital can never fully replace the experience of viewing an artwork in person, or in print for that matter. Art is

multi-dimensional, and even the highest-resolution image cannot convey its many facets without losing something in the process.

So, while people may be stuck clicking through artworks on their computers for now, there will always be a desire to go out and experience them first-hand.”

HENRY MOORE IN THE CURRENT MODERN BRITISH EXHIBITION: RECLINING FIGURE: HOLLES, 1975. © OSBORNE SAMUEL GALLERY



What initiatives or innovations have been introduced in the wake of the pandemic to weather the storm? Have the restrictions pushed you towards positive, new ways of doing business?

DB: "Christie's online sales have been a trusted sales platform since the inaugural online sale for *The Collection of Elizabeth Taylor* in 2011. In these challenging times, our digital platform has provided a vital channel to communicate and engage with our clients.

"All of the lessons learnt across this time, the new tools we invested in and the enhancements made to existing digital options were used for the ONE sale on July 10 – the first of its kind with four salerooms and bidding from auctioneers in Hong Kong, Paris, London and New York competing with online bidders. It totalled \$420,941,042 and over 80,000 people tuned in to watch the live stream.

"We've also sold three lots for over \$1 million online since lockdown including a 28ct diamond valued at more than \$1 million, which sold for \$2,115,000, setting the new record for a jewel sold in an online auction; and L.S. Lowry's *Coming From the Match*, which fetched the highest price for a work in an online-only auction at Christie's – £2,051,250."

LG: "London Art Week decided in March that we needed to improve our online presence and we managed to set up LAW Digital, which turned our established physical event into an online one. Our galleries are very well set up for social distancing, so did actually open to visitors, and we managed to create a platform for dealers and auction houses to collaborate

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and share highlights from their exhibitions with collectors, curators and art lovers in general."

JK: "The industry has finally and almost begrudgingly embraced social media – though it's mostly a case of too little, too late. Collectors are more comfortably transacting online than ever before. More work is accessible and exposed now than ever before; but the caveat to that is the competitive and 'viral' nature of the online space, which can have a detrimental effect on an artist's output if not carefully managed."

TS: "It is not one particular solution but the sum of them all: we have created a new website with more dynamic content; we have filmed videos for exhibitions and also for singular works of art; our hardback catalogues have

always been available to view in full online, but we have now included virtual tours of the gallery. This, added to a very personal and longstanding relationship with many of our clients, has enabled us to weather the storm."

SO: "We have worked very hard to update all aspects of our digital presence, in an effort to continue offering the best experience for our clients that we could. Every summer we hold a themed exhibition in the gallery to coincide with London Art Week; and, while we still did so this year, it looked slightly different. For the first time, we took the show online with a digital exhibition and accompanying digital catalogue. Both featured prominently on our new website, which showcased a virtual tour of the gallery so that clients could visit if they didn't make it to London.

"Our exhibition ran in tandem with LAW Digital. By revamping their online platform and creating curated viewing rooms, LAW Digital worked to maintain the camaraderie and inclusivity which is at the heart of the bi-annual event. This new aspect to LAW provided a chance for many dealers

who had been unable to participate previously a chance to finally join in, as distance was no longer a factor in participation. It also offered those dealers without a prominent digital presence the opportunity to meet with clients in a new way. And, as a result, the event was able to extend far beyond St. James's and Mayfair.

"One of the biggest challenges we have had to negotiate in response to the pandemic was how to engage with our clients online, so that we did not lose the interpersonal relationships and interactions that are at the heart of what we do. If someone comes into the gallery or onto our stand at a fair, we have an opportunity to tell them more about the drawings we are showing and the stories behind them, as well as a bit about the gallery itself.

"We created short informative videos to highlight several of the drawings included in our summer exhibition, which we shared online. The hope was to bridge the gap between the digital and the physical."

Is the art world in a healthy place despite the challenges of the last few months?

DB: "Consignments for our sales in October are strong and show there is confidence among consignors. History shows that the art market has a natural resilience. There is a persistent appetite of collectors for works with impeccable provenance and fair estimates... we're quietly optimistic."

LG: "The art world, like all of us, had to learn to adapt – but did so surprisingly quickly. There will be less opportunities to meet new buyers at fairs but, by raising awareness on digital, specialist platforms that are actually more approachable, art dealers will reach new buyers, and they will then have the opportunity to talk to potential buyers



TOP: LOUIS WELDEN HAWKINS (1849-1910), JEANNE SILVAIN, 1909, STEPHEN ONGPIN GALLERY; ABOVE: MAURO C MARTINEZ, UNIT LONDON

in the safety of their own galleries."

JK: "I'm not sure the art world could ever be described as healthy – but the artists and galleries that are genuinely talented, important and culturally-relevant are doing well. The market is really strong and the quality of the shows is continuing to be exceptional – so it's certainly not all doom and gloom!"

TS: "Osborne Samuel deal in modern British paintings and sculpture. The majority are blue-chip artists with international reputations and long track records. Works like this in our field

continue to remain in a healthy place. There are riskier parts of the art market, for example, some sections of the contemporary market, where the upside has been greater and, no doubt, the downside will follow suit."

SO: "I would say so. The art world has always worked to adapt to the times and the current pandemic is no exception. The technologies that have been developed and implemented will be utilised for many years to

come, as the needs of the market have evolved and continue to change. While there is no doubt that the art world on the other side of this will be different from the one we knew earlier in the year, there is a certain resilience that prevails.

"The auctions that have been held since the pandemic – mostly online – have on the whole been successful, and that bodes well for the market as a whole. I think, most importantly, however, in our field of master drawings, we are lucky in that most of our clients are long-time collectors who are passionately interested and involved in the field, and are not collecting mainly for investment or for status. Our client base is still keen on collecting, so we believe they will continue to support our activities."