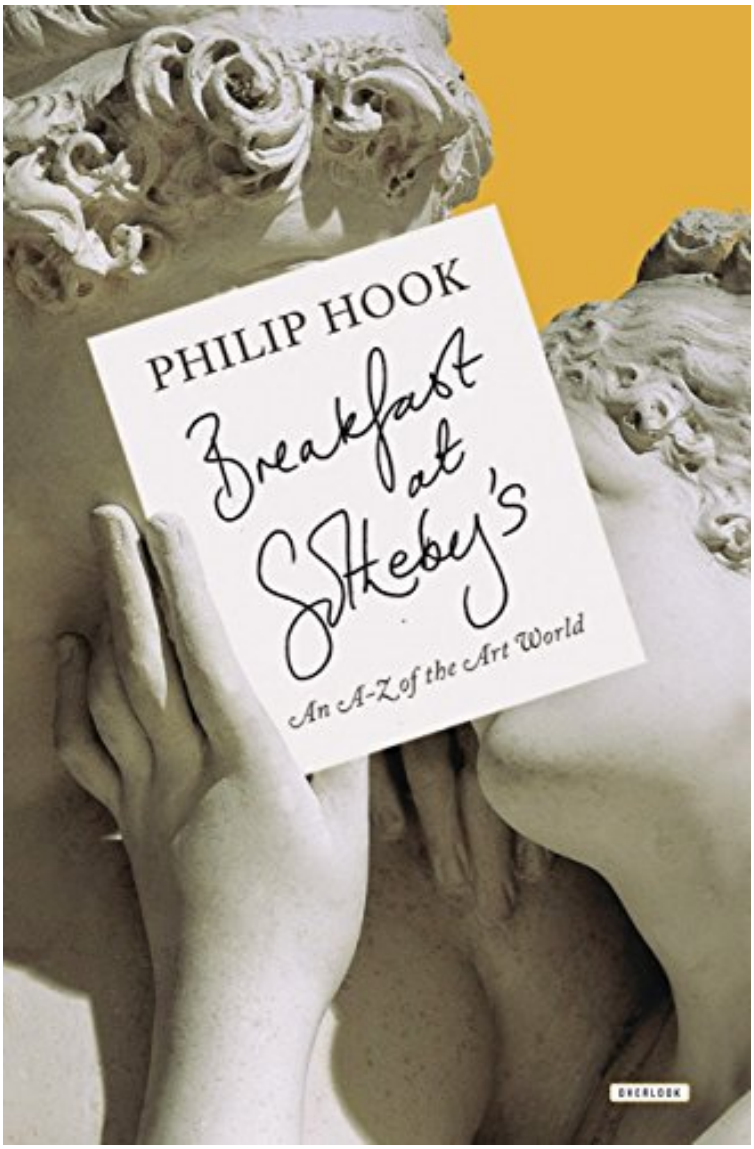
Breakfast at Sotheby's: An A-Z of the Art World



Par Philip Hook
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[Mobile library] Breakfast at Sotheby's: An A-Z of the Art World

Par Philip Hook : Breakfast at Sotheby's: An A-Z of the Art World before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Breakfast at Sotheby's: An A-Z of the Art World:

Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurWhen you stand in front of a work of art in a museum or exhibition, the first two questions you normally ask yourself are 1) Do I like it? and 2) Whos it by?When you stand in front of a work of art in an auction room or dealers gallery, you ask these two questions followed by others: How much is it worth? How much will it be worth in five or ten years time? And what will people think of me if they see it hanging on my wall? Breakfast at Sothebys is an alphabetical guide to how people reach answers to such questions, and how in the process art is given a financial value. Based on Philip Hooks thirty-five

years experience of the art market, Breakfast at Sothebys explores the artist and his hinterland (including definitions for -isms, middle-brow artists, Gericault, and suicides), subject and style (from abstract art and banality through surrealism and war), wall-power, provenance, and market weather. Comic, revealing, piquant, splendid, and occasionally absurd, Breakfast at Sothebys is a book of pleasure and intelligent observation, as engaged with art as it is with the world that surrounds it.ExtraitCopyrightIntroductionWhen you stand in front of a work of art in a museum or exhibition, the first two questions you ask yourself are normally 1. Do I like it? and 2. Whos it by? When you stand in front of a work of art in an auction room or dealers gallery, you also ask yourself the same two questions first; but they are followed by others, rather less noble-minded, such as: how much is it worth? How much will it be worth in five or ten years time? And, what will people think of me if they see it hanging on my wall?This dictionary is a guide to how people reach answers to those questions, and how in the process art is given a financial value. I have spent more than thirty-five years working in the art market, first at Christies, then as a dealer, and latterly at Sothebys. That is my excuse for writing a book about the art world that investigates in prurient detail the guilty but ever-fascinating relationship between art and money. It is divided into five parts, each one of which analyses a different factor in what determines the amount a buyer ends up paying for a work of art. In the process I have undertaken a highly subjective and shamelessly self-indulgent tour of those aspects of art and the art world that have struck me over the years as comic, revealing, piquant, splendid or absurd.The first part examines the artist and his hinterland. Whos it by? The identity of the artist and his perceived importance in the scheme of art history is a factor that has an understandable influence on buyers and the price they pay for a painting; but there is also a back story to artists lives that affects our appreciation of them and the works they produce, a romance made up of the glamour and myth of artistic creation. Quite apart from the art historical importance of say Van Gogh and his significance as the originator of Expressionism, there is a tragic romance to his life that enhances his value to the collector both emotionally and financially.The second section looks at what subjects and styles are in demand. The answer to the question Do I like it? is influenced by ones own personal predilections, but also by a broader artistic taste that is constantly evolving. At different times in history people want different things from art, so that what artists paint and how they paint it can to succeeding generations vary in desirability and financial value. But within that evolution, certain subjects and styles emerge as selling better than others with a reasonable consistency. This part of the dictionary attempts to analyse the factors in play, and to look at artistic taste as manifested now, in the early years of the twenty-first century. A warning in advance: the determinants of what sells and what doesnt are occasionally subtle ones, but more often alarmingly simplistic.The third part, Wall-Power, looks in more detail at what makes us like a painting. What gives it the impact that makes us want to own it (and attracts a crowd of other admirers too so that it sells for appreciably more than we can afford)? Of course, surpassing artistic quality is the element always reflected positively in the price a work of art realizes. And, at the very top of the quality tree, the price differential between something that is very good and something that is superlative is astonishinglylarge. That gap is something I find oddly vindicating about the market: in this respect it has its values right. It recognizes the very best and sets it very emphatically apart.But how does it do it? Artistic quality is notoriously difficult to pin down. Certain contributory factors are examined here: a works colouring, its composition, its finish, its emotional impact, its relationship to nature, and to other works of art. Conversely, on what grounds do we have reservations about a painting that will negatively affect its price? Is it unfinished, or too dark, or heavily restored, or depicting something unpleasant? Could it be, horror of horrors, a fake?In the same way that an artists back story affects our perception of him and his work, so does the back story of the physical work of art: whose collection it has been in, where its been exhibited, which dealers have handled it. So the fourth part looks at provenance. If the work you are buying comes from a distinguished private collection, it will raise the price because previous ownership by a very eminent collector is an imprimatur of the works quality. A Czanne from the Mellon Collection will be worth more than the same picture from an unnamed private collection. Similarly, to those in the know, certain names appearing in a pictures provenance can trigger alarm signals. These are the dealers that research has identified as having trafficked in looted art during the Second World War, for instance. Unless it can be proved that the painting was not stolen from a Jewish collector, its value may be seriously reduced by its handling by one of these dealers. It may not be saleable at all. And the name of Field Marshal Gring in the list of previous owners of your picture even if he came by it legally isnt necessarily a bonus.Whats it worth? Art is assessed and changes hands in a constantly evolving market environment. That environment is the product of a vast range of elements: economic, political, cultural, emotional and psychological. It is

influenced by the marketing of dealers and auction houses, by the whims of collectors and the caprice of critics, by what people see in museums and on television, by their own individual aspirations. The final section of the dictionary, Market Weather, examines some of the varied factors that contribute to the storms and sunshine of the art-world climate.Attaching financial value to works of art is not an entirely uncontroversial activity. But on the whole I think the art trade performs a necessary function and does it no worse than a number of other respectable commercial institutions. It has certainly provided me with an interesting life. I have had close encounters with a large number of great works of art (and a large number of less good ones, too, which is also salutary). I have met some extraordinary (and extraordinarily rich) people. This dictionary is an anthology of what I have learned from them. And, having spent two happy decades working for Sothebys, I should of course point out that the conclusions I draw are my own and not necessarily the views of my long-suffering employers.The Artist and His HinterlandBohemianismBrandingBrueghelCreative BlockDegasDiarists (Artists as)Female ArtistsFictional ArtistsGricaultImages (Famous)-IsmsJail (Artists in)MadnessMiddlebrow ArtistsModels and MusesQuarters and ColoniesSpoofsSuicidesBohemianismIris Barry, having given birth to the child of the Vorticist painter Wyndham Lewis, returned from hospital to his studio with the new baby but had to wait outside until he had finished having sex with Nancy Cunard. When Vlaminck sold a painting unexpectedly, he took the cash and went on a three-day drinking bout with Modigliani; what money they didnt drink they folded into paper aeroplanes and sent gliding into the trees along Boulevard Raspail. To paint The Raft of the Medusa, Thodore Gricault shaved his head, cut himself off from his friends, put a bed in his studio and worked there unremittingly for ten months. After the completion of the picture he suffered a total nervous collapse.Artists live differently from ordinary people. This was recognized early on: in one of Franco Sacchettis novelle, written in Italy in the late fourteenth century, a painters wife exclaims: You painters are all whimsical and of ever-changing mood; you are constantly drunk and not even ashamed of yourselves! Five hundred years later Edvard Munchs father, in classic bourgeois horror at his sons choice of profession, said that to be an artist was like living in a brothel. The alienation of artists is grimly described by the British painter Keith Vaughan in 1943: We see them at odds with themselves and others, perpetually lonely and ailing, carved out with wretchedness, their manhood falling to pieces about them and only the bright jewel of their creative rage burning in the centre of the wreckage.Bohemianism is an expression of the artists otherness. In its modern form, it flowered in the nineteenth century as a growth of the Romantic Movement. The artist was cast as tortured hero, a bohemian in the sense of being a gypsy, one who led a vagabond or irregular and unconventional life; not necessarily by choice, but because he had to, being driven by an irresistible creative impulse. Heavy drinking, sexual promiscuity, drug-taking, flirtations with madness, and eccentricities of appearance and dress were deemed the symptoms of creativity; there were even those who believed that indulgence in such things was creativitys precondition, and steeled themselves to drink more or to grow their hair long (or cut it short if they were girls) in order to become great artists.Henry Murger, who wrote La Vie de Bohme in 1843, is generally credited with having invented bohemia. He fixed it as immutably centred in the Latin Quarter, declaring that it only exists and is only possible in Paris. Arriving there from Germany in 1900, Paula Modersohn-Becker observed that the painters all wore long hair, brown velvet suits, or strange togas on the street, with enormous fluttering bow ties altogether a rather remarkable bunch. By then the uniform of the antiuniform was established.Other bohemias sprang up later to rival Paris Berlin before the First World War, perhaps, and New York in the 1960s. The British competed gamely, and produced a few fully fledged bohemians of their own such as Augustus John and Wyndham Lewis. But in the ranks beneath them, there was a lack of commitment, and a sanitized, romanticized, peculiarly British bohemia came into being. George du Mauriers Trilby, a successful late-nineteenth-century novel, features three impossibly hearty British art students in Paris, and portrays the Latin Quarter as a place where drink flowed, but no one got drunk, no one drank absinthe, and no man or woman ever had sex. Rather than Paris, British artists of the time were actually more likely to gravitate to summer colonies in places like St Ives and Newlyn in Cornwall to paint and live unconventionally [see Quarters and Colonies below]; but despite valiant attempts at bohemianism the British ended up playing rather a lot of golf and cricket. In 1942 Osbert Sitwell told George Orwell that in the event of a Nazi invasion the Home Guard had orders to shoot all artists. Orwell observed that in Cornwall that might be no bad thing.Bohemians at play: artists misbehaving as dawn breaks over Paris (Jean Braud, Le Petit Matin, aprs la fte Montmartre, oil on canvas, 1907)According to Murger, bohemia is a stage in artistic life; it is the Preface to the Academy, the Hotel Dieu, or the Morgue. Part of your duty as an artist was to shock the bourgeoisie, to position yourself remorselessly against convention.

This was all very well up to a point, until you found that the bourgeoisie were actually also your buyers. Then you sold out and joined the Academy. Or you didnt sell out, and either went mad or died. Another exit from bohemia was via the domesticity of marriage, or more specifically of parenthood. That was often a dispiriting cul-de-sac. Nothing, in Cyril Connollys words, is more inimical to artistic endeavour than the pram in the hall.The ultimate bohemian, in his pursuit of a primitive life, uncontaminated by industrial and bourgeois values, was Gauguin, who escaped to the South Seas [see Part II, Exoticism]. Then there was Augustus John, who literally became a gypsy and learned the Romany language, wandering the country in an itinerant, rootless existence trailing mistresses and children, which was a good way of dealing with the pram-in-the-hall problem. Modigliani may have stayed mostly in Paris but set standards of excess that have remained a benchmark ever since. Munch, perhaps finally heeding his fathers strictures, in later life vowed to reform. He would confine himself, he said, to tobacco-free cigars, alcohol-free drinks and poison-free women.Flaubert was an advocate of restraint: Be regular and ordinary in your life, like a bourgeois, so that you can be violent and original in your works, he advised. There is an interesting subsection of artists for whom the bohemian way of life has held no attraction, who have rebelled against the paradoxical uniformity of its eccentricity. These artists make no connection between the production of good work and unconventional behaviour, and deliberately adopt a conservative, bourgeois lifestyle. Pierre Bonnard, for instance, lived a private life of quiet domesticity apparently punctuated (to judge from his subject matter) only by the regularity with which his wife took baths. Magritte maintained a deeply conventional appearance and favoured a bowler hat. Sir Alfred Munnings whose subjects were mostly horses dressed and lived like an English country squire, and once memorably suggested that if he ever met Picasso hed give him a good kicking.Today there is a group of successful portraitists in London known as the Pinstripe School, because they are rarely seen wearing anything but suits. It is entirely possible that these men who are talented if somewhat representational painters take off their jackets to work, and perhaps even loosen their ties. But their supreme conventionality and the dapperness of their appearance are reassuring to a certain sort of public. They drink, no doubt, and may even chase women, but no more so than the merchant bankers, hedge-fund managers and high-earning barristers who constitute the majority of their clientele. On the other hand, the suits worn by Gilbert and George, at the cutting edge of contemporary art, are part of a different agenda. Their apparent conventionality of dress is actually the ultimate nonconformity, a post-bohemian bohemianism.The artist as bohemian is an important part of the myth of art. Art is something magical, transcendent, and worth paying large amounts of money for precisely because it is priceless and unquantifiable. Artists, as the producers of this supremely desirable spiritual commodity, need to dress and behave differently in order to demarcate themselves from ordinary people. Their bohemianism is a badge of their anointed state, a reminder that art is special. And financially valuable.BrandingThe most overworked word today in the vocabularies of dealers, critics and auction-house experts is iconic [see Part V, Glossary]. But to praise a work of art as iconic, besides acknowledging its artistic quality, also betrays an underlying assumption that works of art are good in so far as they are typical or recognizable. An art market that values the highly recognizable qualities of the works that it sells is essentially purveying brands. This is a development that you can trace back to the beginning of modernist art. The challenge for the great Impressionist art dealer Paul Durand-Ruel in Paris in the late nineteenth century was to market a new way of painting, to sell a new and unfamiliar commodity to the art-buying public. One of his successful innovations was to popularize exhibitions of the work of a single artist. This focusing of attention on the individual talent and achievement of a Monet, a Renoir or a Pissarro had an important effect: for the first time it defined an artists brand. Noting the saleability of a strongly branded product, art dealers have been doing the same thing ever since.Damien Hirst is a present-day triumph of branding. The paint-makers colour charts that his spot paintings resemble now strike the eye as imitation Hirsts rather than vice versa. But Hirst is exceptional. Art as a strongly branded product can have two problematic results: with living artists, the danger is that branding encourages sameness and discourages radical experiment, unless you are clever enough to be branded as an unpredictable experimenter, which is a difficult act to carry off. Constrained by their dealers, todays artists paint and sculpt in fear of disintegrating their brand. And with the art of the past the effect is that the work of an artist like Monet grows expensive in direct proportion to the degree that it is recognizable, to the degree that people will come into a room where it is hanging and exclaim to the gratified owner, Ah! You have a Monet! An easily identifiable style or indeed subject matter reassures the buyer, makes him feel good about himself and his own knowledge of art. Thus there is a premium on very typical (iconic) works. But beware the untypical: a still life, say, or a portrait by Monet, will make considerably less

than a view of his water-lily pond [see Part II, Individual Artists].Easily recognized: Fontanas slashed canvas, a formidable trademark (Lucio Fontana, Concetto spaziale, waterpaint on canvas, 1965)In addition to Monet, there are a number of other dead artists who are particularly strongly branded in the public perception, which doesnt do them any harm commercially. These include:Tamara DE LEMPICKA: the visual poetess of Art Deco, whose elegant, faintly Sapphic women, either nude or encased in vaguely Cubistic body-hugging white silk dresses, evoke the stylish world of Hollywood in the 1930s and have proved alluring to Hollywood collectors two or three generations later.Lucio FONTANA: the blank canvas elegantly lacerated by a slash of the Stanley knife was an inspired move. I pierce the canvas, said the artist himself, and I have created an infinite dimension. Plus an infinitely recognizable and repeatable motif.Alberto GIACOMETTI: the thin, craggy, elongated limbs of his later figural sculptures are immediately identifiable, powerful expressions of the existentialist crisis of twentieth-century man.Atkinson GRIMSHAW: this Victorian landscape painters lamp-lit street scenes at night create a frisson of pleasurable nostalgia. He is the entry portal of many nervous new collectors to the art market: the cosiness of his images coupled with the high recognizability of his style is a hugely reassuring combination.L. S. LOWRY: the distinctive stick men and the gaunt northern cityscapes, gloomily evocative of mid-twentieth-century urban life, are patented trademarks whose appeal endures into the twenty-first.Amedeo MODIGLIANI: his sinuous women with elongated necks and faces are among the most readily recognizable in modern art. Modigliani knew what he liked and stuck with it: almost three-quarters of his entire artistic output is constituted by these female portraits.Piet MONDRIAN: grids, composed of vertical and horizontal lines, with the spaces created here and there blocked in with rectangles of colour. The simple ideas are the best.Giorgio MORANDI: bottles and jars, jars and jugs, jugs and bottles, in rows, on shelves, on tabletops. He could have made a fortune if hed started his own brand of kitchen utensils. Imagine how well they would sell now in museum shops.John Singer SARGENT: a distinctive, slick and gloriously free brushstroke creates a look that endows his sitters with elegance and opulence. The most successful conventional portraitists today are still the ones who most effectively replicate the Sargent effect.BrueghelThe first artist I was ever aware of was Pieter Brueghel the Elder. To be more accurate, I wasnt so much aware of him as of his paintings. I was six or seven when my mother showed me a book of colour reproductions of the sixteenth-century Flemish artists works. I have the actual book in front of me as I write, and opening it again brings back extraordinarily vivid memories of how captivating I found the images from the first moment I saw them. They conjured an absorbing world of fantasy, of fairy tale, of the grotesque, of men who looked like fishes and of fishes who looked like men, of villages under snow and toothless peasants enjoying simple rural pleasures, of violent death and fallen angels. I certainly didnt think, Ah! These are all painted by the same man. Nor did I think, How extraordinary that these were painted four hundred years ago. But I did think that they depicted a totally convincing and coherent other world into which it was a delight to enter.Once I discovered these images, I returned to them again and again. There was the comically macabre procession of The Blind Leading the Blind, six sightless figures lurching after each other into a ditch. And the apocalyptic Triumph of Death, a scene of desolation and destruction eerily predictive of twentieth-century warfare, a melee of civilian carnage in the foreground, with a sort of Mediaeval evacuation of Dunkirk going on in the distance. The Adoration of the Magi, relocated in a Flemish village with the snow falling, is one of the great evocations of winter, best enjoyed from a drawing-room fireside. In Fools Paradise three men sleep off the effects of overindulgence, their bodies swelling out of their clothes with that comfortable bulbousness characteristic of Brueghels peasant figures. The Tower of Babel, that vast architectural folie de grandeur stretching up into the clouds, is full of the sort of entrancing technical building detail that you could drive yourself mad with frustration attempting to recreate in Lego or Minibrix. And there was The Fall of Icarus: the young man who flew too close to the sun, melting his wings and crashing to earth, is depicted at the moment he hits the sea, pale legs flailing; but he is a minor detail in a much larger coastal landscape which encompasses a ploughman tilling his fields, a shepherd tending his flock, a fisherman, and various sailing vessels bobbing over the ocean.The Tower of Babel, as built by Pieter Brueghel, oil on panel, 1563Today the number of people who collect old master paintings is small by comparison with those who buy contemporary art. The problem is that some old masters are too far removed from us; they are mired in obscure biblical or classical iconography. But Brueghel is one of those old master painters to whom the modern spectator responds more easily. The world Brueghel illustrates is quirky and strange, but its essential humanity survives. It is no coincidence that paintings by Brueghel have inspired two fine twentieth-century poems: John Burnsides Pieter Brueghel: Winter Landscape with Skaters and Bird Trap, 1565 and W. H.

Audens meditation on The Fall of Icarus, Muse des Beaux Arts. The people in Brueghels paintings still communicate with us across the centuries. That communication is a key prerequisite in what draws collectors to the art of the past.Creative BlockA state of inertia, the inability to create, from time to time afflicts all creative people. It is part of the romantic baggage of being an artist, and the public like to hear accounts of it partly because the suffering validates the work of art that does ultimately get produced. Some painters and writers make a career of creative block. Im writing a novel, says the anguished-looking literary man in the Private Eye cartoon. Neither am I, says his companion. Real creative block is no joke, of course: it leads to a questioning of ones talent, and therefore of ones right to practise as an artist. Under these circumstances, for a painter, the blank canvas or the clean sheet of drawing paper becomes agony to contemplate.Idle the whole day, records the British history painter Benjamin Haydon in May 1810. All this whole week has been passed in sheer inanity of mind, fiddle faddling imbecilly insignificantly. I dont think at this moment I could draw a great toe.In August 1884 Degas succumbs to a summer lassitude. I stored up all my plans in a cupboard, he tells his friend Henri Lerolle, and always carried the key on me. I have lost that key. In a word I am incapable of throwing off the state of coma into which I have fallen. I shall keep busy, as people say who do nothing, and that is all. In January 1949, Keith Vaughan, the modern British painter who kept a touching and revealing diary, anatomizes hisDemoralising bouts of self-doubt and helplessness. Conviction that my whole position is a fraud and far from being the result of any innate gifts is simply the result of perfecting a technique of dissimulation, acting out the person I would like to be. However, there is no choice now but to go on until Im found out. The exhaustion of doing nothing. Fears of being unable to work again, that Im living on some sort of false credit which will run out. Feelings of guilt at watching all the people who go off to work in the morning past my studio window, and envy at seeing them come back in the evening to their simple pleasures earned Ils sont dans le vrai but it doesnt make it any less painful.Zola draws a sexual image when describing the plight of his painter-protagonist Claude Lantier in the novel LOeuvre (1886): doubt about his own ability descends upon him and makes him hate painting with the hatred of a betrayed lover who curses his false mistress though tortured by the knowledge that he loves her still. This is the duplicitous capacity of art to let one down. For Haydon, on the other hand, sex may be the cure to artistic self-doubt. Or it would have been, had he been able to get any. On 19 June 1841 he records, Like Johnsons hypochondriasm, there I sit, sluggish, staring, idle, gaping, with not one Idea. Several times do these journals record this Condition of Brain. It goes off always after connection with Women. But now my wife is ill, my fidelity keeps me correct. I think I suffer by becoming cloudy thick.There are many tricks to avoid creative block. Some writers advocate never stopping work at the end of the day with a completed paragraph. Leave it midstream, so that there is always a theme to resume that gets you running in the morning. Thats more difficult for an artist or a sculptor, who overnight may have lost the light, his model, or his relish for what is often a more physical engagement with what hes making than the sedentary writers. Sometimes the only cure is time. Or drink. But in the art buyers imagination those phases of blockage add value to what ultimately emerges from the artist. No pain, no gain.DegasI am fascinated by Degas. To me, he embodies the French genius in art. He was probably the greatest draughtsman of the nineteenth century, and a supreme technical innovator with a sublime compositional eye. As a man he was obnoxious, cynical, witty, devious and reclusive. He never married: he was too self-absorbed. He made a plea early on for his own independence and for the freedom to paint without constantly thinking about what other artists were doing. It seems to me, he wrote aged twenty-two,that if one wants to be a serious artist today and create an original little niche for oneself, or at least ensure that one preserves the highest degree of innocence of character, one must constantly immerse oneself in solitude. There is too much tittle-tattle. It is as if paintings were made, like speculations on the stock markets, out of the friction among people eager for gain. All this trading sharpens your mind and falsifies your judgement.The Goncourt brothers, those perceptive chroniclers of the Parisian cultural world, first met Degas in 1874 and were intrigued by him. An original fellow, this Degas, they reported in their diary, sickly, neurotic, and so ophthalmic that he is afraid of losing his sight; but for this very reason an eminently receptive creature and sensitive to the character of things.Degas casts a cynical (if ophthalmic) eye over the art world in Paris and regularly comes up with the telling phrase. In April 1890 he goes to the Japanese Exhibition at the Beaux-Arts: Alas! Alas! Taste everywhere! he reports to his friend Bartholom. When Degas wants to draw attention to the coexistence within his fellow artist Gustave Moreau of a visionary and a commercial streak, he describes him as a hermit who knows the train timetable. He identifies a certain sort of success that is indistinguishable from panic. He is funny in his opposition to the mindless painting of nature in the open air: Ah, those who work from

nature! he complains to Andr Gide in 1909. What impudent humbugs! The landscapists! When I meet one of them in the countryside, I want to fire away at him. Bang! Bang! There ought to be a police force for that purpose. In a dig at Monets obsession with painting out of doors, he says that whenever he thinks of Monet he turns up his coat collar.But he could be a spoiled brute too. He had a private income, which immunized him from the travails of his poorer Impressionist colleagues, and he was less than sympathetic to their troubles. Almost manically anti-Semitic, he was guilty of some appalling outbursts in the course of the Dreyfus affair. At times it was as if Degas knew he was behaving badly but could not help himself. In a moment of frankness he explained to Evariste de Valernes the different forces that influenced his personality and behaviour: I was or I seemed to be hard with everyone through a sort of passion for brutality, which came from my uncertainty and my bad humour. I felt myself so badly made, so badly equipped, so weak, whereas it seemed to me that my calculations on art were so right.Degass all-too-knowing Little Fourteen-Year-Old Dancer, bronze, mixed media, 1880, set against the refreshing innocence of a real-life English version (Sothebys, February 2009)As I say, there is something quintessentially French about Degas: perhaps thats what struck the auction room at Christies in 1889 when for the first time a French Impressionist painting came under the hammer in a London saleroom. It was Degass In a Caf and it made the English art-buying public very uneasy. They were upset by something so new and so foreign, and they hissed it. The masterpiece realized a paltry 180 guineas.I recalled the incident in 2009 when Sothebys in London sold a cast of the famous Degas bronze of The Little Fourteen-Year-Old Dancer, one of the greatest sculptures of the nineteenth century (it fetched $19 million). For pre-sale publicity a real live fourteenyear-old dancer was borrowed from the Royal Ballet School to pose next to Degass 1880 version. It was a great success as a promotional exercise and the English dancer of 2009 was sweet. She stood in an identical position next to the sculpture for long tracts of time while the press photographed the two figures together. What was fascinating to compare was the subtle differences in their pose. Ostensibly, it was the same: right foot forward, at right angles to the left, hands behind the back, head held back so that the eyes natural field of vision is down the nose. But when you compared them, you noticed a bit of a cynical slouch to the French 1880 original, the suggestion of the coquette, her head and eyes at such an angle as to communicate a look simultaneously proud, mercenary, slovenly and knowing. What a joyous contrast was evident in the English 2009 version. She was fresh-faced and well built, holding herself upright, graceful and healthy, bringing with her a faint whiff of the hockey field. Her gaze was pure, vibrant and clear-eyed; a young ballet dancer to make Betjeman weak at the knees, and a telling illustration of why Degas could never have been English.Diarists (Artists as)I am always interested in painters who can write. Some artists of course remain resolutely mute, unable or unwilling to express themselves verbally. That doesnt make them less good painters. One doesnt demand of writers that they should paint in order to give the fullest account of themselves; if one did, only a relatively small number would qualify to be taken seriously: Strindberg, Victor Hugo, Edward Lear and Ruskin; perhaps also Goethe and William Morris. But because I enjoy diaries I am particularly drawn to painters who keep them. Their journals can attain a revealing and sometimes touching articulacy. The best of them the sympathetic but ridiculous Benjamin Haydon, or the ever-observant Delacroix, or the mercilessly self-analytical Keith Vaughan in the twentieth century use their diaries to discover verbal equivalents for visual experience, and to give expression to the pleasure and frustration of painting.Painting is an essentially solitary activity, which encourages introspection, and many artists diaries shed fascinating light on how pictures actually get painted (or dont). If a writers intimate journal is a book about how hard it is to write a book, then an artists is a book about how hard it is to paint a picture. There is plenty of torment and frustration, but there are also the good days when in Haydons words nectar flows through the interstices of the brain. The solitude demanded by painting also breeds eccentricity. Artists diaries are valuable first-hand dispatches from the bohemian front line, intimate records of the anarchic, obsessive, destructive and sometimes downright comic ways in which creative people live. As early as 1555 Jacopo Pontormo is interspersing an account of his painting of the frescoes in the church of San Lorenzo in Florence with neurotic notes about his own diet and digestion. Three hundred years later Gustave Courbet confides that whenever he finishes paintings for exhibition it brings on his haemorrhoids.The essential quality of a diary is its immediacy, what Virginia Woolf calls the rapid haphazard gallop at which it swings along the advantage of the method is that it sweeps up accidentally several stray matters which I should exclude if I hesitated, but which are the diamonds of the dustheap. This is something that the best artist-diarists understand, that diaries should be written straight off without correction or polish, the literary equivalent of a spontaneous sketch. The first touch is the best, because it is the sincere one. When you run

your eye over the handwritten page of a diary you should see minimal crossings-out. It should flow without revision, like a study without pentimenti.Another important quality is a willingness to consider and embrace your own inadequacy and ridiculousness. Haydon, for instance, is the victim of a debilitating folie de grandeur as a painter, but as a diarist he expresses an endearing awareness of his own personal fallibility. The tension between the two lies at the heart of his appeal. It is impossible not to sympathize with a man who can write:The mortalities, the filthy mortalities of life, are enough to make ones heart sick. I that should drink nothing but nectar, sleep only upon fleecy clouds, waft with angels by day, kiss only such by night, I with a keen cutting relish for all the beauties of divine being, who would live and quaff the glories of godhead, have been obliged to have a nasty, filthy, stinking, putrid, ulcerous blister! Yah to relieve a nasty, thick, puddled, slimy sore throat, I was sick at heart.Andy Warhol, another revealing diarist, has similar moments of private candour about himself: It was a beautiful day, he records on 15 March 1983. Walked on the street and a little kid, she was six or seven, with another kid, yelled, Look at the guy with the wig, and I was really embarrassed, I blew my cool and it ruined my afternoon. So I was depressed.A diary often represents the therapeutic externalization of painful internal motions of the soul. Writing it down makes it better, more comprehensible, more copable with. And for some it is a means of imposing discipline on life: Ford Madox Brown meticulously records the number of hours he has put in at work in the studio each day. And one dull Sunday in Geneva, on 7 September 1856, Ruskin calculates the number of days which under perfect term of human life he might have left to him to live: 11,795, he concludes, and solemnly reduces that figure by one on each successive diary entry. He keeps it up for nearly two years.What does all this mean commercially? I am not saying that Delacroix is across the board a more expensive artist because he kept a journal. But I do think the value of a specific painting by him would be enhanced if revealing light were shed on its creation by an entry in that journal. The best diaries round out the personalities of the artists who keep them; they are guidebooks to that broader hinterland which enriches our appreciation and increases our valuation of art.Female ArtistsA year or two ago a census was undertaken of the 2,300 artists whose work was at that point on view at Londons National Gallery. In the process it emerged how many of them were women. There were four. It seemed a bit of an imbalance.Of course one cant change history. The National Gallerys focus is on painters working before 1900, and women artists were in a small and heroic minority up until that point. Certainly they were the victims of male prejudice. Albrecht Drer wrote in his diary on 21 May 1521: Master Gerhart, the illuminator, has a daughter, 18 years of age, called Susanna, who illuminated a small panel of the Saviour, for which I gave her 1 gulden. It is remarkable that a woman is able to do such things. Two and a half centuries later, attitudes havent changed very much. Goethe, writing about Angelica Kauffmann in August 1787, observes wonderingly: She has an incredible and, for a woman, really immense talent.Women artists in history are less successful and numerous than women writers, but more prominent than women musicians. Before 1800 women who painted were largely seen as bringing a feminine meticulousness to their craft, bent over their canvases as if over embroidery. Rachel Ruysch (16641750) was a Dutch still-life painter, particularly adept at flowers; Mary Moser (17441819) painted similar subjects in London and was an early exhibitor at the Royal Academy. A brave few attempted to be taken seriously as figure painters. Artemisia Gentileschi (c. 15971651/3) is a pioneering heroine in this respect. Her father, Orazio, a Caravaggio follower, was court painter to Charles I, and she joined him in London in 16389. Her Susannah and the Elders is replete with a particularly piquant sort of feminist irony. Here is an accomplished figure painting executed by a woman operating in an exclusively male world, depicting the naked female form being relished by two male voyeurs. Rosalba Carriera (16751757) and Elisabeth Vige-Lebrun (17551842) were representatives of that rare phenomenon, the successful lady portraitist. But it is noticeable that their sitters tended to be female: few men would risk the undermining of their masculinity implicit in having your likeness captured by a woman.Artemisia Gentileschis Susannah and the Elders, oil on canvas, 1610; or Self-Portrait with Male OppressorsThe second half of the nineteenth century saw women artists emerge in larger numbers. There were establishment painters who won high reputations in specific genres: Rosa Bonheur (horses), Henriette Ronner (cats), and the redoubtable Lady Butler (battle scenes). But many women gravitated to the avantgarde: having stormed the citadel of male dominance in art, you were also likely to assert your opposition to conventional academicism. Berthe Morisot, Marie Cassatt and Eva Gonzals all made significant contributions to Impressionism, as did Rodins pupil Camille Claudel to modern sculpture. In the following generation modernism was carried forward by many women, including Gwen John in England, Kthe Kollwitz, Paula Modersohn-Becker and Gabriele Mnter in Germany, Suzanne Valadon and Marie Laurencin in France, and the Russian Expressionist Natalia Goncharova.Over the past

fifty years, there has been no shortage of art historians, critics and curators prepared to fight the feminist battle, to redress the injustices of history. How much impact does this have on the market? Does being a woman artist make a difference to how her work is perceived commercially today? Would Berthe Morisot as the critic Brian Sewell has rather ungallantly suggested be less expensive if she were called Bert Morisot? I am not sure how to read the evidence of the market performance of, for instance, Gwen John. Over the past generation she has emerged from the shadow of her more feted and flamboyant brother Augustus. The world-record price for a Gwen John (169,000) now stands at appreciably more than that for Augustus (139,000). In their lifetimes such a thing would have been incredible. Is it because shes a woman? Or is it because shes finally been recognized as the better painter?Fictional ArtistsOur perception of what an artist should be is reflected and conditioned by the depiction of artists in literature. In the same way that artists make good diarists, they also make rewarding characters for novelists. I emphasize characters. The fictional works of art that these characters create are more problematic. The visual makes demands that the verbal cannot supply, and a fictional work of visual art is almost invariably unsatisfactory unless treated satirically, which takes us into different territory [see Spoofs below]. What follows is a dictionary within a dictionary, a selection of some memorable fictional painters:Revue de presseReading it is like participating in a hugely enjoyable personal tutorial given by a cultured, witty, clear-eyed, world teacher with a fully functioning sense of humour. A real delight (William Boyd Spectator)Hook's view of the art world is that of the professional auctioneer. In an A-Z format, it is an entire art education contained in under 350 pages. Wry, dry and completely beguiling (William Boyd Guardian, Books of the Year 2013)An auctioneer's alphabet of quirky reflections and off-beat lists such as 'middle-brow artists' and 'fictional artists': an ideal volume for the art-lover's bedside (Martin Gayford Spectator, Books of the Year)How to nail the mad, bad, crazy contemporary art world in print? Sotheby's senior director Hook draws on 35 years' experience in this informal memoir. He unravels, with humour, piquancy and erudition, what drives the economics of taste (Financial Times, Books of the Year)It's very hard to write an amusing book about art that has some serious things to say. But Philip Hook has done it. It's more a kind of Lonely Planet guide, written from the perspective of an auctioneer. In places it's a hoot, but it's also very wise here and there, and refreshingly irreverent. Sir William Russell Flint, for example, "painted like Augustus John commissioned by Playboy magazine" (Sunday Times, Books of the Year)His delightful Breakfast at Sotheby's is a house sale of a book, a chance for him to clear out 35 years of memories as an art dealer and auctioneer, first at Christie's and then Sotheby's, a rival auction house. Besides the colourful stories, Mr Hook offers various theories about the art world, and keen insight on that vexing question of what gives art value. Amid the well-known answers (provenance, colour, "wall power") are some less obvious observations, both relevant and delightful (The Economist)I absolutely adored Breakfast At Sotheby's: An A-Z Of The Art World by Philip Hook. Very funny and often touching, it teems with vivid observation and anecdotes about artists, paintings, nude models, dealers and critics. Hook also provides wonderful insights into The Antiques Roadshow, on which he appeared for 25 years, and the rivalry of Christie's and Sotheby's. My favourite tale is about the camp telephonist at Sotheby's who, when asked by an important male caller 'May I have John Brown?' replied: 'I don't see why not, everyone else has. Putting you through' (Jilly Cooper)