

The Art Market

Garden statue turns out to be £8mn Canova sculpture

UK bans art exports to Russia; support for Ukraine at Art Dubai; Michael Armitage joins David Zwirner in US

Melanie Gerlis YESTERDAY



'Maddalena Giacente (Recumbent Magdalene)' (1819-22) by Antonio Canova is a valuable new rediscovery

A sculpture that sold for £5,200 in a 2002 garden statuary auction has turned out to be a lost late work by Italian master Antonio Canova, commissioned by a British prime minister. It is now valued for sale between £5mn and £8mn.

Its lucky sellers have not been named but are said to be a British couple who bought the marble of an idealised, penitent Mary Magdalene to decorate their garden. When rumours surfaced that their sculpture could be the long-sought Canova, the owners contacted the art adviser Francis Outred whose team, led by Alice Whitehead, unearthed much of its missing history. Christie's will offer the "Maddalena Giacente (Recumbent Magdalene)" (1819-22) in London on July 7.

Robert Jenkinson, 2nd Earl of Liverpool, ordered the marble during his time as prime minister (1812-27). Its attribution to Canova seems to have disappeared after 1920, when it was sold with the opulent Witley Court manor house to Herbert Smith, a carpet manufacturer. Subsequent owners have included Violet Van der Elst, a businesswoman who campaigned against the death penalty in England.

"The story is amazing," says Donald Johnston, head of Christie's sculpture department, who describes the discovery as a career highlight. "I've seen little bronzes on tabletops that have been overlooked but not something of this scale or calibre with this history."

A crucifix that leaned on the Magdalene's shoulder is now mostly missing but Outred says that the work is overall in very good condition with some "sensitive restoration". The marble is unveiled in London this weekend and will then be shown in New York and Hong Kong.

As Russia's deadly attacks on Ukraine intensify, the UK government has tightened its economic sanctions to include art. On Tuesday, the Department for International Trade announced punishing tariffs on imports, notably vodka, and a ban on the export of high-end goods to Russia and Belarus. Further details were to come at time of writing, but the government said that "previous export bans have included items such as high-end fashion, works of art and luxury vehicles".

Guy Jennings, senior director at The Fine Art Group, says that the move, while "broadly speaking a good thing", is "slight tokenism" that seems unlikely to impact the fine art market dramatically. Major auction houses, galleries and dealers say they have already paused shipments to and from Russia and, Jennings says, "the proportion of Russian buying has diminished since most so-called oligarchs made their collections between 2000 and 2015". Plus, he says, "most of the art doesn't go to Russia anyway. There's nothing to stop people moving art around London or to the Côte d'Azur, for example."



Natia Bukia, co-founder of Gallery Artbeat in Georgia, at her booth at the Art Dubai fair

The 15th edition of Art Dubai seemed a world apart from the unfolding atrocities in Ukraine, but one exhibitor made her feelings known. Natia Bukia, co-founder of Gallery Artbeat in Georgia, draped the table in the centre of her booth with a Ukrainian flag and wore a blue top and yellow skirt at the VIP opening on March 8. “I really didn’t want to be in an environment where not everybody felt the same way as me. A lot of Russians holiday in Dubai, I wanted them to know my position,” Bukia says, adding that she received a lot of support. “People thanked me and even hugged me,” she says.

The talk of the fair was, however, its new section dedicated to digital art and non-fungible tokens from the 1980s to the present day. This was hosted in a separate building, described by The Art Newspaper as “like walking into a teenage boy’s bedroom: dark walls, neon lights, stale air and an unending number of screens in all directions”. It was also very popular. “The UAE has invested heavily in crypto and blockchain technologies,” says Diane Abela of art advisers Gurr Johns. “I think there were more people there than in the main art fair.”

Sales from the fair included recent works by Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, the artist who will represent the UAE at this year’s Venice Biennale, through Lawrie Shabibi gallery (price range \$3,500-\$40,000). The fair has committed to donate 25 per cent of its ticket sales to Ukrainian refugees through Unicef.



'Holding Cell' (2021) by Michael Armitage © Michael Armitage. Courtesy the artist/White Cube/David Zwirner. Photo: Theo Christelis

David Zwirner gallery now represents the acclaimed Kenyan-British artist Michael Armitage. Zwirner takes on Armitage's market in the US while White Cube continues to work with him in the UK. Armitage's large-scale paintings, which blend the history of east Africa with the western artistic canon, are made on Ugandan lubugo bark cloth, a material that exposes holes and seams beneath the paint and was traditionally used for funeral shrouds and other rituals.

Armitage has not been immune to the art market's thirst for thirtysomething artists at auction — his "The Conservationists" (2015) sold for \$1.5mn against an estimate of \$50,000-\$70,000 in 2019. But Zwirner says that the artist "is not just a natural painter and extraordinary draughtsman but is also incredibly intelligent and has managed his career well, with credit to White Cube. It isn't easy for his paintings to get on to the auction circuit, there are a lot in museums and his works take a while to make."

Armitage, who recently showed at London's Royal Academy of Art, has a solo show coming to the Kunsthalle Basel in the prestigious slot that coincides with the Art Basel fair (*You, Who Are Still Alive*, May 20-September 4). White Cube then plans a show in London later this year while Zwirner will host Armitage's first commercial exhibition in the US in 2024.

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