

A DAY ON THE SITE

THE CHALLENGE

It has been difficult to get meaningful statistics on the leading art sites. Each reports traffic differently. Many larger sites, such as eBay, do not separate sales of art and antiques from other sales in their annual reports. And few sites are willing to discuss their sell-through rates, measuring the percent of lots sold.

THE EXPERIMENT

In the absence of these figures, *Art & Auction* decided to try something new. Call it a day in the life, or a day on the site, of the world's biggest auction

sites selling art. One summer day, June 27, as it happened, we tracked all of the sales made on Sothebys.com, Sothebys.amazon.com, eBay and eBay Great Collections. For simplicity, only sales of fine art (paintings, drawings, works on paper, prints, photographs and sculptures) were counted. Reproductions such as posters and fine art calendars, often classified under "fine art" on eBay, were not included. Covering just one day, this data is hardly conclusive, but it is suggestive: snapshots of the auction sites in action.

THE RESULTS

Ebay's core site, which sold a total of \$128,804 worth of fine art that day, outperformed Sothebys.com, which grossed \$96,500 before premiums (and \$106,150 after). But the real story is one of price points. Ebay's averaged around \$120, while Sothebys.com's was higher—but lower, perhaps, than some would expect—at \$1,287. These numbers mark the range where Sotheby's and eBay-auctioneers that, at first glance, have little in common—have begun to meet and compete.

JORI FINKEL, SENIOR EDITOR

eBay

Fine art lots with auctions closing on 6/27: **3,190**
 Number of lots sold: **1,076**
 Percent of lots sold: **34**
 Total sold in dollars: **\$128,804**
 Average sale price: **\$120**
Top lot: A late 19th-century Russian painting (title not listed) by C. Makowsky. Sold for **\$4,060** after 13 bids.

eBay Great Collections

Fine art lots with auctions closing on 6/27: **6**
 Number of lots sold: **1**
 Percent of lots sold: **17**
 Total sold in dollars: **\$1,499**
 Average sale price: **\$1,499**
Top lot: A 19th-century oil painting by Ludmilla P. Welch. Sold for **\$1,499** after 1 bid.

Sothebys.com

Fine art lots with auctions closing 6/27: **243**
 Number of lots sold: **75**
 Percent of lots sold: **31**
 Total sold in dollars: **\$96,500***
 Average sale price: **\$1,287***
Top lot: *Ingrid Bergman*, screenprint by Andy Warhol, 1983 (est. \$8,000-10,000). Sold for **\$6,750*** after 5 bids.

Sothebys.amazon.com

Fine art lots with auctions closing on 6/27: **83**
 Number of lots sold: **16**
 Percent of lots sold: **19**
 Total sold in dollars: **\$8,145***
 Average sale price: **\$509***
Top lot: *The Education of Achilles*, an 18th-century Flemish School oil on canvas (est. \$1,500-2,000). Sold for **\$3,350*** after 12 bids.

*These figures are hammer prices, not including Sotheby's 10 percent buyer's premium for online purchases.

filed suit in San Diego County Superior Court seeking damages. If the suit is successful, legal experts say, eBay could be forced in the future to assume much greater responsibility and liability for its actions as an auctioneer. Ebay might even, though it is hard to imagine, be forced to monitor every listing on its site.

In the area of fine art, eBay has taken a step in this direction, buying the San Francisco auction house Butterfields and launching a Sothebys.com-like site called eBay Great Collections in October, 1999. Relying heavily on Butterfields's contacts and consignments, Great Collections draws mid-range material from a network of 15 auction houses and 52 dealers, who are expected to authenticate the works. But so far the site has failed to meet expectations on many counts. Several dealer and auction house partners have voiced disappointment about lackluster material and flat bidding. There are also problems at the top, as the senior management of Great Collections has

changed several times. The most recent casualty is Kathleen Guzman, onetime president of Phillips, who was hired by eBay as senior director of business development in January and was already gone by July.

According to May, the project is doomed for other reasons. "There are really only two brand names when it comes to the higher end of the art market: Christie's and Sothebys," he says. "Ebay doesn't have a chance to succeed here, its brand simply cannot stretch that far. As for Butterfields's brand, no one outside of the art world even knows who they are."

The real competition, then, is taking place between eBay's free-for-all site and Sotheby's authenticated site, which makes a perfect match between the largest unregulated and the largest regulated market for selling art online. For art below \$100, eBay is winning hands down—or hands off, as the case may be. Above \$1,000, at a price point where buyers seek more assurances, Sothebys.com is stealing the lion's share of the market. But in the \$100 to \$1,000 range, which