

# Culture

## Adding some glitter to old masters

LONDON

Auction houses and fairs look to celebrity tie-ins to dispel an 'air of aloofness'

BY SCOTT REYBURN

How do you make the old new?

The art trade here faced that perennial challenge as old master auctions, the Masterpiece fair and the London Art Week gallery trail tried to reinvigorate interest in artworks and objects from before the 20th century.

Such art isn't exactly on-trend. Last year, European old masters represented just 7 percent of the world's fine-art auction sales, even with a sensational \$450.3 million injection from Leonardo da Vinci's "Salvator Mundi." The number of visitors to the National Gallery in London was down 17 percent in 2017 from a year earlier, and those to the National Portrait Gallery fell 35 percent. How can centuries-old paintings and sculptures of gods, saints and aristocrats appeal to consumers in a digital present?



A Rubens portrait of a nobleman led sales at Sotheby's old masters auction last week.

Fortunately, some of today's most influential creatives have recently turned to old art for new ideas. On June 16, American pop's royal couple, Beyoncé and Jay-Z, released a joint album, "Everything Is Love," under the name The Carters. A virtuoso video for their single "Apes\*\*t," set in the Louvre with the couple rapping in front of the "Mona Lisa" and dancers gyrating in front of Jacques-Louis David's "Coronation of Napoleon," has attracted more than 65 million views on YouTube.

Less than a week later in London, the fashion designer Victoria Beckham, inspired by a visit last year to the Frick Collection in New York, hosted in her flagship Mayfair store a six-day exhibition of 16 portraits from the July old masters auction at Sotheby's. The pop-up preview, funded by the auction house, coincided with London's contemporary art sales and generated a blaze of publicity.

"Popular culture is certainly having an effect," Alex Bell, Sotheby's worldwide co-chairman of old master paintings, said Wednesday night after his 66-lot auction raised 42.6 million pounds, or about \$56.3 million. Mr. Bell pointed out



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MASTERPIECE



EDWARD HOPEY

Clockwise from top: The designer Victoria Beckham in her London store during a Sotheby's preview; an 1843 bust of the writer Mary Shelley; old and new works were side by side at the Masterpiece fair.

that more than 7,000 people had visited Sotheby's during the presale view, almost twice the previous high for such an event. "It's the V.B. effect," he said.

What effect such celebrity endorsements had on the actual bidding was more difficult to quantify.

A photograph of Ms. Beckham standing next to a portrait of a lady by an artist in the "circle of Leonardo da Vinci" had, for example, drawn more than 193,000 likes on her Instagram account by Monday. Perhaps that might have encouraged at least one of the four bidders who pushed the price to £550,000, more than double the low estimate. It could also have been the "Salvator Mundi" effect. It should also be pointed out that the

total at the Sotheby's auction was down 19 percent from the £52.5 million achieved at the equivalent old masters sale in July last year, which included a £18.5 million J. M. W. Turner. Top-quality works by the biggest names — the combination that drives growth in every sector of the art market — remain in chronically short supply.

Sotheby's was able to offer an imposing 1630s head-and-shoulders portrait of a nobleman by Peter Paul Rubens that had never been seen at auction before, estimated at £3 million to £4 million. This had also been shown by Ms. Beckham, but a frowning middle-aged man with a beard was hardly Rubens's most appealing subject; it sold to a tele-

phone bidder for a respectable £5.4 million, the top price of the sale.

"The auctions were thin," said John Lloyd, a private dealer in old masters based in London. "There were a lot of boring German and Flemish pictures that weren't great quality."

But one telephone bidder was prepared to spend £5.5 million on half a dozen of the better-quality Flemish paintings in the sale, culminating in £2.65 million for an exceptionally rare group of four circa-1420 panels depicting scenes from the life of the Virgin Mary by a precursor of Jan van Eyck.

There wasn't much of a Beckham or Jay-Z effect to be felt the following evening at Christie's, where the usual

crowd of besuited dealers watched another tranche of moderate-quality old masters sell for low estimate prices in the £100,000 to £500,000 range, or not sell at all.

The only moment of excitement came when three telephone bidders pursued a tender and finely preserved painting of the Holy Family from around 1520. The work, by the early Flemish painter Gerard David, went for £4.8 million, a new auction high for the artist.

Christie's achieved a total of £31.2 million from 61 lots, 29 percent down from the equivalent sale last July.

Masterpiece, whose ninth edition closed last Wednesday, describes itself as "the world's leading cross-collecting fair," pointing to its eclectic mix of art, jewelry, antiques and a Riva speedboat.

## Strange, sad descent

MOVIE REVIEW

A documentary filmmaker delves into the painful life of Whitney Houston

BY WESLEY MORRIS

My heart goes out to anybody who arrives at Kevin Macdonald's new Whitney Houston documentary expecting a celebration of music and once-in-a-generation talent. Those are both present — the songs, that voice. But they're heavy with cost. They're warped, enlisted to indict rather than delight. The goose bumps Houston's singing gives you in "Whitney" are the goose bumps you get anytime you hear her sing. There's a clip of her, at 19, on "The Merv Griffin Show" doing "Home" from "The Wiz," and the chills that come are involuntary. Here was a fever you wanted to catch.

Even at this early point, the movie urges you to think about Houston as someone other than — or in addition to — one of the three or four greatest vocalists in the history of American popular music. It presents her life anew and reconsiders the very private suffering with which she might have lived it. How did someone whose nickname was Nippy go so suddenly from angel to ghost?

"Whitney" is too funereal to be a party, too sad, strange and dismaying to cheer. Yet, in its grim, guilt-inducing way, the film works, even on the occasions when it's working against itself. What Mr. Macdonald wants to do is a

kind of cultural psychobiography. The movie comprises a range of footage (famous and mostly rare) along with one-on-one interviews with her family and friends and exes and collaborators about her childhood, fame, sexuality, technical ingenuity, drug addiction, and the raising of her daughter, Bobbi Kristina, who was also an addict. Houston's mother, the singer Cissy Houston, her ex-husband, Bobby Brown, and the music executive L. A. Reid seem self-protective in their reticence and deflection. But most participants, like her aunt and personal assistant Mary Jones, gush memories, analysis and feelings.

Together, it all becomes a roiling drama built around Houston's celebrity. No one person is responsible for her drug-related bathtub drowning in 2012. Guilt here is powerfully diffuse. Yet when one of Houston's two brothers leans forward and stage-whispers something like, "This family is full of secrets," it sounds like histrionics. But this family really was. It was rich in lies and charades, too, like Cissy and her ex-husband, John, going out in public as a couple to bolster the wholesome, whiter image they and the Arista records executive Clive Davis wanted for Houston.

Some of the trouble might stem from the years the three Houston kids spent living with relatives in the Newark, N.J., area while their mother was on tour. We learn that Houston's drug use actually began when she was a teenager. Another of the film's bombshells has already made it to the press, but the film itself isn't sensational about it. A question of whether she had been sexually abused is casually raised,



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affirmed then unpacked by several people. And it blows open your perception of Houston as a star, mother, wife, addict and persona. It reframes her unceasingly gossiped-about bond with her best friend and assistant Robyn Crawford, so that a question like "Were they lovers?" insults the salvation of the friendship.

This is the second movie in two years about Houston's demise made by a white British man. Last spring we got "Whitney: Can I Be Me?," which the tireless gumshoe speculator Nick Broomfield directed with Rudi Dolezal. It was a Swiss Army knife of pointed fingers. That juicy, speculative sensationalism was right for the director of "Kurt & Courtney" and "Biggie and Tupac." But even at Mr. Broomfield's sleaziest, some kind of compassion is along for the ride. Mr. Macdonald is a



Left, the singer Whitney Houston. Above, with her mother, Cissy Houston.

Scotsman who's moved between meaty nonfiction ("One Day in September," "Touching the Void," "Marley") and trashy melodrama like the Idi Amin blood bath, "The Last King of Scotland." Their Houston documentaries complement each other in a way that establishes an unhappy genre of pop forensics — Whitney: SVU.

They share some of the same players and pivotal events, like Cissy Houston and Mr. Davis's early hold over Houston's career and her being audibly denounced at the Soul Train Awards. (Mr. Macdonald's film remembers Al Sharpton as a notably ruthless assailant of her racial authenticity.) Both films argue for what a primal scene the Soul Train Awards were. She was booed, she saw Mr. Brown perform, and a light bulb is said have gone off. Her humiliation as insufficiently black

allegedly drew her to Mr. Brown, who, at the time, was at the height of his talent and popularity.

Culturally, this interpretation makes sense. Maybe her apparent lack of legible blackness made a striking contrast with his abundance of it. We've been meant to find some kind of Faustian bargain in this — the selling of a soul for some soul. That reading of Whitney-meets-Bobby has never satisfied me. It discounts Mr. Brown's profane sexiness and how it magnetized millions of Americans to him. (I remember wanting his phone number, too.) Maybe Houston's attraction was opportunistic. Maybe she also got caught in a pop star's tractor beam. It also deserves how hard it must have been for Mr. Brown to resist Houston, at least the spontaneous, cutting, charismatic version of her these two movies present. Houston was responding to something about this man, and what if it was more than a Boston adolescence spent in public housing?

Mr. Macdonald can see Houston as being greater than her victimhood. Or maybe it's that he sees her victimhood as being a tragedy greater than any single culprit. The opening minutes come from the set of the "I Wanna Dance With Somebody" video, the most buoyant (and blond) five minutes Houston ever had in the MTV era. But the first thing you hear is Houston recounting a recurring dream in which she runs from the Devil and is never caught. (Later we hear her tell Diane Sawyer, in a flabbergastingly intimate interview, that she's her biggest devil.)

While she ruminates, chaos keeps interrupting the images from the video until it rips the buoyancy apart. And

The Switzerland-based MCH Group, which owns Art Basel, acquired a 67.5 percent stake in the fair in November as part of its "global collector events strategy."

Prompted, in part, by declining revenue from its Baselworld jewelry fair, MCH is planning to expand its art events business in Asia, the Middle East and the United States, positioning Masterpiece as a luxury brand.

Under MCH's management, Masterpiece expanded to 160 exhibitors from 153. The fair, held as usual in a temporary structure on the grounds of the Royal Hospital Chelsea, was almost 20 percent bigger. It is also gaining ground as an event where dealers can make sales, up to a certain price point.

"You see a very different crowd here from Art Basel," said James Holland-Hibbert, a London dealer in modern British art who said he sold seven works priced at £100,000 to £350,000. "They're shoppers rather than collectors, but they are prepared to spend."

The powerhouse contemporary gallery Hauser & Wirth exhibited at Masterpiece for the first time and said it sold Jean (Hans) Arp's 1928 Surrealist relief "Cuillère et Nombres" (Spoon and Navels), which had an asking price of 1.5 million euros, or around \$1.7 million.

There was also a smattering of old master sales, like a 1560s portrait of a gentleman by the Italian painter Antonio Campi. Priced around £200,000, it was sold by the London dealers Agnews to a new British client.

Foot traffic and sales were somewhat slower in the 40 or so galleries participating in the London Art Week promotion. Callisto Fine Arts, a specialist in Italian pre-20th-century sculpture that is based in a fourth-floor apartment in Mayfair, typified the discoveries dealers make and the sales challenges they face.

Callisto was offering what it says is the only known three-dimensional portrait of the novelist Mary Shelley, carved in marble by the Roman sculptor Camillo Pistrucci and dated 1843. The author has drawn plenty of publicity this year as it is the bicentennial of the publication of "Frankenstein," but the sculpture remained available, priced at £100,000, and had not even been viewed by curators at the National Portrait Gallery, according to Callisto's founder, Carlo Milano.

On Wednesday, by contrast, the marketing power of Sotheby's propelled a rediscovered 1814 marble "Bust of Peace" by the neoclassical sculptor Antonio Canova to £5.3 million, an auction high for the artist. On Thursday, Sotheby's announced that the prominent New York trader Otto Naumann had given up dealing to join the auction house as a senior vice president for old masters.

Mr. Milano is grateful for the spotlight that Jay-Z and Beyoncé's video extravaganza has shined on the old masters. "That was the best bit of publicity we could ever hope for," he said. "We have to remove the air of aloofness that hangs over old masters."

It may be wishful, or even desperate, thinking, but dealers and auction house specialists are understandably hopeful that the sight of Jay-Z rapping in front of Théodore Géricault's "Raft of the Medusa" will encourage a new generation to take an interest.

The challenge is finding an artwork as interesting as that Géricault for them to buy.

what comes bulldozing through is riot footage that's meant to connect Houston to her upbringing in Newark. You see something like that, and you groan. It's a cinematic flourish that suggests a director who doesn't trust his material.

But Mr. Macdonald doesn't let up. He uses a montage to boil down her explosion into superstardom scored only, at first, to the vocal track of "I Wanna Dance With Somebody." So you get the Billboard chart zoom-ins put in a blender with bad-metaphor shots of a rocket launch and footage of the Statue of Liberty, a Coca-Cola commercial and, randomly, Michael Jackson in his "Bad" video. He pulls this move once or twice more (tossing in Bill Clinton, O. J. Simpson, the Oklahoma City bombing, Princess Diana's death, the Los Angeles riots), and we're meant to think of this woman's turmoil as matching half of the planet's. But if it feels like too much, it probably should. Here's an argument for Houston as this tabloid-aded natural resource that we guzzled like soda.

Really, though, you don't even have to look that far out. Simply probing Houston's ache gives "Whitney" its hefty woe. Toward the end of the film, Mr. Macdonald takes us back to her doing "Home" that day on "Merv Griffin." Seeing it again, after absorbing the biographical shocks, deepens the movie and its subject. Now, you hear not only longing but pain. Whitney from Newark becomes the inverse of Dorothy from Kansas — or, in "The Wiz," Dorothy from Harlem. Maybe the wicked witches and phony wizards made home seem like such a terrible place that she might actually have felt safer in Oz.