

China's new rich flex muscles in art market

Chinese art collectors are expected to spend £140 million at a major auction.

Thomas Bell, Singapore, 29 Sep 2008

The sale, which opens next weekend in Hong Kong, is expected to set auction price records and will provide a stark illustration of the new distribution of global wealth as the West suffers.

In recognition of the rise of a new generation of Asian super-rich, eager to own Asian cultural artefacts once traded in London or New York, Sotheby's has shifted all of its sales of Asian art to Hong Kong.

In five days of selling, the auctioneers expect to set a local record of £140 million.

Most notably, Sotheby's will host a prestigious "evening sale" of contemporary Asian art in Hong Kong for the first time. Its rival, Christie's, will follow suit with a Hong Kong evening sale in November.

The "Chinese contemporary" category is the most rapidly appreciating segment of the global market.

According to Quek Chin Yeow, Sotheby's deputy director for Asia, China's new wealth has coincided with a creative blossoming.

"All great art needs a great movement," he said.

In China's case that was provided by the transformation of society as it emerged from the strictures of Maoism in the 1980s.

"It's so big and so phenomenal that a lot of [Chinese] collectors are buying their own [Chinese] art," said Mr Quek. "Of course they would."

Mary Dinaburg, whose company, Fortune Cookie, promotes the Asian art trade, said: "This is the beginning of China's modern art history. So when they buy these works what they are doing is collecting their own history."

Her business partner, Howard Rutkowski, referred to the "craziness" of a market in which an artist not found in any museum collection can sell for \$1million (£540,000).

So frantic is the appetite for Chinese contemporary painting that the record price for a work in the category has been broken three times in the past year. It currently stands at £5.2 million, fetched by Zeng Fanzhi's "Mask Series 1996 No. 6" at Christie's in Hong Kong in May.

A major work by Damien Hirst might still be more expensive, but China's top artists have already surpassed giants of contemporary Western art such as Jeff Koons in cash value.

The explosion of the Chinese art scene was as unexpected as it was rapid. According to Mr Quek, when Sotheby's started their Asian contemporary category in 1999 they identified Indonesian painting as the most interesting school.

But although the south-east Asian and Indian art markets have grown in recent years they are dwarfed by China.

Almost every sale throws up a new price record for an individual artist. Since the beginning of the decade Sotheby's Hong Kong sales values have increased five fold. Last year China overtook France as the world's third biggest art market, after America and Britain.

It is not only contemporary art that will be going under the hammer.

Chinese antiques and ceramics -once the preserve of Western connoisseurs- are also now expected to do better in the East.