

WEEKEND JOURNAL.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 20, 2006 W3

FRIDAY, JANUARY 20, 2006 W1

Inside

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Art & Money



Buy George: Washington memorabilia play a big role in shows and auctions. Plus, an Old Masters shift by Christie's. W3

ART & MONEY

By KELLY CROW

The Importance Of Being George

NEVER MIND THAT \$1 bill. George Washington's face is appearing on far pricier objects—including a \$100,000 scrimshaw whale tooth—at this year's Winter Antiques Show, which opened last night in Manhattan.

This year, more dealers are putting the founding father out front, along with other Federal-period items, because of booming sales in high-end Americana. The annual 10-day show, with exhibits by 74 of the world's major dealers, is considered among the country's most watched barometers of prices in fine and decorative arts made before 1945. The show is the highlight of "Americana Week," during which the major auction houses join in by holding sales and smaller shows lure collectors.

During last year's Americana Week, Christie's International took in \$13 million at its sale of such objects. A Christie's spokeswoman says the auction house expects to bring in up to \$36 million at this year's Americana sale. Nearly half of that may come from the sale of a single painting—of George Washington. It's a full-length portrait by Charles Willson Peale that goes on the block tomorrow. Christie's estimates a sale price of \$10 million to \$15 million.

If it makes even its low estimate, the portrait will become the most expensive U.S. portrait sold at auction, topping a Gilbert Stuart painting of Washington that sold in November at rival Sotheby's Holdings for \$8 million. Sotheby's has high expectations for its Americana auctions that start today, estimating sales of as much as \$28 million.

By the end of the Winter Antiques Show, more than \$20 million may have changed hands, a show director says. Price tags vary from less than \$1,000 for a silver ladle to \$1.5 million for John Singleton Copley's preliminary drawing of his famous 1777-1778 painting "Watson & the Shark." (That painting hangs in the National Gallery of Art in Washington.) Last year, Stuart P. Feld of Hirschl & Adler brought one object featuring Washington to the Winter Show; this year, he's offering eight—including five bronze clocks and a Rembrandt Peale portrait.

While interest in Federal-period goods seems strong, sales of furniture



flung Old Masters fans to make two trips to the city instead of one—at least if they want to be a part of the scene. While Sotheby's Old Masters sales start Wednesday, Christie's Old Masters paintings sale is set for April 6.

Some at Christie's had long wanted to shift the New York sale to the spring so it wouldn't closely follow its prestigious London sale in December, says Nicholas Hall, international director of Christie's Old Master Paintings department. But when the house was consigned a rare Venetian view by J.M.W. Turner (estimated at as much as \$15 million) in November, it gave Christie's enough "left" to move the sale and guarantee a turnout then, Mr. Hall adds.

Boston collector Jim Mullen, a retired ad executive, says he'll fly to New York for both sales but predicts that Sotheby's will move its Old Masters to April next year. Splitting the sales is too "inconvenient" for dealers and buyers, he says.

George Wachter, co-chairman of Sotheby's Old Master Paintings Worldwide, says Sotheby's will stay put because collectors get year-end bonuses in January but pay taxes in April, so

"January is too good a month to give up." Highlights of that sale include a terra-cotta relief by Donatello, estimated at as much as \$6 million.

Left, scrimshaw showing George Washington, at New York's Winter Antiques Show; above, a Donatello madonna at Sotheby's



from the mid-1800s have slipped in recent years. Auction experts pin that on young collectors' preference for more modern styles, including 20th century. Still, Americana dealers can get more than \$1 million for a museum-quality Chippendale piece.

Moving Old Masters

THE LAST week of January, a few days after Americana Week winds down, marks the traditional start of Old Master-painting sales. But this year for the first time, Christie's is moving its auction of Old Masters to April, a rare calendar shake-up that requires far-

Pope's Mobile

THE POPEMOBILE is at the Vatican, but a blue sedan once owned by the late Pope John Paul II will go to auction Feb. 11 in Paris, according to Christie's.

The 48-year-old FSO Warszawa, once popular among taxi drivers in Poland, was ordered by the late pontiff in 1968 when he was a bishop in Krakow. He registered the car in his given name, Karol Józef Wojtyła. Lacking a driver's license, he hired a chauffeur, who acquired the car from him in 1977. The chauffeur's nephew is the current owner, and for years the car has been stored in a shed in Poland—it doesn't run, the tires are flat and the exterior is rusted.

The sedan could fetch between \$8,000 and \$24,000, though Jan Löhn, a Christie's car specialist, says it's a "restoration project." Two other cars with papal connections have done well at auction in the past year. In October, Houston trial lawyer John O'Quinn paid \$690,000 for a 1975 Ford Escort GL once owned by the late pope. (Mr. O'Quinn declined to comment.) In May, online casino GoldenPalace.com paid \$244,590 for a 1999 Volkswagen Golf once owned by the current pope, Benedict XVI, and has put the car on tour in England.