

THE DUNCAN

LAWRIE

J O U R N A L

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Odilon Redon (1840-1916)
Vase de coquelicots et mimosa

From the Duncan Laurie Collection

COLLECTING MODERN BRITISH PAINTINGS, DRAWINGS & PRINTS

Novice collectors often approach the idea of starting a collection of paintings and drawings with understandable trepidation. To the first time buyer, auction houses can seem like frightening and mysterious places, certainly not for the uninitiated.

Buying at auction, however, should be a straightforward and enjoyable experience. In the major auction houses a knowledgeable specialist, who more than likely catalogued the picture that you are interested in, should be on hand to discuss its merits with you and give his or her own frank opinion. Secondly, if you are reluctant to bid yourself, a member of the auction house staff will be able to bid on your behalf.

Having braved the front door, which picture or print should you decide to

bid on? The golden and often repeated rule of collecting is a simple one: 'Buy what you like, rather than what you are supposed to like'. If your painting does fall in value, or you end up paying too much money, then at least you are left with something that gives you aesthetic pleasure.

The idea of buying art as an investment is controversial. Auction houses, as a rule, tend to be reluctant to recommend buying art as an investment. Of course, like any other market, prices

rise and fall and the work of currently fashionable and over-hyped artists can fall quickly in value. At the same time, it is important to understand that prices for artist's work can vary enormously depending on size, subject matter and use of medium. James Rawlin, Phillips' London based Modern British picture specialist recommends 'works on paper', (that is drawings and pastels) as being relatively undervalued. A good Christopher Wood drawing, for example, may be bought at auction for a few hundred pounds. A decent Wood painting should sell for considerably more. Likewise, a David Hockney print from the *Brothers Grimm* series might make at auction upwards of £500 depending on subject – a relatively small sum to pay for the work of a major artist and printmaker of the greatest skill.

Having decided to start a collection, where do you begin? The London auction houses have been holding Modern British picture sales since the mid 1980s. The market suffered particularly badly during the art recession but is now recovering well.

The current 'darling' of the salerooms is the once ignored Anglo-Irish painter, Sir John Lavery (1856-1941), whose appealing work in the manner of the great society portraitist, John Singer Sargent, is attracting increasing attention.

A group of rival American Irish collectors have forced prices up as they

*Paul Maze: Henley Regatta sold for £6,200, Phillips, 26 November 1996.
Picture courtesy of Phillips International Fine Art Auctioneers.*



fishing boats and harbours; above all they are a celebration of the sea. *Steamer Leaving Harbour*, again sold at Phillips, fetched £2,500 against an estimate of £1,200-£1,800.

An artist worth looking at, but entirely different in style and content is the French ex-patriate, Paul Maze (1887-1979). Described by his biographer, Anne Singer, as 'The Lost Impressionist', Maze knew Dufy and Braque in youth and met Derain, Segonzac and Bonnard while living in Paris.

Later he settled in England and became a friend of Winston Churchill. His best work, in pastel, shows an England that perhaps never was; rowing at Henley Regatta, race goes at Ascot, Horse Guards Parade, Whitehall in the snow. His work is represented in major collections but is probably undervalued; drawings and pastels may sell at auction for a few hundred pounds, canvases generally in the low to mid-thousands (see illustration).

For lovers of architecture, the work of John Piper (born 1903) might appeal. Piper was a prolific artist in mixed media; his best work, perhaps, explores the decay of some of the great English Country Houses in that grim period of austerity just after the Second World War. Piper was a master at painting brooding water-colour skies and expressing the density of his architectural subjects in crayon and paint.

David Hockney could of course, be considered Britain's most famous artist. An interesting collection might be made of his *Brothers Grimm* series of aquatints and etchings. Hockney became fascinated by the old German fairy tales and at the end of the 1960s decided to produce a series of illustrations from a few selected stories. Prices at auction vary depending on subject, but can be bought for upwards of £300. His better known paintings, usually in acrylic, explore his native Bradford. A medium sized typical Hockney of say, a Californian swimming pool, might set you back £200,000-£300,000 at auction. A Hockney 'photomontage' – that is a collage of snapshots making up an almost three dimensional picture – might sell for only

£4,000-£6,000. One of his best, but slightly sinister prints, *The Hypnotist* recently sold for £3,500 (see illustration).

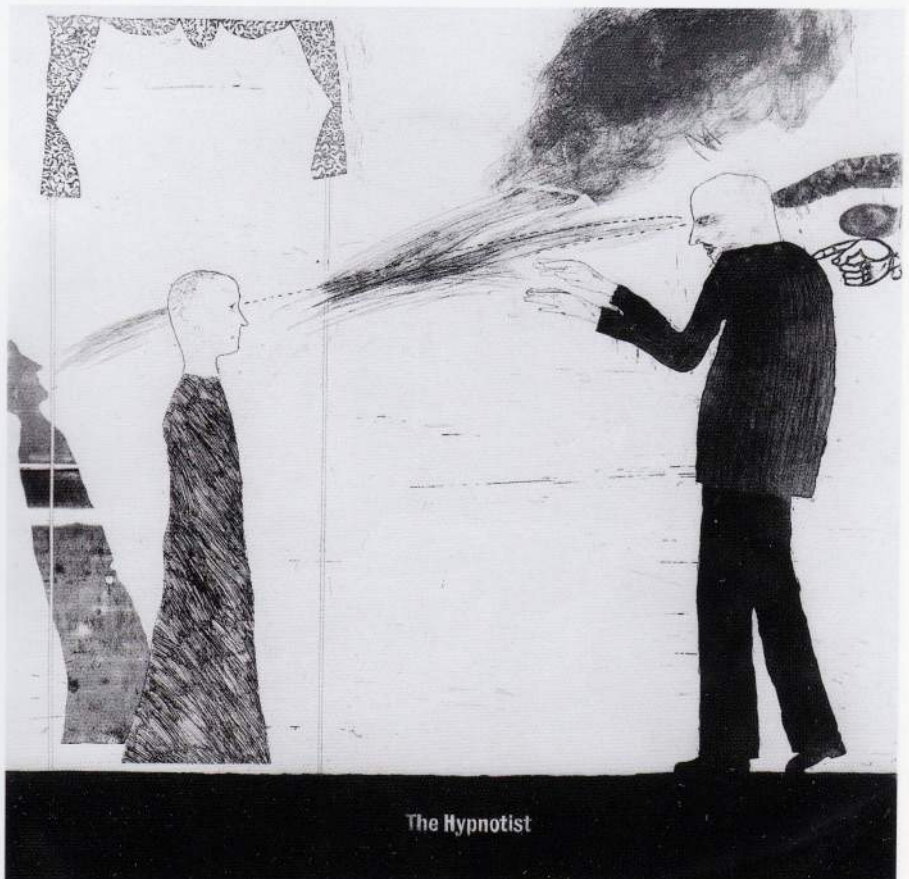
Carel Weight (born 1908), who sadly died this year, was an extremely English painter. His drab London street scenes often conceal a spooky menace; a sense – so English – that behind every respectable yet dull suburban facade, there lurks something far more interesting. In his paintings, buildings and townscapes are portrayed with a vivid accuracy. His work, rightly, has attracted attention and deserves to rise in value.

The topic is obviously a vast one, and like any other specialist field, the more a collector learns about his chosen subject, the more there is to come to grips with. Collecting can be a rewarding and absorbing past-time but should, above all, not be taken too seriously. Buy the painting you like, and if it does increase in value, toast it in champagne. If it falls in value, lean back, shrug your shoulders and just enjoy it.

Luke Honey

'...a David Hockney print from the Brothers Grimm series might make at auction upwards of £500 depending on subject – a relatively small sum to pay for the work of a major artist...'

*David Hockney: The Hypnotist sold for £3,500 at Phillips, 23 June 1997
Picture courtesy of Phillips International Fine Art Auctioneers.*



The Hypnotist