



100 Years of  
Collecting  
in America

The Story of Sotheby Parke Bernet



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# Foreword

The history of fine art auctions in America is an indelible record of public opinion in the realm of aesthetics and taste. In every auction, the work of art that has the greatest appeal commands the highest price, and a reading of the roster of objects and artists most frequently selected gives a clear and fascinating picture of the evolution of fashion and taste in America.

The history of Sotheby Parke Bernet and its predecessor firms in America gives us a quick synopsis of where we were and how we have changed and how much we enjoyed ourselves in the process. Looking at the many illustrations of works of art sold over the course of a century, we are mesmerized by the range of objects that have passed through their auction rooms.

The days when America's cultural resources were sparse and neglected now seem remote, but nearly all of the great collections that we enjoy today were created by just three or four generations of Americans over the last one hundred years. Never before has any nation collected with such an appetite or on such a scale, and the pace seems to accelerate each year. New museums are being built in every state in the nation, established museums continue to expand, and individual collectors spend enormous sums for the work of artists who were unknown just a short time ago.

Auctions play a crucial role in the process of building the outstanding private collections that form the basis of our great museums. As is fitting in a democracy, auctions are open to all, and the only rules are the basic laws of economics. Although record prices catch the headlines and the cost of many objects may be prohibitive, the history recorded here shows that connoisseurship is much more important than a vast fortune to those who would succeed at auction.

I have had the great pleasure of living in a period that can be seen as a golden age for collecting in America. For the past fifteen years, I have been privileged to watch at close range the remarkable growth in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I myself have enjoyed collecting and like many others have lamented the scarcity of first-rate material on the market in one category or another. That has almost always been the case. Because serious collectors set exacting standards, they must expect the chase to be difficult. Still, there is always hope, and new prizes continue to appear at auction. This book is the history of an institution that has had a marvelous collaboration with the collectors of our past and, with the coming generation of collectors, looks forward to an even more exciting future.

DOUGLAS DILLON