

Not your average amateur artist

The name Churchill can take ordinary pictures to out-of-the-ordinary auction results

Report by Gabriel Berner

AN £8.79m total from 15 canvases and an artist's record of £1.5m are the kind of statistics linked to a leading Mod Brit artist, not an amateur one.

Yet, back in December 2014, these were the sums paid for pictures by **Winston Churchill (1874-1965)**, the formidable war-time leader and self-professed amateur artist who, alongside bricklaying, famously painted to relax.

The sale in question was at Sotheby's London where the estate of his youngest daughter, Mary Soames, was offered.

Impeccable provenance and the culmination of two decades of steadily rising values for Churchill pictures combined to set astonishing prices. Wealthy Churchill aficionados and prominent American collectors were at the forefront of the buying.

Admittedly, Churchill is not your average amateur artist, and there is no doubt that the stature of the man has single-handedly created this market – arguably the most valuable in the world for an amateur artist.

Since 2014, however, demand has inevitably softened as few stand-out lots have been able to match the calibre of the Soames sale.

Some who operate in this market even see the record-breaking auction as an anomaly or false market, with prices and demand simply returning to 'normal' levels.

A chance to test the current appetite for top Churchill oils was denied the sector earlier this summer when a 1946-47 view of the River Meuse in Belgium, guided at £600,000-£1m, was withdrawn at Christie's in June.

Boningtons' bulldog spirit

Instead, collectors turned their attention to Essex auction house **Boningtons (23% buyer's premium)** who included a pair of significant Churchill views painted on his travels abroad just after the Second World War in 1946.

Valued at over £500,000, the pair was offered on July 27, fittingly in the auctioneer's saleroom in Epping, Churchill's parliamentary constituency from 1924-45. This was the first time a regional auction house had offered original works by Churchill, despite his prolific output of some 500 pictures.



Above left: Venetian Causeway, Miami Beach, Florida by Winston Churchill – **£160,000** at Boningtons.

Below left: a busy street scene, probably Paris by Elie Anatole Pavil – **£3200**.

Above: a portrait study by Follower of Giovanni Antonio Boltraffio – **£3000**.



a £421,250 total at Christie's King Street in 2010. Nevertheless, the auction house is still confident of an after sale.

Achieving a better result was an exotic but slightly worse-for-wear 2ft 1in x 2ft 6in (63.5 x 76cm) canvas of *A Venetian Causeway in Miami Beach, Florida*. Churchill painted this on a six-week trip with his wife Clementine – their first extended holiday after the war.

They stayed at the Miami Beach home of Canadian industrialist Colonel Frank W Clarke, who was later gifted the picture.

It was in the possession of Colonel Clarke's family until it was sold at auction in Sotheby's New York in 1982 for \$23,000 (then around £12,800).

There were some condition issues including flaking to the surface, perhaps due to Churchill's technique in preparing his canvasses.

A contemporary photograph showing him standing up on an easel was discovered by Luke Bodalbhai, picture specialist at Boningtons. This was an important piece of provenance which had not been included in the

Top three prices for Winston Churchill at auction

■ *The Goldfish Pool* at Chartwell, oil on canvas, 1932, 2ft 1in x 2ft 6in (63 x 76cm) – £1.5m at Sotheby's London, December 17, 2014 (Soames sale).

■ *Tapestries at Bleinheim*, oil on canvas, c.1930, 2ft x 2ft 5in (61 x 74cm) – £900,000 at Sotheby's London, December 17, 2014 (Soames sale).

■ *Chartwell Landscape with Sheep*, oil on canvas, 2ft 6in x 2ft 1in (76 x 63cm) – £875,000 at Sotheby's London, July 13, 2007.

Both had appeared at auction in the last five years and were consigned by a private collector who was looking for a strong return.

The larger and more expensive of the two, priced at a punchy £400,000-600,000, was *The Giza Pyramids at Cairo*, a 2ft 4in x 3ft (71 x 91cm) signed oil on canvas.

Despite its impeccable condition and excellent provenance (it had originally been gifted to Churchill's close friend Field Marshal Jan Christian Smuts), it failed to find a buyer.

The bold estimate was the difference here, especially given its last outing at auction had produced



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catalogue entries of its previous two sales at auction.

Armed with this and a subject matter with strong appeal to American collectors, it got away within estimate at £160,000 – a major house record for Boningtons. The buyer was from the UK trade who outbid an American dealer on the phone.

The sum also bettered the previous price of £145,250 including premium fetched at Sotheby's in 2010.

Beyond Churchill

Elsewhere in the sale, a strong return resulted for a fresh-to-market bustling Parisian scene by Ukrainian artist **Elie Anatole Pavil (1873-1948)**.

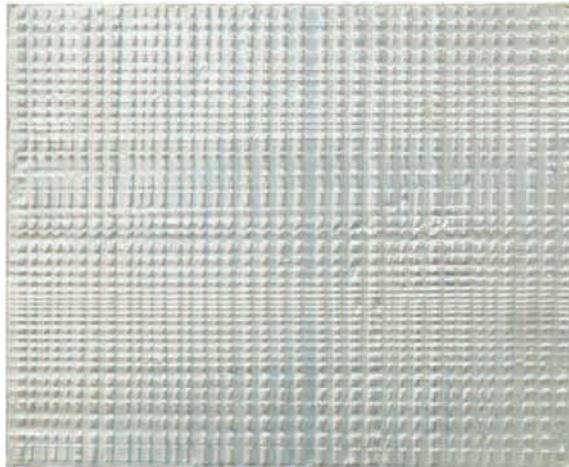
The 12½ x 16in (32 x 41cm) oil on canvas, which bore a shaky signature first thought by the auction house to read 'Paris', was pursued by five bidders, selling to the internet at £3200 against an attractive £400-600 guide.

Although born in Odessa, then part of Russia, Pavil travelled to Belle Époque Paris in 1892, establishing himself in Montmartre. For the next 50 years he painted the cafes, bars, jazz bands and artist ateliers of Paris, inspired by the compositions of Edgar Degas and Pierre-Auguste Renoir.

Following the Paris auction of more than 200 works in 1973 from Pavil's atelier, many of his works have appeared at auction over the years, varying in prices – according to Artnet – from over £130,000 to a few hundred pounds, although these could be fakes.

The other surprise among the pictures was an early Northern Italian portrait study catalogued as by a follower of **Giovanni Antonio Boltraffio (c.1467-1516)**.

At least 17th century but probably earlier, this market-fresh work had been finely executed and was in relatively good condition. It attracted plenty of interest and was pursued to £3000 against a £400-600 guide, eventually selling to a Chinese buyer. Bonington's Bodalbhai said there was a "good hit rate for quality Old Masters in the low thousands, showing that the market is there". ■



Above left: *Untitled, Light Relief* by Heinz Mack – £20,000 at Roseberys. **Above right:** *Ron's Place, Brighton* by Brian Hagger – £1350.



Modern works earn their keep at Roseberys

A MODERN and Contemporary sculpture category was added to **Roseberys' (23% buyer's premium)** mixed discipline two-day sale formula for the first time, earning its keep as it produced some of the sale's top highlights.

The inaugural section of the June 28-29 auction in West Norwood, London, was led by an abstract piece by German sculptor **Heinz Mack (b.1931)**. *Untitled, Light Relief*, the 15 x 19in (39 x 48cm) embossed aluminium relief on board dated '59' formed part of the artist's 'Light Relief' creations – a phrase he coined – which seek to show the way in which light and material worked together to create a finished product.

Consigned from the collection of the recently deceased sculptor Michael Michaeledes, it was fought out by two European buyers on the phone and internet, clearing an £8000-12,000 estimate to reach a final price of £20,000.

The sculptor is best known as a founding member of 'Group Zero', the art movement established in 1950s Dusseldorf that sought to explore kinetic nature of art. The name refers to the countdown for a rocket launch that the group said evokes 'a zone of silence [out of which develops] a new beginning'.

The section also posted solid prices for a pair of privately

consigned works by British artists. The first was animal sculptor **Adrian Sorrell (1932-2001)**, whose bronze *Owl* sold for £1900 against a £500-700 estimate to a London-based buyer. Numbered 1/10 and with a foundry stamp, the 11½ x 10in (29 x 26cm) piece had been consigned by a collector of wildlife art who was downsizing their collection.

The second was **Brian Hagger (1935-2006)**, best known for the pictures he painted of life in Fulham and Chelsea, and later Brighton, during the 1960s and '70s.

He took to the streets documenting the scruffy side of life before areas such as Fulham became the fashionable places they are today.

While his name did not reach national acclaim when he was living, his illustrative style appealed to many, which created a steady stream of sales, and eventually led him to exhibit in many London galleries and at the *Royal Academy Summer Exhibition*.

He moved to Brighton in the early '70s to teach and continued to document the world around him. It was here that he painted *Ron's Place, Brighton*, a 16 x 20in (40 x 50cm) oil on canvas, signed and dated 1978. Guided in Roseberys' sale at £300-400, it sold for £1350.

Spanish Seago

A FINE example of **Edward Seago's (1910-74)** Spanish subjects led **Chiswick Auctions' (20% buyer's premium)** July 19 sale in London. Painting as he went, the popular royal artist made a number of trips to Spain and they regularly appear on the market today.

This c.1950 post-Impressionistic 18in x 1ft (45 x 60cm) oil on canvas, **right**, depicts a sunny beach with figures by a white-washed profile of a house. An old gallery label for a Toronto gallery appeared to the verso. Guided at a modest £7000-10,000, it sold to a bidder in the room for **£18,600**.

The self-taught artist's crisp and highly skilled pictures, which appear simultaneously traditional and modern, pack a punch at auction and attract a strong field of collectors and art dealers.

Although his foreign subjects sell well, particularly those he painted of Hong Kong, the most commercial pictures remain those of his home county of Norfolk.

