

**Session Title:** Christie's and the birth of the European art market

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### **Session Abstract**

The basic structure of today's global art market has its roots in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the establishment of auction houses and art dealerships. These are fascinating times when the art markets of Europe were becoming interconnected and the cross-border trade in works of art was expanding rapidly. Christie's in London was a prime mover of these developments, as the company fast rose to primacy after its inception in 1766. This session aims to explore how Christie's pioneering business practices were instrumental in shaping the London art market, and how the company was able to secure the sale of the most prominent art collections of the period.

The session thereby addresses one of the seminal themes of the conference by examining how and intermediaries in the art ecosystems may have shaped national tastes in the visual arts in the early years of Christie's, and how this relates to the business models of the major auction houses in the contemporary art market. In addition, the internationalization of the art trade invites interesting comparisons with today's emerging art markets. An expert panel will tackle these topics in an interdisciplinary fashion and across time.

### **Session programme (preliminary)**

#### **1) The French connection: James Christie and dealers from the continent**

*Lynda McLeod (Christie's Archives London)*

James Christie, senior (1730-1803), the founder of the auction house and his son James Christie, 'the younger' (1773-1831) sourced pictures (and works of art) for sale from individuals, collectors and dealers from around the UK. With the tumultuous events occurring on the near continent in the late 1780s the auctioneers also fostered relationships with a number of French and Netherlandish artists and artist/dealers to source, supply and ship pictures (and works of art) from continental Europe for sale at their saleroom in London. This paper will examine the relationship with Christie's and dealers such as: the French born dealer and agent for the King of Poland, Noel Joseph Desenfans (1745-1807); the Flemish born painter/dealer Joseph Philippe Tassaert (1732-1803) and Maurice Rubichon (active 1802-1818) the French dealer.

## **2) Christie's and the artist-collector market in late eighteenth century Britain**

*James Goodwin (Erasmus University Rotterdam / Christie's London)*

This paper investigates the influence of Christie's in 1766-1801 on the artist-collector market in relation to other art retailers in late eighteenth century Britain. This research is based on a selection of artists including craftsmen and designers who sold their collections through Christie's between 1766 and 1801 – a total of 2,358 sales including 1,234 identifiable collectors. Using auction catalogues, I will outline and compare Christie's business practices such as supply sources, conditions of sale, auction sale formation, marketing, buyers, prices, and repeat business. Supporting information about the artist's relationship to Christie's and other retailers will come from inventories, bank accounts, letters, diaries etc. From this we should be able to deduce which of Christie's business strategies were influential in the auction market and they may have pioneered – establishing the auctioneer's competitive advantage and unique selling points. This will be placed in the context of the late eighteenth British art market, including changes in auction legislation and art taxes, and external factors, such as revolutionary war, economic development and financial crises.

## **3) Exploring Christie's business model during the early nineteenth century**

*Neil De Marchi (Duke University) & Filip Vermeulen (Erasmus University Rotterdam)*

Between 1820 and 1840, Christie's became the leading auction house in London for (high end) paintings, drawings and prints. The number of sales rose precipitously in these years, without comprising quality. The company was able to take advantage of arbitrage opportunities for a steady flow of artworks from the continent – mostly Dutch, Flemish and Italian paintings. Drawing on previously unexplored sources in the Christie's archives, this paper argues that the auctioneers developed the expertise and engendered the trust among sellers to secure consignments of desirable works of art (collections), which were estimated at realistic and attractive levels which gave the company a competitive advantage in the booming London art market of the early nineteenth century.

### **Convenor details:**

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