

# Sotheby's Loses a Rising Star

PARIS — Sotheby's has lost its rising star in the Old Master paintings arena. Etienne Bréton, director of the Old Masters department at Sotheby's France, has revealed that he is resigning.

After nearly eight years in his present capacity, Bréton is to join forces with Marc Blondeau SA, the Paris art brokerage and consultancy operation set up in September 1987 by another former Sotheby's star. Bréton's departure has far-reaching implications for the com-

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pany. He belongs to the tiny elite of those who went into the art business driven by an early and intense desire to do so.

Bréton said in an interview that his vocation was triggered by the visit of a French dealer to his parents' apartment while he was attending high school. They needed a valuation of the family paintings. As the late François Heim strode into the drawing room with his determined military bearing, he caught sight of the portrait of a woman hanging over the chimney and said as a matter of course: "Ah, you've got a good Thomas de Keyser there." The ability to identify at first glance the work of a little-known Dutch painter of the 17th century greatly impressed the teenager.

He, too, would be an expert.

After graduating in art history from the Sorbonne, the young man did the art training course at Sotheby's in 1982-1983. This was followed by a two-month spell under a French expert Jacques Kantor and another 17 months in the employ of the art dealer Jean Gismond, for whom he built up a small choice collection of 18th-century masters. In July 1986, Blondeau, who was head of Sotheby's France, hired him to become Sotheby's expert in Old Masters and put together the Monte Carlo sales in the field.

Blondeau's instinct was quickly proven right. Bréton's eye was sharp. He performed an early stunt when a young student called Philippe Guinot came in with a painting he had just bought at a French provincial auction for a few hundred francs. This, Bréton quickly found, was a preparatory sketch for Charles Le Brun's "Scevola Confronting Porsenna," painted about 1640-1650. The hunch was brilliant. The early work is in a strong Caravagesque vein. Bréton took it into his sale with a 150,000 to 250,000 franc estimate. Helped by the surprise effect, the sketch climbed to 555,000 francs. The student was over the moon. He later became a gifted dealer based in Bourg-en-Bresse.

Greater finds were to follow.

One day Bréton saw a farmer walk into his office with a family Dürer, wrapped up in a brown paper. Unfortunately, the Dürer was a copy. The farmer bit his lip and said he would come back. He had plenty more at home. Bréton firmly encouraged him to put photographs in the mail rather than go to so much trouble. The photographs duly arrived. It was Bréton's turn to bite his lip. To his disbelief, a whole group of unrecorded works by the rare Neoclassical painter Anne-Louis Girodet could be recognized from the amateurish snapshots. He rushed to see the farmer.

Among his pictures, the portrait of a melancholy child dated 1800 stood out. He is seen leaning three-quarters, holding a book open dan-



*Josse Lieferinxe painting of the Visitation, sold for 1.3 million francs.*



*Etienne Bréton, who will join a Paris art brokerage.*

gling from his hand. The title of a Latin grammar leaps to the eye, "Les Rudiments." Back home, Bréton discovered that a portrait by Girodet was sent to the Salon in 1800 under the title "Portrait of a Child Studying His Rudiment," as the salon catalogue called it. Eventually, Bréton came across a print by Mondsaldy and Devisme that bears out the verdict. It is a view of the Salon room with the pictures hanging and, right in the middle, there appears the melancholy child.

The 1800 catalogue even names the sitter, Romainville Trison, son of the doctor who was Girodet's patron. Along with the other Girodets, the portrait was included in Sotheby's June 16, 1991, sale with a 1.5 million- to 2.5 million-franc estimate. Later, however, it was pulled out. Pierre Rosenberg of the Louvre wanted it and Bréton negotiated a private treaty sale through Sotheby's to the museum.

But Bréton's greater satisfaction in that sale of the farmer's pictures, which netted over 11.1 million francs, was identifying a "Visitation" painted in an unusual style, halfway between Flemish and Italian Primitives. It turned out to be an unrecorded section of a retable of Mary's life of which three others survive. The retable is the work of an artist known only by his other retable, similarly broken up, the Retable of St. Sebastian.

They have been ascribed to a painter called Josse Lieferinxe, do-

cumented as working in Provence from 1493-1508.

Why did discoveries such as these, of which he made many more, fail to keep Bréton happy? Largely, he says, because of the sea change that has affected auction house life in the last four years. Finding and researching pictures took up 60 percent of his time or more when he joined the company. Now this accounts for less than one-fifth. The economic constraints resulting from the fierce competition between Sotheby's and Christie's have led to often self-defeating, cost-cutting efforts.

Marketing has taken over at the expense of connoisseurship. Departmental heads are requested to submit budget projections a year ahead, which can only be done by imagining things. Consigners rarely send in their goods more than four or five months before a planned sale. Fixed budgets are set by administrators for the production of catalogues three months before the sale, on the basis of the estimated value of what is in hand, when the best frequently comes in later, at the eleventh hour, which necessitates impossible juggling. And the list goes on.

ALL this made it hard to resist the prospect of joining Blondeau SA, held out to Bréton the moment the expert, now 34, mentioned to Blondeau that he was thinking of looking for other venues. Blondeau himself followed much the same line of thinking a few years earlier. He too found that the upper hand gained by administrators from the world of finance, the increasing volume of paper work and what he described as the management effort at mind control, made the job unattractive. After 18 years spent with Sotheby's where he was one of the pillars of the Impressionist and Modern Art establishment, Blondeau left to set up in September 1987 the world's first art brokerage and consultancy operation led by an insider from the auction world.

His fundamental idea is rooted in common sense. In the present market structure, where auction houses increasingly tend to present themselves as a public service when they are commercial outfits whose

aim is, quite naturally, maximum profit, art buyers and vendors need an independent advisory body which has no personal stake in what is sold. The auction house expert who puts the sale together is under pressure to sell as much as he can, for the highest possible price. He is not likely to say candidly that his pictures are not very good, or that his own estimate is inflated.

Vendors are confronted with parallel problems. Should they sell a given work at auction? Privately? And just what is the potential value of what they own? On all these scores, the opinions given by dealers or auction house experts could be influenced by their desire to handle the sale.

Blondeau's basic principles are simple. On direct advice to buy he charges a fixed fee, 3 percent at auction, 5 percent in private transactions. On sales he handles, his charge is 10 percent to the vendor, less on important items. Blondeau prefers not to buy from clients. He does so only at the express request of a vendor eager to avoid the publicity of an auction, or dealers, and keen to sell at once. Blondeau then asks him to state his price, which he either accepts or declines.

In the last few years, the operation has taken off. Blondeau SA has been advising on a continual basis 12 to 15 "very serious art buyers." He conducts about 80 transactions a year on a one-to-one basis within a \$50,000 to \$5 million range. In 1991, the operation was extended to Contemporary Art, with Philippe Segalot in charge.

With Old Masters to be handled by Bréton, a new line of substantial business is potentially open to Blondeau SA. Quite a few old-timers, disgruntled at the prices of Impressionist art which they see as out of proportion to the general level of prices, are turning to Old Masters, particularly French 18th-century pictures. From Bréton, they get the in-depth information and detailed coaching that no auction house expert can find time to give, to say nothing of his psychological conditioning. With art consultancy, a third component, equally removed from auction houses and dealers, has been introduced into the art market. It could lead to profound structural changes.