



World Library and Information Congress: 69th IFLA General Conference and Council

1-9 August 2003, Berlin

Code Number: 045-E
Meeting: 106. Art Libraries
Simultaneous Interpretation: -

Sold! The unique research role of auction sale catalogs

Deborah Kempe

Chief, Collections Management & Access
Frick Art Reference Library of The Frick Collection
10 East 71st Street, New York, NY 10021 USA
212 547-0658; 212 879-2091 (fax)
kempe@frick.org

ABSTRACT:

The Frick Art Reference Library has one of the world's richest historic collections of catalogs of art sold at auction. The paper will give an overview of this collection and how it is increasingly used by scholars to determine issues of provenance and, more widely, in studies of the economics of the art market over time, topics that resonate far beyond the field of art historical scholarship.

The second half of the paper will be devoted to the SCIPIO database, an international online union catalog representing the holdings of some leading repositories of art sale catalogs, including the Frick's. As chair of the RLG-SCIPIO Advisory Taskforce for the past six years, I will report on significant enhancements to the database that have occurred during this time, and will issue an invitation to collections in Europe and elsewhere whose records would make SCIPIO a more authoritative and powerful tool for research.

TEXT OF PRESENTATION

The lure of a meeting located in Berlin and devoted to tools of the art trade proved irresistible to me. As a result, I am here for my first IFLA meeting, and delighted to take part in this discussion of art publications that are too often overlooked and underutilized. These publications include auction sale

catalogs, dealers' catalogs, and small gallery catalogs or checklists, materials frequently referred to as ephemeral or "gray" in library literature. This workshop signifies an increasing level of recognition of these materials by librarians and art historians, a trend I am very pleased to contribute to and promulgate. I believe the elevated status is a benefit of supply and demand that has increased at a most fortunate time. The demand from those charged with urgent provenance research and a return to object-based study has coincided with the advent of increased access and improved information tools, as more and more libraries convert records for these materials.

Although I am now twenty years into my career as an art librarian, I must admit that during the first ten years or so spent in a university setting my knowledge of these materials, and auction sale catalogs in particular, was very limited. Neither of the two academic institutions I worked for collected them, so when asked about them at the reference desk, I could do little more than refer patrons to the museum-affiliated libraries in New York that did, those being primarily the Watson Library at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Frick Art Reference Library. I knew about the existence of the SCIPIO database, but lacked confidence searching it. It was only later, when I joined the staff at the Frick, that I began to familiarize myself with these fascinating materials.

While the Frick Art Reference Library does not have one of the largest collections of auction sale catalogs in the world, it does have a very significant historical collection. During the retrospective conversion of our 73,000 auction catalogs, we discovered that over 2,000 were considered unique by Lugt in his *Repertoire des Catalogues de Ventes Publiques, 1600-1925*, and by our own estimation, an additional 8,000 others are extremely rare. The Frick's collection of auction sale catalogs contains 23 catalogs from the 17th century (all of which are reprints or photocopies, however), 1,633 catalogs from the 18th century, and 9,709 catalogs from the 19th century. The remaining 62,000 catalogs are from the 20th century onwards, and we continue to add catalogs in our collecting scope. Burton Frederickson, former editor of the *Getty Provenance Index*, has stated that due to fires in France during the Revolution and the 1871 uprising that destroyed Parisian archives, there are unique copies of French auction catalogs in the Frick. Another strong area of the Frick's collection is catalogs of auctions for the years during and just after WWII. Because of the demand for this WWII material, we prioritized its retrospective conversion.

I could give an entire talk on the fascinating nature of auction catalogs as a unique publishing entity, but that's not why we're here today. Rather, we want to talk about use—and *usefulness*—of these materials, by and for the patrons of our libraries and the scholars we increasingly reach outside of our walls worldwide. Documentation of art sold at auction and privately through dealers is essential to the history of the development of both private and public collections. As Christie's London-based librarian Lynda McLeod stated recently in her fine article in *Information sources in art, art history and design*, "Many of the finest art works that now reside in national collections have previously passed through private collections and auction houses. Research could start with a tantalizing reference to a sale in a private letter or diary." Auction catalogs tell stories. They tell a story of a particular object, sometimes from the time the paint has dried to the present. They tell stories of people: individuals who buy and sell, for all kinds of reasons, and those who sell for them: auctioneers, *commissaire-priseurs*, *experts*. They tell a story of tastes, fashions, and fads for art. They can "dot the lines" in provenance research. Occasionally, they provide the "smoking gun," conclusive evidence of a disputed transfer. The stories they tell are sometimes not happy ones, of greed, desperation, sale under duress. But such circumstances drive the art market. As the saying goes, sales at auction are usually a result of one of the three D's: Death, Divorce, or Debt. In the days before lawyers were quite so involved in these dealings, the rule of "buyer beware" was definitely valid, and some would argue, still so. Catalogs before the late 19th century have no accompanying photographs to document the lots (that's where the Frick's photoarchive can be helpful), and houses were not scrupulous about attributions. For the informed, encoded naming and typography practices were used to signify levels of attribution, but not always. So while not wishing to overstate the usefulness of these materials in provenance research, it remains true

that they are one of the best resources for this purpose. We will no doubt hear more about this slippery slope this afternoon, and I hope we can talk more about these issues in our discussion.

As I mentioned at the beginning of my talk, great strides in access to records for auction catalogs and the data they contain have been made in recent years. A growing number of commercial online databases index the individual lots in a sale. If specific price or seller information is all that is being sought, a researcher need not go further. More often, though, it is desirable to go to the actual catalog to see an illustration for a lot, or to view it in context of the full sale. Furthermore, the online resources have very little retrospective coverage beyond the past few decades. For locating historical catalogs, one can consult the amazing microfiche collections issued by IDC (reproducing European and American sales from 1600 to 1900) or Sotheby's (reproducing annotated copies of their catalogs from 1734 to 1980). That is, if one is fortunate enough to have proximity to a library that can afford them. Recently, IDC has introduced the *Lugt Repertoire online*, and it promises to be a fantastic resource, especially as IDC has introduced fiche on demand. Once a record is identified, the fiche for that individual catalog can be purchased directly from IDC. A broader and more affordable tool is available in the *SCIPIO: Art and Rare Books Catalog* database. SCIPIO was started in 1980 by the Art Institute of Chicago, Cleveland Museum of Art, and Metropolitan Museum of Art as a way to share common data structure, search indexes, and holdings information. The result was what RLG calls "the only existing online union catalog of auction catalogs." There are now over 850,000 records contributed by twenty libraries. Its scope is from the 16th century to the future. The Getty has the oldest record in SCIPIO, a 1599 catalog for a book sale in Leiden; records for upcoming sales are often entered the day the catalogs are released. SCIPIO is now international in scope, but would benefit immensely from additional contributions by members with significant collections. In addition to U.S. contributors, records are added by the National Gallery of Canada and the National Art Library of the Victoria & Albert Museum. Although a huge fan of SCIPIO, I often state that it cannot truly be labeled a definitive resource until the major collections from around the globe are represented. Therefore, I keep a running list of those collections that I would love to see added to SCIPIO. There are no French, German, Italian, Spanish, or Australian holdings in SCIPIO, just for starters! One of our researchers said it best. Dr. Evie Joselow, former Chief of Research for the Commission for Art Recovery of the World Jewish Congress, commented that "SCIPIO has been extremely helpful in our research of art looted by the Nazis. Auction catalogs are particularly difficult to track down, and SCIPIO is the best place to start. SCIPIO would be improved by the addition of records by more libraries holding significant collections of auction catalogs and by the full retrospective holdings of its current contributors." The time is right for SCIPIO to expand, and I hope that you as librarians will make a case to your institutions for joining this union catalog. The record format is MARC21, and use of LC name authority headings is strongly encouraged, but not required. A few special fields such as date of sale are required, but otherwise, it's fairly basic stuff. To encourage the widest participation, RLG offers very attractive terms for contributors. For those who input more than 300 records a year, searching fees are waived. Batchloading has always been free. You do not have to be an RLG member to contribute or to subscribe to SCIPIO. I have chaired an advisory taskforce on SCIPIO since 1997, and since that time have worked with RLG to effect some significant improvements to the database. Search interface and display as well as content standards have all been upgraded in the past year. For more information on SCIPIO, see the RLG website: <http://www.rlg.org/aag/index.html#scipio>

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Deborah Kempe has held a senior management position at the Frick Art Reference Library of the Frick Collection since 1995, where as Chief, Collections Management & Access, she oversees technical services and serves on the Library Steering Committee. Before her arrival at the Frick, she held technical service positions at Avery Architectural Library of Columbia University, New York University, New-York Historical Society, and the University of Arkansas. She has served on the board of the Art Libraries Society of North America and is currently chair of the New York Chapter of ARLIS/NA. For the past six years, she has chaired the SCIPIO Taskforce, advising the Research Libraries Group on the development and marketing of the SCIPIO database of auction sale catalogs. She is interested in collaborations beyond political borders, which are becoming increasingly possible as computer and descriptive standards evolve. She attended the RLG Art Libraries meeting in London in 1998 and was the 1997 recipient of a grant from the British Council to visit libraries in Northern Ireland.