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Predictions for 2016: Partnering in the Online Era



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The following essay is by Ed Beardsley, Vice President and Managing Director, Fine & Decorative Arts, Heritage Auctions.

Many players shape the art market—dealers, collectors, auction houses, advisers, appraisers, fair organizers, museums, and more—all of whom are increasingly involved in projects often linked to online initiatives.

The Internet has made the world a smaller place. We have constant access to global events and news, often in real time. Those involved in the art market are no different, being exposed to the same abundance of information. In response—given the frequent outcome when human ingenuity recognizes opportunity, including making art at all levels accessible—the global art market is growing accordingly, engaging ever more new collectors.

While many art professionals remain in place, these new possibilities are changing business services and roles of the past. Auction experts are becoming private art advisers. Dealers are closing brick-and-mortar operations. Private sales at auction houses are increasing. Auction houses are hiring curators, museum directors, and gallerists as experts and procurers of business. Dealers are holding auctions, while galleries are curating museum-worthy exhibitions. Museums are showing hip young artists. Auction houses are selectively curating and organizing selling exhibitions of emerging talents. Everyone is diversifying.

Change keeps us on our toes, and all the parties noted above are potential partners in any given venture. In an earlier Internet era, eBay purchased Butterfield & Butterfield, an auction house, for the access to its experts. Very shortly, they realized that a brick-and-mortar business didn't fit their model. Now we test these opportunities through partnerships. This acceptance of collaboration within the art trade has increased its vitality, and subsequently, its sales. That said, trusted advisers should always focus on the artwork rather than the partnership and remain available for consultation no matter their defined involvement. It is crucial to master the nuances of all components of an industry, which is ultimately to the benefit of both client and consultant.

The art marketplace will undoubtedly continue to evolve, but I doubt it will shift to an entirely virtual arena. The number of online companies and bidding platforms continues to grow, but even with the expectation that the cataloguing provided is accurate and trustworthy, there will always be important groups of collectors and art professionals who depend on the physical experience of exploring art and meeting each other in person. Receptions, art fairs, auctions, and other events will continue, during which the changing professional roles will surely be among the topics of conversation. My hope is that the discussion will start and end with the art itself.