



The Auctioneer: Adventures in the Art Trade

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Just as William Goldman, the ultimate screenwriter, took us inside Hollywood, Simon de Pury, the ultimate art player, will take us inside an even more secretive business, whose staggering prices, famous collectors, and high crimes are front page news almost every day. The former Chairman of Sotheby's Europe, the former owner of Sotheby's rival Phillips de Pury, and currently a London-based dealer and advisor to great collectors around the world, Simon has one of the highest profiles of any non-artist in the art world. Even though he has an ancient title and the aura of an elegant Swiss banker, Simon is famous as an iconoclast and is known as "The Mick Jagger of Auctions" for his showmanship and exuberance. His whole life in art has been devoted to bringing art to the public and to the juxtaposition of high and low. Movie stars, musicians, and athletes compete with hedge funders and billionaires for the great art, and Simon is their pied piper; he wants to turn the world onto art and this book will be his message.

The Auctioneer: Adventures in the Art Trade Details

Date : Published May 3rd 2016 by St. Martin's Press

ISBN : 9781250059789

Author : Simon De Pury

Format : Hardcover 240 pages

Genre : Art, Nonfiction, Autobiography, Memoir, Biography, Art History

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From Reader Review *The Auctioneer: Adventures in the Art Trade* for online ebook

Julia says

Although I enjoyed a look into the distanced, absurd world of art dealing, I had some major problems with this book. First, de Pury never seems to acknowledge his own privileged upbringing. Growing up as part of the Swiss elite, de Pury admits multiple times that he was never a good student. But naturally his family's connections allowed him to meet and work under many prominent dealers. For example, one of these connections set him up with a plan to work in Bern for a month, then Sotheby's in London and New York for a year each, and then another year at Malborough Fine Art, and yet we are expected to feel sorry for him when it turns out a job at Sotheby's was unavailable at the time and that ~~he~~ his parents would have to shell out thousands of dollars for him to attend the auction house's art course instead.

Second, I wish de Pury had spent more time on details of his life's journey - e.g. odd tasks he had to do at the auction houses, how he accumulated knowledge of art (since he proclaims he is usually too busy to read), and surprising behind-the-scene facts about auctions - rather than which duke married what model or how much a widow's collection sold for. Of course, this was probably a deliberate choice of his ghostwriter/publishing house. That also segues into my third problem with *The Auctioneer*, which is really a problem with the editors. Not only are names spelled correctly and incorrectly in the same paragraph (Ruedi and two words later, Rudi; Brian Ivon-Jones or is it Ivan-Jones?; And the last name of his major boss, Thyssen, is at one point written with a serpentine three s's), but there are also misspellings of common words like "viila" for villa, "ex-amabssador," "Amercan hedge-funders," and "gilded staute of Michael Jackson." Other favorite phrases of mine were "also aka" and "Arnault lived, spoke, and talked culture."

2.5 Stars - Entertaining, yes, but also a low-quality read.

John-Paul says

It's my fault, really. Had I taken a moment to read the dust jacket of this book, I would have discovered that it was rife with anecdotes about the rich and famous, a topic which I could not have less interest in if I tried. I can't imagine a segment of the population that inspires less interest and wastes more ink than the idle rich and please believe me when I say that that opinion does not come from a place of envy. I'm not about to stand in the way of someone that wants to shell out \$10 million on a canvas painted pure white or whose idea of a weekend getaway is traveling to the middle of the Sahara on camelback and drinking fruit juices out of syringes (and no, I'm not making that last one up). However, I also don't want to waste my time reading about them, especially when there are vastly more interesting people doing vastly more interesting things with their time and money.

Unfortunately, the book itself is much more about the glitz and glamour of the people buying all this art than about the art itself. In fact, if this book were a movie, the art would have a walk on role at best. Instead, the reader is subjected to a laundry list of counts and countesses, baron, dukes, earls, and Russian oligarchs whose only claim to fame are the conspicuous ways in which they spend their immense wealth. Perhaps there are those that will get a kick out of living vicariously through such people. I can name one such individual right off the bat: Simon de Pury.

I must preface this by saying that I think he's probably a very nice gentlemen and I'm certain he knows his art, but sake's alive! We all knew people in school whose whole *raison d'etre* was to be just like the cool kids. Well, I'm here to tell you that de Pury seems to be the adult version. In addition, there's a tone in the book, particularly the beginning, that comes off as haughty and aristocratic. I'm not sure that it was his intent, and it's not surprising considering the company he keeps, but it's there nevertheless.

There were many quotes in the book that had me doing double-takes upon reading, but here's one I couldn't resist writing down: "People only care for things if they are worth something." Really? I have a daughter whose prize possession is a beat-up old teddy bear. Not only isn't it worth a red cent, we'd probably have to pay someone just to take it off our hands. But doesn't it derive its priceless quality from her, and not from the world? You may say, "Well, he didn't mean monetary worth." Actually, I'm pretty sure he did, because the quote was in reference to a couple that brought him what they believed to be a valuable heirloom. When he indicated it was worthless (monetarily) they shoved it back in the box they had lovingly and carefully packed it in and went away dejected. Hence, his quote. Again, perhaps it came out the wrong way, but that's what his co-author was there to do, make sure things didn't come out the wrong way. Right?

There are more intrigues, affairs, improprieties, and oddities than I care to remember in this book and the whole work seems to be one big valentine to Simon de Pury's favorite person: Simon de Pury. I simply cannot fathom his worldview. For example, he mentions how "generous" millionaires and billionaires are for spending \$19,000 on tickets to a charity auction. Have we lost all understanding of the definition of the word? If I have a triple-tiered cake and I give you three crumbs off of it, am I being "generous?" I understand that the people that inhabit this world are his bread and butter and it behooves him to treat them with kid gloves, but his attempts to paint them as regular Joe and Joanne Six-Packs were laughable.

After reading this review, you may think that I'm some sort of "Occupy Wall Street" death-to-the-1% anarchist, but you would be very wrong. However, if I had to read another one of these kind of books...

sendann says

Just...not very good, because it doesn't have any humor about itself. Hardcore namedroppy bragathon books can be lovely when they have a fun, self deprecating, long point of view woven throughout. They can also succeed if the stories, setting, and information is so rich and detailed that it takes you in and shows you its world without apology. Unfortunately this book stops short at every opportunity to welcome the reader into a world using either method. It feels like it was written for friends of the author and those who appear in its pages. A bummer, because I would just love to read a deep, dynamic memoir about life in the commerce department of the fine art world.

Lorraine says

"The Auctioneer" is a memoir by Simon de Pury, a prominent auctioneer of fine art. It's not as detailed as you would expect from an autobiography. In fact, it gives little personal detail. I ended the book not feeling that I knew much about de Pury, and certainly not much about the people close to him, such as his wives and children.

Overall, I found this a rather flat book. De Pury comes across as rather arrogant. The world he works in is so

exclusive that readers unfamiliar with it have little context for his claims of extraordinary achievements. Although many of the names he mentions were famous in their day, few are well known now, disadvantaging a significant number of readers.

More importantly, there is little spirit in this book. Few anecdotes are told in any detail; we don't get a strong sense of many of the people de Pury interacts with; and what should be a vivid and exciting life simply doesn't come across that way.

This, I think, is best suited to anyone who is an aficionado of fine art, especially of the auctions in which it changes hands. Many others will struggle to stay interested.

Mary Crotty says

I finished this biography, barely- a lot of skimming. A not very pleasant main character and the book read like a diary fleshed out by a ghost writer which i think is exactly what it was. Lots of dates, names, places, not a lot of insight or projection or contemplation. Pretty boring. Some interesting comments on the oligopolic art world and naming of names - especially famous actors- that was interesting. Apparently Leonardo DiCaprio's acting in Walk Street wasn't really acting

Cynthia says

I am sorry to say that I really did not care for this audiobook. I thought that the subject would be really interesting- it was anything but. It seemed to be a mishmash of stories with no real point. There was a tremendous amount of name-dropping done. Unfortunately, I recognized very few of them. The author alternately bragged and put on his humble suit. It was tiring and not terribly interesting. Making the audiobook more unpleasant was the narrator. He read rather emphatically and that was tiring as well. I also did not like hearing Van Gogh referred to as Van Goff. Several of the narrator's pronunciations were annoying.

Would not recommend, I am afraid.

Taryn says

Auctioneer Simon du Pury shares the story of his life. He explains what lead him into the art world and describes his ascent from a Sotheby's intern to the "Mick Jagger of auctions." He also introduces us to the men who had a great impact on his life and career: Swiss art dealer Ernst Beyeler, auctioneer Peter Wilson, and art collector Baron Heini Thyssen. **There were many interesting anecdotes, but the art and auctioneering aspects were overshadowed by the intricate details of the lives of the rich and famous. Despite my interest in the arts, I think I was the wrong demographic for this book.**

*In art, knowledge--of the art, and of the buyers--was power, and knowledge meant business.
Ignorance could only be measured in misery and failure, never bliss.*

I really liked Hannah Rothschild's *The Improbability of Love* and my educational background is in the fine arts, so I thought I would really enjoy *The Auctioneer*. **However, it was too much Top 1% gossip for me.** The 1-percenters are going to play a large part in a book on this topic, but it was just **too many details**. I ended up skimming through many sections of the book, because **many paragraphs read like lists of names and places**. Not only do we learn about the lovers, finances, and estates of the art collectors, but we also learn those details about people in their immediate social circle. The gossip didn't entertain me because I had no clue who 90% of these people were and there were too many to get to know them well via the text. **It might have a different effect on the wealthy and/or those that came into adulthood during the 1980s.** All that being said, de Pury has an *amazing* memory! As a brief example of what I am talking about, here is a random sample:

Denise had just had the house redecorated by the interior decorator of the moment, Renzo Mongiardiano, an Italian former theatrical set designer who had been discovered by Stavros Niarchos to redo his Kulm Hotel in St. Moritz. Once Niarchos "discovered" Mongiardiano, so did the rest of the Jet Set. He also had the Kennedy imprimatur, thorough Lee Radziwill, so he was unstoppable.

(I actually did know who the Niarchos family was, thanks to Paris Hilton :)) **So why did I keep reading? There was some interesting information buried in the sea of proper nouns.** While I found the text dry, Simon du Pury himself is full of personality. The writing style is **pithy**. Every time I thought he was getting a little pompous, he would display some **self-effacing humor**. **The humor is not always politically correct.** It seemed overly irreverent and out-of-touch to compare business struggles to atrocities that largely affected the lower classes, whether tongue-in-cheek or not. I thought it was an odd direction to go in the current political climate.

Was I delusional? Maybe, but if you love art, and you believe in art, you always know that art will come back, and take you along with it.

I admired Simon de Pury's vision. He is not afraid to push boundaries and shake things up. He is honest about his failures, as well as his successes. His career has had many highs-and-lows and he walks us through all of them. One of my favorite anecdotes was from the beginning of his career when he accidentally sliced into a priceless work of art. Can you imagine? He also tells the highly entertaining story of how a jilted lover got revenge on him via an art auction. *The Auctioneer* gives a real-world glimpse at the eccentric buyers and sellers that could have stepped right out of Rothschild's fictional book. My jaw dropped when I read about the buyer who spent over \$150 million on two paintings by very famous artists and publicly expressed his wish to be cremated with them!

The moral is that if you buy the best, in the long run, if you can stay the course, you will not overpay.

I love books about unique careers and I would have loved more insider information about

auctioneering and art, within the context of de Pury's career. He briefly discusses how the face of collectors has changed from royalty to MBAs and how different cultures view auction practices. The back cover teases a reveal of a "[high] crime of an industry known to the elite few, until now." There are two things that I think that sentence could be referring to and the most interesting of the two is revealed in the first twenty pages. **The ways in which art and auctions are impacted by historical events and the role art plays in politics is also interesting.** How World War II affected the art world, even now, is endlessly fascinating to me. During his career, de Pury was able to play a part in global politics. While he was working with Thyssen, they were asked to provide paintings to set the proper mood at Ronald Reagan and Mikhael Gorbachev's Geneva Summit in 1985. There is also a really interesting section about an auction he held to give exposure to Russia's "unofficial" artists.

I ask not for whom the gavel tolls. I know it tolls for me.

Simon de Pury has had an amazing life! The man designed his own Swatch watch! In my plebeian eyes, that is the pinnacle of success! ;) However, I prefer memoirs that are more personal. I enjoyed the introspective tone of the final page of this book, more than the gossip of the previous chapters. **The name-dropping reduced my interest in this book considerably, but I think the audiobook may have been slightly more enjoyable.** The sample I listened to was read with the exuberance that I imagined de Pury speaking with. I've also enjoyed listening to a series of Simon du Pury interviews from Big Think.

While *The Auctioneer* was just an okay read for me, ArtNet's review claims the excessive name-dropping is "the most enjoyable, and creative, aspect of the book." Just like in art, it is all a matter of preference! **If you are a fan of contemporary art and would like a glimpse into the lives of the obscenely wealthy, this book may be for you.** Or if you are like me, and are interested enough in the subject to dig through piles of names to get to the good stuff, it might be worth a read.

Some positive reviews, because I may just be the wrong demographic for this book: Kirkus | Publisher's Weekly. The first six chapters are available through Amazon's Look Inside feature.

Many thanks to Goodreads Giveways and St. Martin's Press for the opportunity to read this book. I won this book in a Goodreads giveaway. This does not affect my opinion of the book or the content of my review.

Margaret Sankey says

Simon de Pury's tone-deaf anecdotes about his time in the high-flying world of art mostly want me to lead a bunch of pitchfork wielding peasants to his door to roust him and his ballerina-avant-garde portraitist-lingerie-model girlfriend.

Mary Rose says

You know, for someone who says he's been "seduced" by art, he doesn't talk about art at all. He just sounds like he's been seduced by a lifestyle of the rich and famous art collectors, which is all this book is about. It's an interesting read if you want to see how nepotism and aristocracy are alive and well, but it also might just depress you.

Roxy says

Firstly I'd like to thank the publisher for gifting me a copy of this book.

The Auctioneer is an interesting and revealing book about the multi million dollar business of fine art. It is very informative and, being written by an insider, it gives you a real feel for the secretive world of art auctions. While it was a fascinating read, I did find that certain parts were a little dry and at times slightly haughty. But overall it was an enlightening read for anyone interested in the world of fine art.

Sharon Jarvis says

An intriguing insight into the unusual world of art auctions but also into the man himself, Simon de Pury, who provides compelling anecdotes , 'gossip' about a wide range of rich and famous people and the fascinating world of auctioning which is obviously an adrenaline rush for those involved. His story is infectious and I really enjoyed reading about this unusual environment. While there were parts that were dry and a little tedious for the most part it was amusing and interesting.

Thank you to The Reading Room and publisher Allen & Unwin for a copy to read and review.

Debra Komar says

The jacket promises a gossipy tell-all style trip through the high-priced art world. What the text delivers is the autobiography of an auctioneer few people have heard of. There is a lot of name dropping but the references mean little to anyone who wasn't part of the jet-set in Europe in the 1970s. Two celebrities - Sarah Jessica Parker and Leonardo DiCaprio - feature near the end and there are virtually no discussions of the artists themselves. The only time art is mentioned is to cite the prices each piece went for - not what interests me about art. I was hoping for some talk about the art of auctioneering: how to get bids going and the mob mentality that keeps people bidding long after they should stop. There's none of that. Little of it is actually set in the auction room. Disappointing, and a little misleading.

Cristhian says

Esperaba algo mucho más... saucy.

Niki says

DNF at 10%

Simon De Pury is an annoyingly pompous man, but I might have been able to trudge through his memoir (for the sake of art) if the narration hadn't been so teeth-gratingly bad. I could say that I might revisit this in print, but I know I really won't.

Erik Moloney says

Just as William Goldman, the ultimate screenwriter, took us inside Hollywood, Simon de Pury, the ultimate art player, will take us inside an even more secretive business, whose staggering prices, famous collectors, and high crimes are front page news almost every day. The former Chairman of Sotheby's Europe, the former owner of Sotheby's rival Phillips de Pury, and currently a London-based dealer and advisor to great collectors around the world, Simon has one of the highest profiles of any non-artist in the art world. Even though he has an ancient title and the aura of an elegant Swiss banker, Simon is famous as an iconoclast and is known as "The Mick Jagger of Auctions" for his showmanship and exuberance. His whole life in art has been devoted to bringing art to the public and to the juxtaposition of high and low. Movie stars, musicians, and athletes compete with hedge funders and billionaires for the great art, and Simon is their pied piper; he wants to turn the world onto art and this book will be his message.
