

WHO'S NEWS

Art Consultant Sanada Shepherds Japanese Flocking to Major Auctions

By MEG COX

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NEW YORK—Thanks partly to Ikkan Sanada, Black Monday has failed to make the art market blue. The droves of eager Japanese collectors and dealers who the New York-based consultant shepherded to major auctions in the past two weeks have helped keep the bidding lively.

The sale of Vincent van Gogh's "Irises" at Sotheby's Wednesday night for \$53.9 million—the highest price ever paid for an artwork at auction—was global news. But it gives a misleading impression of the post-crash state of the art market. Dealers and collectors who sat through auctions the past two weeks, the heart of the fall auction season in New York, saw a market that was strong but far less euphoric than it was last May. About 25% of the expensive works offered here recently didn't sell, even though those that did brought prices so high that total sales set records.

But a big factor buoying the art market was the heaviest buying ever by Japanese. And on the Japanese scene, Mr. Sanada is one of the more visible and important players. One of the few Japanese consultants who understand Western art as thoroughly as Japanese culture, Mr. Sanada has helped educate buyers who had known next to nothing of auctions.

Two weeks ago, Mr. Sanada sat through contemporary art sales flanked by about 18 "beginner collectors" from the Keiyu Forum, an association of young Japanese entrepreneurs, helping them buy works by Jackson Pollock and others. Last week at the impressionist auctions, he accompanied his client Kazuo Fujii, president of the Fujii Gallery of Tokyo, who would occasionally pop up to snap flash photos of the proceedings in between buying multimillion-dollar paintings.

The Japanese have bid at auction here for years, but their presence this year was the strongest ever, fueled by the robust yen and aggressive marketing and education campaigns by the auction houses, Christie's International PLC and Sotheby's Holdings Inc. Last May, the Japanese walked away with about 30% of the major impressionist artworks sold at Christie's and Sotheby's. The previous record artwork, a \$39.9 million van Gogh sold at Christie's in London last March, was bought by Yasuda Fire & Marine Insurance Co. of Tokyo.

At Christie's big evening sale of impressionist and modern art last week, Japanese buyers swept up 48% (by dollar value) of the art for sale. They bought five of the 10

most-expensive works. "This is the biggest attendance by Japanese I ever saw, no doubt about it," says Mr. Sanada. "There are plenty of new faces."

The son of an art-loving journalist, Mr. Sanada left college at age 19 to move to Paris, where he worked for six years in a Japanese-owned art gallery that sent French impressionist art to Japan. "Since I was too skinny to carry things, they asked me to learn French and Japanese accounting and export laws," he says. He briefly returned to Tokyo, but he found his age to be a barrier. "A 27-year-old art dealer is a joke in Japan," he says. "You have to respect the old guy."

So he moved to New York, where he studied English and art history. In 1982, he set himself up as a "runner," finding art for Japanese art dealers.

Now, he works out of his home in White Plains, N.Y., offering intensive personal services for a nucleus of 10 big clients, mostly dealers. For Mr. Fujii, for example, who speaks no English, Mr. Sanada acts as tour guide and translator as well as adviser, accompanying him to every auction and dealer he wants to visit when he comes to New York twice a year.

"In times of auction season, some ask me which paintings or prints they should go for and what is a reasonable limit," says Mr. Sanada, a slight, bespectacled man whose boyish face makes him look much younger than 37.

Mr. Sanada gets kudos from New York dealers. "The other Japanese advisers I have dealt with don't know as much about art," says one SoHo art dealer. "They come in with a list that someone else has made and they will only pay attention to that list. If you veer from the list slightly and say, 'This is a better painting or more interesting drawing,' it is clear they are in unfamiliar territory."

There are far more Japanese art buyers armed with the knowledge and interest to buy at American auctions, and experts predict that they'll be around even if the yen should drop a bit. But Mr. Sanada isn't satisfied merely with more Japanese buying. He wants to change the taste of Japanese buyers who know only French Impressionism, and inspire them to buy more contemporary American art.

Mr. Sanada did score a major triumph last May, persuading a Japanese businessman who had never heard of artist Willem de Kooning to buy a major painting at an auction three days after he arrived from Tokyo. "I took him to the Museum of Modern Art and lectured him," says Mr. Sanada. "I told him that it was too late to start a museum-quality collection of French impressionists, but not for American contemporary art. And besides, he wouldn't be competing against other Japanese." At an auction at Sotheby's, the businessman bid for a de Kooning, and let out a whoop as his bid won at \$2.5 million.



Ikkan Sanada