



Online antiques

IT PAYS TO DO A LITTLE INTERNET HOMEWORK BEFORE POINTING AND CLICKING ON ART AND ANTIQUES

BY CAROLINE ASHLEIGH

1. Know the field.

Beauty, rarity, condition and historical importance all play a role in establishing an auction price. For a painting by a major artist, check whether it's typical of his work; ask the history of ownership and whether it's signed. For furniture, history and condition are important. For a modest print, a sense of prices on similar items is probably enough.

2. Be a wary consumer.

When the description of an item sounds too good to be true, be careful. Ask yourself the obvious, i.e., "Why would a pair of Imperial Ming jars be listed for such a low price?" The answer may be that they're fakes.

3. Research price parameters.

Don't be misled by high or low estimates. Bidders assume that sellers have placed a price close to what they paid; or that they have special knowledge. But often this is not the case. Unscrupulous sellers know that putting a high price on an object conveys a sense that it is authentic and valuable. Do independent research. Check prices for similar items

4. Check the seller's reputation.

A declaration that something is authentic and guaranteed is meaningless if the seller is unknowledgeable or dishonest. Unfortunately, the art and antiques market is cursed with a high proportion of fakes, which can look better than real antiquities to inexperienced buyers. Research the seller's track record in online auctions; query people in the field about the seller's standing, and ask to come by and see the item. (The seller won't know if you can actually get there, so a "no" should raise a red flag.)

Web site "feedback" registering buyers' compliments or complaints is supposed to be a bulwark against dishonesty, but where art and antiques are involved, it's not much protection. Determined professional criminals create positive feedback by selling high volumes of low-value items over several months.

5. Request a condition report.

When bidding, get a detailed condition report from the seller, specifying even minor flaws. If the purchase is a major investment, arrange to see the

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POPULAR ONLINE ANTIQUE SITES

- sothebys.com
- christies.com
- igavel.com
- icollector.com
- heritagegalleries.com

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object yourself or have an independent appraiser look at it. Photographs help, but they can be deceptive; clear, high-quality images suggest the seller is professional and attentive to accuracy. A detailed condition report also provides protection if the object arrives and is not in the shape expected.

6. Beware of reserves and sniping.

Hidden reserves protect the seller from letting go of an item at a price below what they want; it's perfectly legal, but is less advantageous to the buyer. So-called sniping, in which a bidder can lose to a competitor who places a slightly higher bid in the final seconds, is prevalent on online auction sites with fixed closings, such as eBay. Look for sites that eliminate sniping by having extended bidding — a feature that automatically extends an auction by up to five minutes whenever two competing bids are received in the final moments.

7. Scrutinize hidden costs.

Internet bidding at live auctions is convenient, but often costly. Many live auctioneers have a live-bid link that allows people to place online bids, and while it's useful to see what an auctioneer is offering, be aware that you may be charged a higher buyer's premium above the hammer price.

8. Conceal your user name.

Remaining anonymous during online auctions can be wise if you are known in the field or if you're buying a gift.

9. Be savvy about shipping costs.

Reputable sellers will provide a shipping estimate posting an item; read it carefully. Some sellers offer items with ridiculously low reserves, hoping bidders won't notice the excessive shipping costs.

10. Know your rights.

Reputable sellers provide guarantees. These should specify authenticity and/or condition, what steps will be taken to judge whether the item meets conditions, and the time frame for challenging the transaction. Most major auction sites guarantee only the lot heading, not the specifics of each item.

Look for sites that specialize in a particular subject, such as art or antiques. And look for those that offer site-wide guarantees and that use experienced appraisers in their fields to authenticate objects before they're offered for sale. If you buy art or antiques from any source and you're unhappy, take your purchases to the nearest state museum for authentication and peace of mind. □

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