

Ask the Artsperts

by Kristine Meek and Juliana Meek

Harmon-Meek Gallery, Naples, FL

Galleries versus Auctions

Dear Artsperts:

I went to a gallery and saw an artist that I really liked, but being new to buying art I decided to research the artist online before purchasing from the gallery. I was surprised that the prices were so much lower at auctions than in the gallery.

Signed,
Going...Going...Gone

Dear Gone,

Most often works of art are brought to an auction house for sale because of one of the eight “Ds”. Death, Divorce, Debt, Downsizing, Damaged work, Disliking an earlier purchase, Deaccessioning from a museum, or Disposing of a work garnered by an insurance company. The person or entity in one of these eight categories will find that the immediate need to sell the work as quickly as possible outweighs the desire to realize the full value of the work.

So yes works will often sell for less at auction than at a gallery. Artists work with galleries to establish prices which are based on the reputation of the artist coupled with national and sometimes international retail market factors. Retail markets refer to galleries. Auction prices are seen as wholesale and are not taken into consideration by galleries, even when auctions result in higher prices.

A sale price at auction represents the desirability of one particular work of art at one moment of time and relies on more than one individual bidding on the work. There could be many factors affecting the work’s desirability, including questions of condition, provenance, or simply that the work is not as strong as others in an artist’s body of work. If a work goes for a high price compared to galleries, the work may be a particularly rare or desirable work or there may be investor speculation occurring. Auction prices fluctuate greatly due to so many factors and therefore cannot serve as a basis for gallery prices, which are far more stable.

It is easy to find past auction records for any particular artist. It is not so easy to stay vigilant to keep up with all of the auction houses if you are in search of a purchasing a particular artist at auction for the better prices. It is further complicated if you only want a particular medium or subject matter by the artist. It could be several years before the work you want comes up at auction.

Art is very personal. People build art collections based on how they can relate or connect with artwork on a personal level. Collecting through purchases at auctions can severely limit this process of connecting with a work. Often you will be restricted to seeing a photo image of the work and you will have to worry about condition and provenance since auctions are largely “buyer beware”. Some auction houses will supply condition reports when requested. Also, another potential drawback is that auction records are published and easily found online. This severely limits future resale value in our experience. People believe the published auction price is the established price for that work indefinitely.

With a gallery that represents the artist or artist estate, your experience will be far more pleasant and personal. You will have the luxury of selecting from several works of art by the

artist. You can purchase immediately without having to wait for the work you want to come up at auction. Often, you can try the work in your home before making a final decision. If it is a local purchase the art dealer will offer to deliver and hang the work for you in your home, even if the hanging is over a stairwell, from a ceiling or over a mirror. With living artists, you will be given the opportunity to meet the artist at an opening, artist talk, or dinner provided by the gallery. You will also receive a book about the artist, if available, with the purchase of a work.

A gallery will go above and beyond to ensure your happiness providing services that do not exist with auctions.

Sincerely,
The Artsperts



Dinner with the artist William Entrekin at Harmon-Meek Gallery



William Meek with the aid of Juliana hung these two Abe Lincoln works by Hunt Slonem twelve feet above the floor on opposite sides of a center fireplace in a private home in Naples.