

—5. Auctions

INTERVIEW

Robert Ketterer *Ketterer Kunst*

Founded in 1954, Munich-based Ketterer Kunst is a family-owned auction house specialising in art from the 19th to 21st centuries, as well as rare books. Last year it achieved a turnover of about €100m. Having taken over the business in 1994 at the age of 25, CEO and auctioneer Robert Ketterer leads the company from both boardroom and podium. He tells us how his clientele has changed in recent years and why auction houses outside the world's main art hubs now have a chance to shine. — GCH

Who are Ketterer Kunst's clients?

It's an ever more diverse group. In the past it was the wealthy entrepreneurs of the postwar *Wirtschaftswunder* [West Germany and Austria's economic bounceback of the 1950s]. Then these were joined by a broad range of business owners or successful lawyers and doctors. In the past 20 years, I have seen an enormous change driven by the internationalisation and digitalisation of our business. We now have clients from around the world, mostly private individuals but also a number of museums and collections. We recently sold a Gerhard Richter painting to a collector in Hong Kong, other works to customers in the Middle East and Asia, and modern art to US bidders.

As the CEO, why do you still choose to lead the major biannual auctions?

I really enjoy it and it is where I excel. The key to being a good auctioneer is empathy, knowing the art and the audience. We have bidders in the room, on the phone and on the internet but I know who they are at every moment. You need to have good communication, to know when to push and when to stop – and to not be so fast that you miss bidders. I've been doing this for more than 30 years; there are many small tricks that come with the experience.

What sets Ketterer Kunst apart from other auction houses?

Our auctions are quite small, with only 400 objects. We insist on printing catalogues in German and English, which is remarkable. Most houses have stopped printing catalogues but we send 10,000 of them all over the world.



If you have the catalogue on your table, it commands more attention than a link in your inbox. Plus, consignors are more likely to sell at a higher price if their artwork is in print. We also started digitalising early, in 2007. During our sales, we have a video live-stream using up to nine cameras with three operators and three people directing what you see, with close-ups and different information – so it's not boring; it's like a television show.

What do auction houses in mainland Europe have to gain from Brexit?

Brexit changed a lot of things and so did the pandemic. In 2018 or 2019, there were two major auction spots in the world: London and New York. Now you can find big auctions in Paris, Munich, Shanghai or Hong Kong. We used to go to London for one week and it was fun to jump between the auctions at Sotheby's and Christie's but buyers now realise that they can go elsewhere.

Looking ahead, what are you most excited about?

We hold big biannual auctions and our next one is in June, with names like Alexej von Jawlensky and Gerhard Richter. We have a Max Pechstein painting, which is amazing because until two months ago it was in the Nationalgalerie in Berlin. It's part of a restitution case and has been given back to the heirs of the collector. Restitution cases are really important in the global art market at the moment. kettererkunst.com