

Upper East Side

It was a bitterly cold 'Upper East Side' morning when I was viewing a New York auction that, I hoped, would offer tempting old master paintings. Usually, the paintings and sculptures on show were either indifferent, poor 'school' copies or 'not my period.' I was searching for early and High Renaissance paintings that were affordable but more often than not, in poor condition, but when in the care of talented English conservators, could undergo miraculous resurrections.

Well, on this particular frosty January morning I struck gold. Hanging above an unpolished and worm eaten Italian credenza was a poplar wood panel covered in layers of tissue paper and yes, behind the paper there appeared to be the outline of a Renaissance Virgin and Child.

The tissue paper was acting as bandage for the crumbling paint behind. When early painted panels are subjected to the dry conditions of central heating, the chalk 'gesso' layer behind the paint surface can start to break away – hence the need for the protective tissue paper. The auction room expert was uncharacteristically honest with me, fearing that if I were to buy the painting and have it flown to England I would be lucky to find any paint left on the wood panel – the vibrations of international travel would make certain that gesso, pigment, and tissue paper would make one small heap of dust at the bottom of the wooden crate.

The need to buy one old Italian wood panel bereft of paint wasn't in the least bit tempting but the results of half an hour's research changed my mind. I discovered that the painting was listed in Berenson's 'Italian Painters' and had been given an authorship: it was by the 'Master of The San Miniato Altarpiece' – a major Florentine master of the Renaissance, and so one battered old panel miraculously morphed into a masterpiece.

The painting was estimated at \$8,000 – an extremely modest figure – but I realized with an auction room bursting at the seams with Italian art dealers I was going to have to pay a much higher price. The auctioneer, after what seemed an eternity of bidding, finally knocked down the painting to me for a princely sum of \$75,000. My immediate reaction was not one of joy and victory but one of sheer desperation and panic: I phoned my brother in Wales and told him I had just made myself bankrupt.

I needed to calm down – to chill out! But instead of sipping a glass of iced water with a slice of lemon I walked over to the local Starbucks and ordered a treble shot espresso – not sensible! Across from my table I noticed a bevy of Italian art dealers, one of whom had been my under-bidder for the painting. Unsurprisingly, they averted their eyes from my table and concentrated on their coffees and continued their conversation. .

To this day I cannot understand why, after 'blowing' so many dollars on my battered Virgin, I felt the need to bid on yet another lot in the auction. Lot 263 was a 'miss-

catalogued' terracotta head of Christ; the auction room had described it as 17th century, whereas it was, in fact, a fifteenth century 'bozzetto' – a clay model that would eventually be the 'core' for a bronze cast.

Well, as I had 'bankrupted' myself on the painting, buying a small clay head at a couple of thousand dollars wasn't going to make too much difference to my financial embarrassment. But these thoughts were academic: the coffee drinking Italians would surely win the prize and easily outbid me on lot 263. However, I had nothing else better to do than saunter back to the saleroom, sit in the back row of a now nearly deserted room and have a modest bid. But what was very odd were the lack of Italian dealers; there was no sign of my 'friends' from Starbucks. Anyway, I bid and the kind auctioneer knocked down lot 263 to me for \$2,000, but within micro-seconds of his gavel hitting the desk top, the double doors behind me swung open and in flooded the Starbucks Italians – headed by Georgio, who, while running towards me, asked in a desperate manner, how much 263 had made.

'Two thousand dollars,' I replied. 'No, Richard, how much was 263?' 'For the second time, two thousand dollars,' I repeated. No, Richard, the head of Christ, how much was the head of Christ?' 'Georgio,' I replied, 'for the third time and last time, it made two thousand – and I bought it.'

On hearing my third affirmative reply, Georgio screamed to his Maker and went into a huddle with his fellow dealers. They re-grouped and approached me again but more stealthily – a more imploring approach. 'Ok, Richard,' Georgio gently asked, 'Maybe you take a little profit – perhaps we take it off your hands for three thousand dollars.'

'No, Georgio,' I replied, 'it's not for sale today, I know it's fifteenth century so I shall wait to exhibit it at the European Fine Arts Fair and correctly catalogue it. But tell me Georgio, why didn't you buy it?' 'Ah, Richard,' he replied, 'it's a tragic story – it's a catastrophe, you see, we were in the bloody Starbucks trying to drink their coffee from plastic cups, but the bloody coffee wouldn't cool, it just stayed piping hot. We kept looking at our watches and blew and blew on the bloody coffee – but it never cooled. Finally, we ran out and, yes, Richard you know the rest – bloody Starbucks – we hate them.'

I felt rather pleased with myself, if not a little broke but that evening sat at my hotel desk and drafted a letter to Starbucks thanking them for making their 'bloody coffee' too hot!