

The eloquent auctioneer

Top auctioneers of art and memorabilia tell **Ranjita Ganesan** about the skills and thrills that go with performing sales at the rostrum



William Robinson conducts an auction for Christie's; (below) Mallika Sagar during a Pundole's auction

Newly married in the 1980s, Lord Mark Poltimore remembers shouting numbers in increments to his wife, Sally, who would approve of most and remain unimpressed by others. By way of this unusual demonstration of love, the two had in fact been practising for the art auctioneer's debut performance at the rostrum for Christie's in South Kensington. "We are still married so I must have done something right," says Poltimore, now among the main auctioneers for Sotheby's and the deputy chairman of its Europe business.

A day after conducting an auction for Sotheby's in London, he led the auction house's inaugural Mumbai sale at the dazzling Taj Mahal Hotel ballroom recently, introducing pieces as being "of great interest" and egging on hesitant bidders with a "might regret it later". He brought the hammer down at ₹187 million for Amrita Sher-Gil's *The Little Girl in Blue*.

The 61-year-old's schedule resembles that of a touring rockstar, but he likens modern auctioneering to conducting an orchestra. Gavel masters have to control the room, while also seamlessly teasing out bids on the telephone and the internet. They must also be prepared for surprises: during a recent sale in Russia, one bidder turned up with a large, beady-eyed parrot on her shoulder that made everyone around nervous but allowed Poltimore to make a few bird-themed quips. "It is not the comedy hour but you can give the auction a lighter touch."

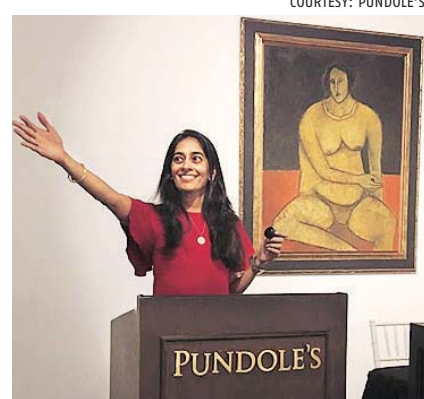
Showmanship is a distinctive aspect of the work of conducting an auction. Most

credit James Christie, who founded Christie's in 1766, for establishing protocols that turned humdrum art auctions into enjoyable affairs. He was known for making rapid-fire, florid appeals to buyers, such as: "The inexhaustible munificence of your superlatively candid generosity must harmonise with the refulgent brilliancy of this little jewel." He would lean forward from the rostrum, gently wielding the gavel, in a pose that some auctioneers employ even today.

The verbal flourishes of the 18th and 19th centuries, however, have been replaced by a more restrained script. As anything an auctioneer may ad lib may be used against them at a later date, they tend to only pronounce the lot number, artist name and price, and thereafter announce bids, for instance, from the "gentleman at the back" or the "lady in the aisle".

There is still an element of theatre, says William Robinson, a prominent auctioneer with Christie's and international head of the group for world art. He is not immediately recognisable without his bifocal glasses, with which he is regularly photographed on stage. He spins out the introductions of some coveted works of obvious beauty, such as the Pala-period black stone figure of Avalokitesvara — part of a sale last year — a bidding war for which took the price from an estimated \$3 million to \$5 million to about \$24 million.

THE THEATRICALS AND MECHANICS OF LIVE AUCTIONS APPEAR ENDANGERED BY AN INCREASING NUMBER OF SALES ONLINE



To encourage such battles, auctioneers must create "a feeling of excitement, of energy, of 'I have to raise my hand now'," says Robinson. He is able to recognise people who are interested in a work and coax out bids. "You become aware because there is an alertness to them that is not there for other lots." Auctioneer Mallika Sagar, who conducts sales for Pundole's, is also familiar with buyer idiosyncrasies. "Some are superstitious and want the same paddle number, the same telephone line for each auction; some will bid at the last minute thinking they can outwit everyone else." She first took to the auction stage at Christie's in New York, selling baseball memorabilia to a roomful of male collectors.

Auctioneers learn to modulate their voices, be swift with numbers, and pick up

subtle cues in the sale room. Strong mathematics and some experience of acting helped Dinesh Vazirani feel comfortable on the rostrum. As the co-founder of Saffronart, an online auction house that also hosts live sales, Vazirani benefits from knowing Indian buyers personally. While he goads them to put in an extra bid, he too encounters friendly heckling asking him to hurry up and "put that hammer down".

Poltimore believes that the quality of auctioneering can increase or decrease the sale value by 10 per cent. Each auctioneer seems to have unique pre-show rituals. Poltimore walks around the sale room to observe the audience; Robinson always wears a pair of dice-shaped cufflinks; and Vazirani goes for a swim two hours earlier. During the sale, they have assistants to record sale prices and paddle numbers, to point out bids they may have missed, and to warn them if the pace picks up or drops.

These theatrics and mechanics of live auctions appear endangered by the fact that the major auction houses are moving more sales online. But many in the industry believe that live shows will survive at the highest levels. "If that too goes online fully, then the very nature of the art markets will fundamentally change towards standardisation," says Osian's auction house founder Neville Tuli, who hired auctioneers for 15 years before taking up the role himself in 2016. Vazirani predicts a convergence in the future such that auctioneers will perform solely to a camera, while bidders will stream the video and buy works on their devices: "The best of both worlds."