

Can the Antiques World Master Digital Sales?

Dealers are making an effort to captivate homebound collectors, curators, and designers

By Brook Mason

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From left: Hsiao Chin's Dancing Light-15, sold by 3812 Gallery at Masterpiece; a silk-and-wool needlework picture shown by Cora Ginsburg at NAADAA; Ginsburg's printed cotton work depicting the bombardment of Algiers. [Gabrielle Pilotti Langdon. Antiques](#) images courtesy of Hsiao Chin Foundation; Cora Ginsburg

Cutting-edge contemporary art dealers have long left antiques specialists in the shadows when it comes to making digital sales. Case in point: During the online rendition of Art Basel in June, a hefty number of dealers pulled off [multimillion-dollar sales](#).

Overall, antiques dealers have been slower to catch up. But the virtual version of [Masterpiece London](#) and the inaugural online [New York National Antique & Art Dealers Association of](#)

[America](#) (NAADAA) fair, which both closed on July 8, demonstrated surprisingly successful sales for some.

At Masterpiece, as always, the likes of Chippendale highboys, Georgian silver, Sèvres porcelain, and 18th-century English portraiture were on offer alongside contemporary art. “The market has adapted to the situation and has swiftly moved to a digital format, with Masterpiece recording good sales,” says Philip Hewat-Jaboor, the show’s chairman.



Thomas Coulborn & Sons, Toleware and Ormolu Egyptian Revival Obelisk, circa 1805. Photo: Courtesy of Thomas Coulborn & Sons

For example, British antiques dealer Jonathan Coulborn of Thomas Coulborn & Sons racked up more than £200,000 in sales. Both a grand George IV table and a Egyptian Revival tole and ormolu obelisk, each priced at £75,000, sold swiftly. Fellow U.K. dealer Apter-Fredericks packed up an ornate 1780 crystal chandelier for close to £100,000 for shipment to a client.

The format marks a major change for these dealers, who are used to courting droves of collectors, curators, and designers in person. After all, last year some 55,000 visitors—among them AD100 designers [Alidad](#), [Veere Grenney](#), [Ellie Cullman](#), and [Rose Tarlow](#)—strolled through Masterpiece.

But the online edition did have its own benefits. “Top-notch panels, videos with experts, and private views,” says Coulborn of the offerings, which included a discussion on living with collections led by Mitchell Owens, *AD*’s decorative arts editor, and another one on art experiences in the digital era that included AD100 designer Francis Sultana. “I’ve kept in close contact

with my clients, and that makes a difference” in terms of remote sales, the third-generation dealer explains.

Others reported similar successes. Morentz, based in the Netherlands, sold a 1960 [Nakashima](#) lounge chair to a European collector for £84,000. (Another European buyer snapped up a 1950 Nakashima armchair pegged at £18,000 from the Dutch dealer.) Meanwhile, London’s Adrian Sassoon found buyers for 18th-century French porcelain and contemporary ceramics by Takahiro Kondo.



Morentz, George Nakashima Lounge Chair, 1960. Photo: Courtesy of Morentz

First-time Masterpiece participant Calvin Hui, who heads up Hong Kong's 3812 Gallery and just opened an outpost in the tony St. James district of London, sold a monumental Hsiao Chin painting to a European collector for a price exceeding \$1 million. "For me, showcasing my offerings right alongside dealers touting superb antiques and design proves that my clients find the mix enticing," says Hui, who sold three additional works at the fair.

Meanwhile, James McConnaughey, who leads NAADAA, launched a virtual fair in a mere three weeks featuring 25 dealers from Philip Colleck to Clinton Howell. "Yes, sales were made, and an overwhelming number of dealers met new collectors," says McConnaughey, who also serves as silver and jewelry dealer S. J. Shrubsole's senior vice president. He put a 1908 Tiffany cup and saucer on hold for a five-figure sum, and wrote up several sales.

But as antiques dealers get comfortable in the digital marketplace, it remains to be seen whether designers and collectors will continue to embrace this new way of doing business. "A few months ago, I would have said no way," says Alidad, speaking from his London office, where he perused the latest edition of Masterpiece.

Despite the coronavirus, Alidad's project list is packed to the gills. "With clients under lockdown at home, they're examining every corner of their rooms and I've never been busier," says the designer, who is overseeing projects in England, France, and Croatia.



Adrian Sassoon, a Vincennes Soft-Paste Porcelain Covered Saucer, 1754

Photo: Courtesy of Adrian Sassoon, London

For him, acquiring antiques online can be problematic. “I’m fussy, and condition is a major issue,” he says. “So if it’s a dealer I trust and they are nearby, it’s not a problem. But if something is in New York at auction, I can’t fly over,” Alidad says. He contends better and more photographs, especially close-ups, can help dealers win over remote buyers, along with more detailed condition reports. In-depth information about scale is also necessary. “Even though the dimensions of a piece of furniture are noted in the catalog, I always ask the dealer to measure yet again, whether it’s a desk or a chandelier,” notes Alidad. He blows up the image to its full size to inspect a piece, so high-resolution photographs are especially appreciated.



Apter-Fredericks, a George III cut-glass chandelier attributed to Moses Lafount. Photo: Courtesy of Apter-Fredericks

L.A.-based designer Rose Tarlow, who has taken in virtually every edition of Masterpiece, points out that there is a radical difference between purchasing Jean Prouvé chairs and a Louis Quatorze marquetry commode online. “We’ve all seen midcentury design up close, but few are really familiar with the riches of the 18th century,” she says. As such, careful questioning is mandatory when it comes to making a virtual purchase of such treasures. “If you know the dealer and don’t like it, you can always return it,” she adds. Still, Tarlow says regular fairgoers likely are missing the immersive and inspirational room settings, where prize Chinese export porcelain punch bowls are placed on Regency consoles, and gilt mirrors abound.

Until halls can be packed with buyers again, it seems as if the industry will have no choice but to adapt, at least for now. Both TEFAF New York Fall and the Winter Show say they are preparing online versions, just in case their physical fairs need to be canceled. That is just another reason for antiques dealers and collectors to get comfortable transacting from their laptops.