

Record-Setting Ernie Barnes Painting Steals the Spotlight at Christie's \$831 M. Evening Sales

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Ernie Barnes, *The Sugar Shack*, 1976.
Christie's

On Thursday night, Christie's concluded its marquee May sales week with a blockbuster night of back-to-back auctions. A sale dedicated to Impressionist and modern works from the collection of the late New York philanthropist and socialite [Anne Bass](#) was followed by another devoted to 20th-century art. Together, the two sales brought in a staggering \$831 million with buyer's fees.

Christie's global head of Impressionist and modern art, Adrien Meyer, took to the auction podium to welcome another full room of spectators. First up were the works previously owned by Bass, who amassed her wealth during her marriage and subsequent divorce from the Texas oil magnate Sid Bass. Twelve works from her holdings—including pieces by [Edgar Degas](#), [Claude Monet](#), and [Mark Rothko](#)—brought in \$363 million, well surpassing the presale expectation of \$250 million. All the works in the sale sold.

The works that impressed the most in the sale that followed may not have been quite as highly valued as the ones previously owned by Bass, though they garnered significant bidding wars and prices far beyond what had been expected. In the 20th-century art sale, records were set for Emmanuel Leutze, Howardena Pindell, Grace Hartigan, and Blinky Palermo. In particular, it was an Ernie Barnes painting that turned heads, overperforming dramatically.

Monet, Degas, and Hammershøi Top Bass Sale

The bulk of the Bass sale's total came from two paintings by Mark Rothko that once hung on adjacent walls in Bass's New York apartment. Both were backed by financial guarantees. Despite accounting for \$116 million of the sale's total, and despite being some of the most expensive works of the evening, they still managed to perform below expectations.

The first Rothko to be offered, *Untitled (Shades of Red)*, from 1961, hammered on a bid of \$58 million, going to a bidder on the phone with Christie's New York impressionist specialist Max Carter. It failed to reach its low estimate of \$60 million. The other, *No. 1, an orange and pink abstraction* (1962), failed to spur excitement among bidders, hammering for \$43 million, below its \$45 million estimate.

Among the other highlights of the Bass sale was a 1927 version of Degas's famed sculpture of a young dancer that was given a \$20 million estimate. It far surpassed that expectation, hammering on a bid of \$36 million, generating applause, and going to a phone bidder with New York contemporary art specialist Ana Maria Celis. It sold for a final price of \$41 million with buyer's fees.



Anne Bass's New York apartment living room. Courtesy Christie's

One of three Monets to hit the block during the night's first leg was *Le Parlement, soleil couchant* (1900–03) a lavender-skied view of the U.K. Parliament building. It drew five bidders and hammered at \$66 million, far outpacing its \$40 million low estimate. The painting sold for a final price of \$75 million to a buyer on the phone with Christie's European global president Jussi Pylkkänen. A second Monet, the waterlilies painting *Nymphéas* (1907), went for \$56 million.

It was a rare interior scene by Dutch modernist Vilhelm Hammershøi that drew the most spirited bidding in the early portion of the night.

After a protracted spar between two bidders, *Stue (Interior with an Oval Mirror)*, 1900, hammered at \$5 million, going for more than three times the \$1.5 million estimate. It went to a bidder on the phone with Christie's Shanghai-based specialist Tan Bo, who beat out a New York client on the phone with contemporary specialist Sara Friedlander. The final price was \$6.3 million, marking a record for the artist and surpassing his previous auction milestone of \$6.2 million, achieved in 2017.



Vincent van Gogh, *Champs près des Alpilles*, 1889. Christie's

20th-Century Art Sale: Ernie Barnes Steals the Show

Following the success of the Bass sale, a 20th-century art auction brought in \$468 million. Paintings by Monet, van Gogh, and other marquee names came to auction here, but work by women artists and Black artists, who have historically been under-represented on the auction block, stole the spotlight.

Van Gogh's *Fields near the Alpilles* (1889), which the artist produced while he was committed to a French asylum, made its auction debut here. It hammered with a bidder in the room at \$45 million, beating out another from Hong Kong after a minutes-long bidding competition. The painting went for a final price of \$51.9 million and brought applause from the room—with Meyer, in a closing remark, calling the battle “a beautiful performance.”

A couple major museum deaccessions starred in tonight's sale. The Metropolitan Museum of Art parted with Pablo Picasso's *Tête de femme (Fernande)*, a early bronze cast of a woman's head dated 1909, with proceeds from the sale going toward the museum's acquisitions fund for new works. Estimated at \$30 million, the work eventually sold for a final price of \$48.6 million, going to a U.S. buyer who won it against three other bidders calling in with specialists in New York and Hong Kong.

Another deaccession, this one from the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, ended up being one of the sale's more surprising flops. Georgia O'Keeffe's 1937 painting *A Sunflower from Maggie*, which was estimated to fetch \$6 million, failed to find a buyer altogether.

A recently restituted Claude Monet landscape was among the top lots of the night. Selling for \$25.6 million, it reached its high estimate. Proceeds of the sale were split between the heirs of original owner Richard Semmel, who sold it under duress in the years leading up to World War II, and its current owners, a French family whose members did not reveal their identity. The two parties reached a legal settlement in March that resulted in the work's sale.



Christie's New York salesroom, May 12, 2022. Courtesy Christie's

It wasn't until Barnes's 1976 dance hall scene came up, *The Sugar Shack*, an image used for the cover of Marvin Gaye's album produced that year, that a bidding frenzy began. In 2019, the California African American Museum (CAAM) mounted a Barnes survey, and ever since, there has been renewed interest in his work. After a heated bidding spar between a New York phone bidder and another determined bidder in the room, the work's hammer price climbed to unforeseen heights, eliciting awe from the crowd.

Eventually, the canvas hammered at a staggering \$13 million, a factor of 80 times its \$150,000 low estimate, with a final price of \$15.3 million.

Elsewhere in the sale, Grace Hartigan's 1959 abstract canvas *Early November* went for \$1.3 million, hammering just below its high estimate of \$1.2 million. The price set a record for the artist, surpassing the \$687,500 achieved in 2021 at Christie's for her 1961 canvas *The Phoenix*.

Hartigan's record is one of many achieved by postwar female painters in recent auction seasons. The momentum comes as houses look to bring to the salesroom influential women who have gone under recognized compared to their historical male counterparts.

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