



Economics

Spring round-up

Picasso, Gauguin rally; Pontormo leads Old Masters sale; new records for Pollock and Kline; print market on the rise; major auctions celebrate photography's 150th anniversary; Latin American art market strengthens; art financing at Citibank; art as investment; Spring sale results...

Yo, Pontormo

by Robert B. Simon

NEW YORK. By all accounts, the sale of Pontormo's *Portrait of a Halberdier* is extraordinary. The painting, auctioned for \$35.2 million on May 31 at Christie's in New York, achieved a record price for an Old Master at public sale. And yet, by the conventional rules of the art market, almost everything is wrong with it.

First of all to the layman, Pontormo is no van Gogh or Jasper Johns (and let us hope that this bit of wisdom is never quoted out of context). Well known among serious students of Italian Renaissance painting, Pontormo nevertheless is hardly a household name. Despite his esteem among scholars, he does not appear in most general introductions to art; there has been no English language monograph on him since 1916. In their pre-sale brochure Christie's was rather pitifully constrained to indicate Pontormo's significance by associating the relatively obscure old master with a certifiable modern "blue-chip" hero: "Pontormo is a key figure in the development of Florentine and Italian Mannerism. An eccentric and solitary genius, his style finds echoes throughout the subsequent history of European painting, and even recalls certain aspects of twentieth century art, for example, the early Picasso."

Then, there is the subject. Portraits generally fall somewhere between Annunciations and Martyrdoms in descending market scale of undesirability. Nobody really wants a portrait unless it is of himself, a relative, or an ancestor, and most people owning ancestral portraits would just as soon send them on to Christie's. It is well that the *Halberdier* is not an old man — that would drop the painting to the Martyrdom end of the Spectrum of undesirability — but it would be better if only he were an invitingly coquettish girl!

The sitter is somewhat of a problem too. He does seem a bit epicene, and the very evident codpiece, the height of fashion at the time, will provoke either amusement or embarrassment, depending on one's presumed level of maturity. The picture may not be just right for the puritanical American living-room. Small wonder that Chauncey D. Stillman sent the *Halberdier* out on loan to museums for forty-five of the sixty-two years that he owned it.

No one doubts the attribution to Pontormo today, yet the painting is not signed and was attributed to four different artists before first being associated with Pontormo's name as recently as 1920. The 1916 Pontormo monograph, by F. M. Clapp, does not even mention the work, and identification of the youth as the illustrious Cosimo I de' Medici, dating only from 1959, is still not universally accepted. The composition is crowded, the colors not particularly cheery, and the young man's gaze confrontational. These do not seem endearing qualities for most



Pontormo, *The Halberdier*, oil on panel transferred to canvas, sold to the Getty Museum for \$35.2 million at Christie's, New York, on May 31.

collectors ready to part with substantial sums. Not only that, in the fine print of the catalogue, one reads anathema to the purists: the painting has been transferred from panel to canvas.

It is inevitable to compare the *Halberdier* with paintings that have brought record prices of late — pictures of unproblematic condition, as-

sured identity, popular appeal, manifest marketability, attractive or at the least unchallenging subject matter, pictures by familiar names that can hang equally in boudoir or boardroom and need not be politely called "museum pieces," pictures that can serve as icons of the owner's taste, knowledge, discrimination, fame, power, wealth, or whatever other grift might motivate

him. Nevertheless, at the minimum estimate of \$20 million or for \$35.2 million, one thing is certain: Pontormo's *Halberdier* is a bargain.

Christie's advertised the picture as "the greatest Italian Renaissance painting to come on the market in recent years and the finest work by Pontormo left in private hands." A grand statement but quite accurate, even

somewhat modest: the *Halberdier* is one of the greatest portraits of all time. Art historically, there can be little doubt of the picture's significance. It is one of Pontormo's three or four most important surviving works, and despite the turn of the century transfer to canvas, it is in superb condition. For the history of portraiture, the *Halberdier* is a revolutionary image, one in which physiognomy has been subverted by psychological compulsions as had rarely been attempted before. Historically, the portrait is a subtly polemic image of the young Cosimo I de' Medici, the shrewd, politically influential Duke of the Florentine city-state. And stylistically, the painting itself better defines the term "Mannerism" as an artistic movement than anything ever written by critics or scholars.

But what makes this picture powerful and unforgettable is not easily definable by such art historical concerns. Rather it seems to lie somewhere in the disquieting confrontation that exists between subject and viewer that results in critical and reflective self-appraisal. The *Halberdier* is a subtly but profoundly disturbing figure, perhaps because his physical beauty, eerie grace, and detached air of superiority seem threatened by someone or something unseen. Whether from without or within, this doubt seems to reflect a vulnerability shared by both subject and viewer.

There is much that is bizarre about the figure. This is a painter's fantasy and a geometrician's nightmare, a human constructed of a succession of round, whorled, slightly eccentric forms, a nearly weightless creature moored to the mast-like pike he firmly grasps. He is dressed as a soldier and stands boldly armed before the sharp unarticulated architecture emblematic of a bastion. Yet with feathered cap and fine gold chain, he is a most fashionable *condottiere* — projecting neither valor, nor steadfastness, but rather that sense of ease, remove, grace, and perhaps boredom, that is so splendidly evoked by the term *disinvoltura*. He is, in short, a prototypical dandy.

It is a common weakness to wish to feel superior to or in control of the painted image — easily enough done with those recent record-setters of the sales-rooms. Portraits that do not defer to their audience fare poorly over time in domestic environments. Hard to live with, these pictures in the old days had nowhere to go but to the attic. Today they can be accommodated in museums, where they need not constantly dominate a single possessor, but may assert themselves for tolerable periods of time on passing visitors. For many, one of the joys of living in New York in the past twenty years has been the opportunity to be challenged by the *Halberdier*. With its purchase by the Getty Museum, one is grateful that he will remain accessible to those responsive to this eternally questioning youth.