



The whole lot

Once in a blue moon, a golden ticket will arrive under an auctioneer's gavel somewhere in the world. *Upward Curve* looks back at five of the most valuable items sold this millennium

SOtheby's: RUBENS' MASSACRE OF INNOCENTS 2002 £49.5M (US\$76.7M)

There was nothing extraordinary about a Sotheby's auction one Wednesday in July on London's New Bond Street in 2002. *Massacre of Innocents*, originally assumed to have been painted by Jan van den Hoecke (a Sir Peter Paul Rubens follower), was expected to fetch £4-5m (US\$6-8m). But weeks before the auction, Sotheby's expert George Gordon identified the artwork as a Rubens original, painted between 1609 and

1611. He described it as "one of the most significant old master picture discoveries to be offered at auction for decades, and the greatest Rubens to come to the market for more than 20 years".

More than 500 people packed into the sale room and the bidding began at £3m. It soon jumped to £3.2m, then £3.8m and then up to £6m. Soon after, it smashed the record for the most expensive painting ever bought, or sold, in a British auction, going for £49.5m (US\$76.7m). At the time it was the third most expensive bid for

a painting at any auction in the world, subject to exchange rates.

The buyer was in the room, and later emerged as Sam Fogg, a dealer who acquired the work on behalf of Canadian businessman and art collector Kenneth Thomson, 2nd Baron Thomson of Fleet.

The famous painting depicts the incident in the nativity narrative of the Gospel of Matthew in which

Above: Rubens' *Massacre of Innocents* sold for £49.5m at a Sotheby's auction in 2002 – an adjusted price of US\$106.8m

Herod the Great, King of Judea, orders the execution of all male children two years old and under in the vicinity of Bethlehem.

Following the auction, the painting was loaned to London's National Gallery before its transfer to the Art Gallery of Ontario in 2008 (to whom Thomson had donated it) which was undergoing a major rebuild and expansion.

CHRISTIE'S: AUDREY HEPBURN'S BREAKFAST AT TIFFANY'S DRESS 2006 £467,200 (US\$923,187)

The most famous 'little black dress' of all time, designed by Hubert de Givenchy and worn by Audrey Hepburn, was auctioned at Christie's in London in 2006 and purchased by an anonymous telephone buyer for £467,200 (\$923,187) in 2006. The Italian satin dress worn during the ➤

Right: Antonio Stradivari's Lady Blunt Below right: **The famous Breakfast at Tiffany's dress** Below: **Bonhams' auction of a Ferrari 250 GTO in 2013**

opening of the 1961 romcom had been estimated to fetch between £50,000 and £70,000.

The money raised built a school for the underprivileged young people of Calcutta. It so happened that Givenchy, the designer of the dress, had donated the dress to Dominique Lapierre, the author of the book *City of Joy*, and his wife to help raise funds for the charity.

"I'm absolutely dumbfounded to believe that a piece of cloth which belonged to such a magical actress will now enable me to buy bricks and cement to put the most destitute children in the world into schools," said Lapierre.

In a 2010 survey conducted by LOVEFILM, Hepburn's little black dress was voted the best dress ever worn by a woman in a film.

TARISIO AUCTIONS: STRADIVARIUS VIOLIN 2011 US\$15.9M

An Antonio Stradivari-made instrument is a treasured artefact – even more so, one made in the 'golden period' between 1700 and 1725. In 2011, the 1721 "Lady Blunt" violin (named after

Lord Byron's granddaughter Lady Anne Blunt, who owned it for 30 years), sold for a record \$15.9m.

The violin's proceeds benefited the Nippon Foundation's Northeastern Japan Earthquake and Tsunami Relief Fund. It was sold by Tarisio Auctions, (a web-based auction house that specialises in string instruments and bows) for four times the previous record selling price.

ANTIQUE WINE CO: CHATEAU D'YQUEM 2011 £75,000 (US\$99,000)

A 200-year-old bottle of Château d'Yquem sold for £75,000 in 2011 after The Antique Wine Company at London's Ritz Hotel put it up for auction. French collector and restaurateur Christian Vanneque bought the record-breaking 1811 Sauternes (a sweet wine from the Graves section south of Bordeaux), and put it on display – behind bullet-proof glass – at his restaurant, Sip Sunset Grill, in Bali, Indonesia.

Vanneque, a former head sommelier at La Tour d'Argent in Paris, was, at the time, an owner of one of only ten confirmed bottles left in existence from ten barrels (3,000 bottles) – most of which were exported to Russia. "I always have a tear in my eye when I sell a bottle like this,"

Stephen Williams, managing director of The Antique Wine Company, said, 'but it's some consolation when you know it's going to a good home.'

The 1811 vintage is renowned as the most famous of the 'Comet vintages' – years in which an astronomical event has happened before harvest, in this case the Great Comet of 1811.

BONHAMS: FERRARI 250 GTO US\$38M

Ferrari 250 GTOs own the 'most expensive car' department. Only 36 of the road-legal racer were ever built, between 1962 and 1964. Its rarity, combined with incredible top speed (up to



174 mph) and distinctive aerodynamic design, make it the world's most coveted car. When an anonymous buyer privately purchased a 1963 Ferrari 250 GTO from collector Paul Pappalardo for a record \$52m in 2013, Don Williams of Blackhawk Collection said, "It's like the Mona Lisa. It has a mystique. If you have a GTO, you have a great collection."

Most GTOs raced in the iconic Tour de France road, with famed drivers such as Jean Guichet behind the wheel. Some won and some crashed; though some came through unscathed, such as the 1963 Ferrari 250 GTO, which sold for \$70m in 2018 to become the world's most expensive car.

The new record-holder is thought to have been bought by David MacNeil, an American businessman and avid Ferrari collector. The private sale will have comfortably smashed the former record of £40m, set by another 250 GTO in 2013. The following year, yet another 250 GTO became the most expensive car sold at auction, with a hammer price of \$38m (£23m). And the only way is up, it seems: Marcel Massini, a leading Ferrari historian, said that he was confident a GTO model would be sold for \$100m (£75m) within five years. ■

