



## Inside Christie's

*John Herbert*

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## **Inside Christie's** John Herbert

In 1958, when John Herbert joined Christie's and initiated their press office, fine art auctions were mysterious to the general public and Christie's functioned in a traditional way through family connections and gentlemen's agreements. Their assumed position as leaders of the art market had just been taken from them by their arch-rivals Sotheby's and they were endangered by falling profits and a lack of top-quality goods to sell. In 1985 when he retired the outlook had been entirely transformed: Christie's was an international concern, handling pictures and other properties which fetched enormous prices, offering all sorts of expertise and services, highly profitable - and still trusted by "the best people". From his privileged and hard-working position in the press office John Herbert saw the whole process of this fabulous turn-around: the big stories and the big deals, the development of marketing and the spread of wider knowledge, the mistakes and the near-misses, the expansion and the slumps, the rivalry and the scandals: the exposure of "the Ring", the uproar over the bidding at the sale of the Rembrandt "Titus" (which provoked a memorable Osbert Lancaster cartoon), and the revelation that bought-in pictures were included in sales totals. Fine art auctions became news, and John Herbert handled that news, present as he was at the big events that shaped a new trend in British social history: London as the well-publicized centre of the art world. John Herbert started his working life with ten years of journalism, after service in the RNVR and New College, Oxford. He then entered public relations, which led him to Christie's. Here he initiated the press office and was Public Relations Director from 1959 onwards until his early retirement in 1985. He has since then continued to keep sharp attention fixed on the art world.

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