

The Canadian art market has never seen anything like it. After being in the doldrums four or five years, the prices paid for art at auctions have finally started to take off.

The fall of 1986 will long be remembered by observers as the turning point. At one auction, the record amount for a Canadian work of art was broken three times. In the same evening, record prices were established for no less than 14 Canadian painters. Most important of all, perhaps, a major psychological barrier was broken when a private Toronto collector paid more than \$500,000 for a single canvas.

It's little wonder Canadian art dealers have been walking around with large smiles on their faces. It's not surprising either that they are looking forward, with anticipation, to the next round of auctions which begin in May. No one is sure yet whether the records will continue to drop like flies, but virtually everyone in the business feels that the new price levels set last fall are here to stay.

The big turnaround began with a big bang last October 23 at the Fraser Brothers auction in Montreal. Not normally noted for their sales of Canadian art, Frasers had something special to offer that night: 128 drawings and paintings by 35 major artists all from the prestigious collection of Mel and Mitzi Dobrin, members of the Montreal family that owns a chain of supermarkets. The appearance of so many historical paintings of the highest quality, broke the cycle of poor prices/poor works that has plagued the Canadian market since 1980/81, when it reached rock bottom.

The item that got all the attention at the Frasers auction was *La Boulangerie, Baie St. Paul*, painted by Quebec artist Clarence Gagnon circa 1922. Everyone expected it would do well but they couldn't have known just how well. When the bidding for the Gagnon finally stopped, it was the most expensive Canadian painting ever sold at auction. It fetched a whopping \$275,000. The

Autumn Ploughing, Arthabaska, by Quebec artist Marc-Aurèle de Foy Suzor-Côté set a record for the artist last fall when it brought \$145,000 at Joyner's. It had been estimated at between \$20,000 and \$30,000.

