



Top: The most expensive Canadian painting ever sold at auction: *Last November*, Lawren Harris' Mountains in Snow. No. VII went for a whopping \$450,000

outgrossed the latter, \$2.5 million to \$2.1 million. A highlight of Joyner's auction was a selection of drawings and paintings from the collection of the late Mrs. Ward C. Pitfield of Montreal. Though the 60-odd lots in this small auction consistently went over their estimates, none did so, more than a 1909 canvas by Marc-Aurèle Suzor Côté. Titled *Autumn Ploughing, Arthabaska*, it was estimated at between \$20,000 and \$30,000. Instead, it fetched \$145,000, a record for the artist at auction.

Another work that fared particularly well, though not from the

at Sotheby's. The monumental canvas was expected to do well (estimated: \$300,000 to \$400,000), but no one knew just how well.

Pitfield collection, was a small oval Krieghoff that sold to Lord Thomson of Fleet, better known in Canada as Ken Thomson, for \$160,000. Thomson, who has been buying Krieghoffs for nearly 30 years, owns the most complete collection of the Quebec artist in private hands.

At the moment however, Joyner is concentrating on the next round of auction fever that comes up in May. His sale runs May 20 and 21 at St. Lawrence Hall. Sure to get a lot of attention is a portrait by Frederick Varley, a member of the Group of Seven, titled *Green and Gold*. It is a painting of Vera, one

of Varley's favorite models and the subject of some of his best-known works. In addition, Joyner will have several Krieghoffs and a large Italian landscape by Clarence Gagnon, expected to reach between \$100,000 and \$150,000.

Sotheby's has high hopes that a large painting by Franklin Carmichael will get bidders excited. "There hasn't been a major Carmichael at auction since the late 1970s," says Orobetz. Sotheby's sales, of Canadian art and jewellery, take place May 12, 13 and 14 at the Four Seasons Hotel in Toronto. Hopes are also high for *The Dancing Doll*, a small painting by Paul Peel, one of the popular Canadian artists in the 19th century. Because Peel was best loved for his portraits of children, and because this painting depicts a young girl playing with her doll, bidding could get heated.

Certainly the auction bosses are looking forward to the spring session. "It will be even better," says Orobetz, sitting in her art-filled office in Toronto's fashionable Yorkville area. "And there will be some really nice things. Prices are high so good pieces are coming up for sale." She's encouraged by low interest rates ("Frees up money for buying art.") and the capital gains exemptions ("Helpful!").

Joyner is equally positive about the future: "I look forward to May with optimism and enthusiasm. Overall, I think the market is going to be even better. One good sale prompts another. People are more willing to sell than before. As a result, the works coming to auction are of higher quality."

Of course, everything, even the value of art, is relative. While the Canadian art market has been playing catch-up, it has a long way to go before it rivals the auction action in London and New York where paintings routinely sell for millions of dollars. The record now stands at \$15.4 million, spent on a canvas by the Impressionist Edouard Manet. Other prices reached this season include \$14.6 million for a Rembrandt and \$13.2 million for a Georges Braque. All these paintings brought more than the total amount ever spent on art at a single auction in Canada.

Nevertheless, in our own peculiarly Canadian way, we are beginning to wake up to the value of our

cultural heritage. We are also realizing that it has a price, one that's growing fast. Judging by the standards of equally important artists from other countries, Canadian artists are still inexpensive. This has something to do with the fact that Canadian buyers have never been as adventurous as those elsewhere, especially in the U.S. The tradition of collecting art either institutionally or privately has not been nurtured in this country. Indeed, public galleries and museums figure little in the Canadian auction scene. As a direct result of cutbacks in government funding, acquisition budgets for even our major institutions are minimal. Institutional collections are largely dependent on donations from private individuals or corporations.

At the opposite end of the scale is the fabulously wealthy Getty Museum, in Malibu, California. Created by the late oil billionaire John Paul Getty, the museum spends \$150 million a year buying art. Its presence has had a profound impact upon the international art market, including the prices paid for Old Masters. In addition, there has been an influx of immensely wealthy collectors from Japan and Europe into the market.

In a regional or national market such as Canada's, the value of art is not subject to international pressures. In other words, it's up to Canadians alone to determine the worth of Canadian art. So far, we haven't allowed ourselves to get too carried away. As one might have expected, we've been conservative; but there are signs this is changing. One that comes to mind was the excellent showing of a 1967 painting by John Meredith, titled *Courier*. It sold at Sotheby's for \$16,000, well over its estimate of \$5,000 to \$7,000. The buyer, Toronto art dealer Emerich Kaspar, knew exactly what he had, the best painting in the sale. In the past, however, contemporary art hasn't fared all that well at auction. Canadian collectors prefer their artists to be dead and consigned to the history books. John Meredith, born 1933, is *alive* and consigned to the history books.

It will be awhile before Canadian art can match those prices. It took its first step last fall; chances are good the second will come this spring □