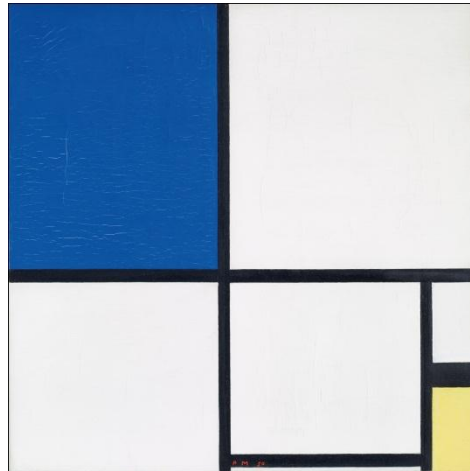


CHRISTIE'S

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CHRISTIE'S ANNOUNCES *MODERN MASTERS: WORKS FROM AN IMPORTANT PRIVATE SWISS COLLECTION*

FROM CUBISM & PURISM TO NEO PLASTICISM & SURREALISM, LONDON FEBRUARY 2014



London – Christie's is proud to announce an exceptional and historic group of *Modern Masters: Works from an Important Private Swiss Collection* which will be offered at auction in February 2014. Collections often reflect their collectors' tastes and histories, but seldom do they also reflect their friendships and relationships as much as the 22 works of art assembled by a private Swiss couple. Behind almost all of these works are tales of friendship, as the collectors came to know many of the artists who are represented, meeting a number of the leading figures of the avant garde from the 1920s onwards. Living a reality confined merely to dreams for many, they were able to meet Constantin Brancusi, to see Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* while it was in its studio, to support the impoverished and embattled Piet Mondrian and to entertain Hans Arp on a regular basis. Two published authors, who were authorities in their field, the couple were prominent in the cultural milieu of Switzerland and Europe as a whole, particularly in the middle decades of the 20th century. The collection is led by a magnificent still life by Juan Gris, *Nature morte à la nappe à carreaux, 1915* (estimate: £12-18 million, *illustrated above*). Coming to the market for the first time, the works will be offered across all four King street sales: *The Art of the Surreal* and *The Impressionist and Modern Art Evening Sales*, 4 February; *The Impressionist and Modern Art Day Sale* and *Impressionist and Modern Art Works on Paper Sale*, 5 February. The collection is expected to realise in the excess of £30 million.

Olivier Camu, Deputy Chairman, Impressionist and Modern Art, Christie's: "This extraordinary time capsule of a collection was formed by truly passionate art connoisseurs. They were amongst the best and most generous minds of the European architectural and contemporary art worlds from the early 1920s all the way to the 1970s. It is fascinating to see in each work of art how rigorous the collectors were, sticking to the avant garde movements. From Cubism to Surrealism en passant par Metaphisica and Neo Plasticism all the works follow a very pure and concentrated modernist and architectural taste. The provenance is so pure; never seen before on the market, these works were almost always either bought from or, more often, received as gifts from their friends the artists. As a result every work in the collection is highly enviable, evocative and through each work one feels the artist himself reaching out to us via the friendship bond of their only owner so far."

John Lumley, Honorary Chairman, Christie's: "In all my 50 years at Christie's, this is a collection which stands out. It has faultless historical credentials, it provides insights into the personalities of the artists and the collectors, and it also reflects their daring, now justified support of modern art itself, ranging across Cubism, Purism and Surrealism."

Not all of the works in the collection were from artists whom the collectors knew. The magnificent still life by **Juan Gris**, *Nature morte à la nappe à carreaux*, 1915 (estimate: £12-18 million, *illustrated below*) was beyond the couple's financial means when it was available for sale in Switzerland. Instead of buying it, they were able to advise an acquaintance, the eminent Professor Doctor Wilhelm Löffler, with such enthusiasm that he bought it for himself; bequeathing it to them upon his death.

This large-scale landmark painting by Gris dates from 1915, a watershed year in which he shifted further from his earlier Analytical Cubism to the more lyrical Synthetic Cubism. The importance of this picture, which is over a metre tall, is reflected in the fact that it has featured in a number of significant collections since its execution, including that of one of the greatest patrons of Cubism, Dr. G.F. Reber of Lausanne. Gris' move away from Analytical Cubism is demonstrated in the exuberant energy of this painting which features an explosion of objects, seemingly radiating from a point in the lower centre of the composition. There is a sense of dynamism to this composition which contrasts with the more static still life works that he often created prior to 1915. It was painted in March, only a few months after Gris had returned to Paris, following some months in the South of France after the outbreak of the First World War. Gris has not entirely succeeded in blocking out the War in this painting, depicting a copy of *Le Journal* and deliberately showing the ominous subtitle: 'Communiqués officiels'.



Gris' growing focus on coherence is clear in *Nature morte à la nappe à carreaux* in its inclusion of various objects which are shown emanating like a fan from a central point and almost in relief against the uncluttered background, resulting in a heightened sense of cohesion. The painting has a vibrancy which is accentuated by the checkering of the tablecloth, which extends into various other fields within the composition. Increasingly, Gris was seeking out an almost Neo-Platonic version of his objects, no longer trusting observation alone, but instead memory, experience and indeed concept. He was seeking out a modern form of classicism that cut to the heart of existence.



Looking at the collection, it is interesting to note the architectural dimension that is often present. The couple who assembled these works were often in contact with people from that world, and so it seems only natural that they acquired works that are either architectural in character, such as **Piet Mondrian's** *Composition No. 2 with Blue and Yellow*, 1930 (estimate: £8-12 million, *illustrated left*), **Theo van Doesburg's** 1928 *Contra Composition XX* (estimate: £1-1.5 million) and **Georges Vantongerloo's** *Composition émanant de l'hyperbole de Oel*, 1919 (estimate: £250,000-350,000), or which were the creations of artists involved with architecture and

design, such as **Le Corbusier** and **Laszlo Moholy-Nagy**. These artists spent time with the couple on the *SS Patris II*, an extra location for the fourth *Congrès Internationale d'Architecture Moderne*. The voyage from Marseilles to Athens, where the congress was to take place, became a *de facto* conference in its own right. This gave the collectors and the artists and architects alike, such as Moholy-Nagy, Le Corbusier, Fernand Léger and Ernő Goldfinger, a chance to begin or to deepen their acquaintances. It is this type of glancing insight into the cultural world of Europe during those turbulent decades at the middle of the Twentieth Century that this collection provides.

Piet Mondrian's *Composition No. 2 with Blue and Yellow* is an historic example of the radical Neo-Plastic aesthetic that Mondrian had developed during the previous decade and which reached a pinnacle at this time. It forms part of a group of under a dozen paintings from the late 1920s and early 1930s in which he used approximately the same armature of black lines with different colour effects, revealing his own satisfaction with this grid format. In part because of these works, this period of his career has been described as, 'the peak of Mondrian's classicism'. Other examples of works from the group are now in the Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam, the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Dusseldorf, the Kunstmuseum Winterthur and the Beyeler Foundation, Riehen. Of these, *Composition No. 2 with Blue and Yellow* is the only one to balance the colour in the upper left area with another in the lower right.

For Mondrian, the Neo-Plasticism which he pioneered was a means of bringing equilibrium to art and to life. Over the previous decades, he had developed an increasingly spiritual understanding of the role of art and its ability to contain universal truths. Mondrian had moved to Paris only a couple of years before the First World War; he had intended to make the French capital his base but was visiting his native Netherlands at the outbreak of hostilities, and did not go back to Paris until after peace had returned. In 1919 he re-immersed himself in the avant garde, fully advancing the ideas he had developed during the war years in isolation from the pioneers of Cubism in France who had influenced him. Now the grids of his 'Cubist' works were freed from form; paving the way for the Neo-Plastic ideas that underpin *Composition No. 2 with Blue and Yellow*. By creating a work that was devoid of representation, without any sense of fictive space, Mondrian was creating a work that avoided emotions and subjectivity. He did not want to root himself in figuration, but instead sought to create an artwork that was more universal. Mondrian's dedication to his Neo-Plastic concepts was reflected in his life as well as his art. He was fascinated by jazz and dancing, enjoying the disruption of melody and seeing it as a near parallel to the abandonment of form in his pictures, many of which he named after dances and music.

Alexander Calder met Mondrian and visited his studio soon after this work was painted. Calder was very impressed and inspired, going on to create his 'Mobiles' following this encounter - putting fields of colour into motion. Mondrian didn't feel such movement was needed, believing that the colours were already fast enough. This is exemplified in *Composition No. 2 with Blue and Yellow*, where the two fields of colour, the blue and the yellow, have an intense dynamism that is propelled by their containment within the black-bounded planes.



Further highlights include the most significant work by **Carlo Carrà** to come to auction: *Solitudine* (Solitude) (estimate: £2.5-3.5 million, *illustrated left*). This work is an important testimony to one of the most intense, most influential encounters in the history of Italian modern art. Conceived in the middle of the First World War, in a withdrawn hospital outside Ferrara, the painting commemorates one of the most significant years in the career of the artist, when in 1917 he met and worked closely together with Giorgio de Chirico. While *Solitudine* testifies to the intellectual bond that Carrà and de Chirico shared that year, it also states Carrà's singularity, expressing some of his deepest beliefs about art and situating his metaphysical art into an orbit distinct from that of de Chirico's.

In its distilled composition and linear structure, *Solitudine* ultimately expresses Carrà's individual perspective on *Pittura Metafisica*, manifesting his very personal approach to figurative painting. The composition has rigour and symmetry, two principles that remained extraneous to de Chirico's works of the period. Carrà's involvement with *Pittura Metafisica* in 1917 was paralleled by a growing interest for the masters of the Renaissance, which permeates

Solitudine. Later on, he explicitly acknowledged the link between his interest in Renaissance art and his involvement with *Pittura Metafisica*: ‘with *Pittura Metafisica* (...) we tried to re-establish that superior equilibrium that we had found so magnificently expressed in the work of Piero [della Francesca]’. *Solitudine* remains one of the most emblematic works of *Pittura Metafisica*, marking the dawn of Modernism.

L’Oiseau-nocturne, one of two paintings by **Joan Miró** in this collection, was painted on 30 August 1939 in the village of Varengeville-sur-Mer, Normandy, on the Channel coast, during a sojourn that lasted from mid-August 1939 through late May 1940 (estimate: £1-1.5 million, *illustrated right*). It is one of two canvases which marked the beginning of an astonishing sequence of works Miró went on to create in Varengeville, culminating in the first of the celebrated wartime Constellations on 21 January 1940, followed by nine more before the artist and his family fled south in late May to avoid air raids and approaching German forces during the invasion of France. Less than forty-eight hours after *L’Oiseau-nocturne* was completed, the German Luftwaffe bombed military targets in Poland. On 3 September Great Britain and France, under treaty with the Polish government, declared war on Germany, not quite twenty-one years after the end of the First World War.



Miró’s works immediately prior to his Constellations fall into two distinct sets, which have been classified as Varengeville I and Varengeville II. *L’Oiseau-nocturne* belongs to the first group of five small canvases executed on this “raspberry red” background during August-September. One may characterise the reddish paintings of the Varengeville I set as the calm before the storm, but bearing ominous signs of menace in the offing. A great black bird, with an alarmingly distended phallic appendage, here fills the night sky over the form of a great earth mother. The overall import of the imagery is visionary in a truly cosmic dimension, and so strikingly animated that Miró projects a sense of profound mystery and wonderment more than any inclination toward foreboding and despair. Varengeville provided Miró with a temporary sense of refuge, a “splendid isolation” from events of the day, in which he could paint. He and his family walked along the Channel beaches at night, revelling in the vast array of stars, constellations and galactic swirls, which he rendered in *L’Oiseau-nocturne*.

The collection also includes works by Kurt Schwitters, Antoine Pevsner, Constantin Brancusi, Louis Marcoussis, and Henri Laurens, which will be offered for sale across *The Impressionist and Modern Art Day Sale* and *Impressionist and Modern Art Works on Paper Sale*, 5 February.

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Images available on request

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