

In an exhibition hall in the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre, the third auction of the day is in progress. “Lot 236 by Zhu Ming,” the auctioneer says as he introduces a work by the famous Taiwanese sculptor, using English, Putonghua and Cantonese. “I can thus start the bid at HK\$900,000,” he proceeds. Auction paddles with the buyers’ registration numbers start rising to bid. Each time, the price increases as the auctioneer announces the new bidding price.

This Sotheby’s sale of 20th century Chinese art is typical of an auction, where the auctioneer is responsible for the introduction and sale of the items.

An auctioneer working for a prestigious international auction house like Sotheby’s would be expected to have specialist knowledge and mastery of a second language. But not all auctions involve pieces of fine art.

Brian Hodgson is the founder of Hong Kong Auctions, a Hong Kong-based international benefit auction company. He is also an auctioneer.

Hodgson says that his company, which holds around 50 auctions a year, sells everything, ranging from jewellery, art works and wines to watches. The company often sells memorabilia, such as President Obama’s signature on a magazine and a Beatles’ signed guitar, mainly for charity purposes.

The company even sells people for charity. “We have ‘bachelor auctions’. We get single men and women to bid to have dinner with him,” says Hodgson.

Hodgson recalls how he started his career as an auctioneer. When his barter exchange company, launched 12 years ago, had made some money, Hodgson’s partner suggested that he get into auctions. As Hodgson also had 30 years’ experience as a public speaker with an international

speaking club, he thought he had a good foundation to build a career as an auctioneer. So he went to an auction school in the United States and learned some of the key skills of auctioneering.

Hodgson says there are around 10 auctioneer schools in America. Most of the training these schools provide is to teach students speaking skills. However, during his three weeks of training, Hodgson also learned that psychology is an important component of auctioneering. The auctioneer has to identify potential bidders,

“For example, if I know you are going to bid, and I don’t look at you, I would get you nervous,” Hodgson explains. He says the main point is to exert pressure on the potential buyers to buy.

He adds that an auctioneer needs to have “stage presence”, which means you should be able to stand on stage without being nervous in front of the crowd.

How to be an Auctioneer

by Jennifer Kwok



The successful auctioneer needs other important qualities, says Hodgson, including having a good short-term memory so that you do not mix up the prices; peripheral vision and good eyesight, so that you will not miss any bidding and, finally, the ability to control the crowd.

Hodgson says the job of an auctioneer is “very, very popular” in other countries. He is a member of the US-based National Auctioneers Association which has around 5,000 members. Apart from the three-week training course, Hodgson has not had any training in fine art or antique appreciation. He describes himself as a generalist, rather than a specialist. He is not worried about setting the prices for the items; in fact, he relies on the buyers.

“People know what they are buying. All I need to know is how to get them to buy,” he says.

Hodgson is an example of a generalist auctioneer who received auctioneer training. However, in Hong Kong, auctioneer schools are rare. For most auction houses in Hong Kong, the auctioneers do not go through specialised auctioneer training. They usually enter the auction house with a bachelor degree in a related specialisation.

Auctioneers in Hong Kong are usually staff members of auction houses who wear multiple hats. They are rarely exclusively auctioneers. Most are specialists in various disciplines who are also given the job of auctioning items related to their discipline.

Jewellery specialist Edmond Chan, the head of the local jewellery department of Bonhams, an international auction house, says that, besides auctioneering, he has to select valuable and fashionable pieces from around the world for Bonhams’ auctions.

“People know what they are buying. All I need to know is how to get them to buy.”

Chan has to be up-to-date on trends in different markets. “Rings and earrings are the most popular items in the Asian market, while necklaces and bracelets are relatively common within the Western culture,” Chan explains. As fashion is closely linked



Brian Hodgson completed a three-week auctioneer training course while most auctioneers in Hong Kong enter the field with specialist training.

ELIZABETH CHEUNG

with jewellery, he has to keep abreast of fashion trends too.

Chan’s job also requires him to help clients purchase jewellery from different countries. After an initial inspection of a suitable item, he needs to appraise and validate it before handing it to his clients.

Elaine Kwok, the Hong Kong business manager of international auction house Christie’s, is an auction house multi-tasker. Apart from conducting auctions, she occasionally holds exhibitions and manages the jewellery and watches department in her company.

Kwok has been the auctioneer at a number of events, from the sale of Chinese ceramics to antique watches.



Bidders listen as the auctioneer introduces an art work.

COURTESY OF BONHAMS

She says that, typically, besides Asian buyers, there are also many foreign buyers who bid through the telephone or on the internet.

Kwok says potential buyers can also download a program from the company’s website and proceed with a “live bid”. So sometimes the auctioneers shout: “There is an online bidder from California!”

You need a bachelor’s degree to get into an auction house and to become an auctioneer, knowledge in a related discipline is an advantage. To enter different departments, knowledge in related disciplines is necessary. Knowledge in literature, history and art is preferable. For example, if you would like to enter the jewellery department, studying jewellery design is an added advantage. Also, business and commercial experiences are also necessary for some companies such as Christie’s.

According to Kwok, proficiency in Chinese, both Cantonese and Mandarin, are a great advantage for anyone who wants to get into the industry. There is a growing number of clients from the mainland, so the industry needs employees competent

in Chinese. She also suggests that studying history, attending auctions and visiting museums are good ways to equip yourself for the industry.

The outlook of the auction industry in Hong Kong remains optimistic. “In fact, Hong Kong has already become the third largest auction centre in the world,” Kwok says. “There are many buyers willing to come for auctions.”

Bonhams’ Edmond Chan adds that auctions in Hong Kong are especially attractive to foreign buyers because there is no value added tax.

He says auction houses’ prospects have improved since they “changed to a retail model”. In the past, auction houses auctioned items that were collectibles or were items the owners no longer used or wanted. Now that auction houses have changed to a retail model, they will specially search for, purchase and auction items people might want. Chan says the current annual turnover in his jewellery department is around HK\$60 million. The company earns a commission of 20 per cent every time an item is sold. “The profits are really high,” says Chan. “Together with other departments, it could be over a hundred million.”

Currently, the basic salary for the job is above HK\$10,000 but Chan observes that local graduates rarely consider working in this industry. This might be because there are few auction houses in Hong Kong or because of the long and ever-changing working hours.

Back at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre, the auction of Lot 236, the Zhu Ming sculpture, continues. The bidding price rises from six digits to seven digits. “HK\$2.6 million, against you sir,” the auctioneer says to the previous bidder. “I’m selling at HK\$2.6 million,” he says and repeats the statement a couple of times. Then, he hits his hammer on the gavel: “Sold!” Job done, the auctioneer moves onto the next item. ▣



Edmond Chan not only works as an auctioneer but also has to perform other duties such as keeping a close eye on jewellery and fashion trends.

JENNIFER KWOK

