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A Library Sets Sail

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Abstract

Society News

Hurry down New Bond Street too fast and miss the main entrance of the Sotheby salerooms. It is a small fronting done out in fading cream paint with the apologetic air of a second rate bookie's office. But inside the building expands into a veritable Ali Baba's cave for there is no denying the pivotal position of Sotheby & Co. in the world of fine art, of books, of the rare and the beautiful. The front entrance is, by some quirk, no more than a curious self-effacement in the centre of exhibitionist London, and the eighteenth Egyptian dynasty animal statue (circa 1320 BC) perched above the twin doorways and entitled SEKHMET appears to be having the last laugh.

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A LIBRARY SETS SAIL

M. F. Macnicol

Hurry down New Bond Street too fast and miss the main entrance of the Sotheby sale-rooms. It is a small fronting done out in fading cream paint with the apologetic air of a second rate bookie's office. But inside the building expands into a veritable Ali Baba's cave for there is no denying the pivotal position of Sotheby & Co. in the world of fine art, of books, of the rare and the beautiful. The front entrance is, by some quirk, no more than a curious self-effacement in the centre of exhibitionist London, and the eighteenth Egyptian dynasty animal statue (circa 1320 BC) perched above the twin doorways and entitled SEKHMET appears to be having the last laugh.

To reach the book auction room situated at the rear of the building a tricky negotiation is necessary through ranks of intensely pre-occupied dealers and collectors. Jade, china, the finest teak, silverware and worked ivory meet the eye. The book saleroom, in comparison, is plain indeed. It contains an ell with the auctioneer's stand, a central table with chairs grouped about it, and wooden book shelves reaching almost to the ceiling. The familiar vellum and calf bindings of the RMS collection look uncomfortable and seedy in the unaccustomed surroundings. No longer wedged together in mutual support or tucked away in gloomy corners the books show a sad state of dilapidation. Flapping covers, striped backs and cracked spines interrupt the eye's movement along each row of shelves, while the strings encompassing each lot turn the appearance of the books into slaves wait-

ing in the market. Sadly disused slaves they are, ready for new masters after two centuries of increasing dust and corrosion.

The sales begin "at eleven o'clock precisely each day", by which time the buyers for Rota, Dawson, Elliot, Quaritch and other firms interested in the collection have taken up strategic positions. Private collectors are present too, but do not change the atmosphere of cool professionalism that contrasts with an earlier view of a Sotheby book sale by the 18th century caricaturist Rowlandson who depicted delightfully the rivalling expressions of buyers in his day. Nevertheless there is drama enough as the price for a book slides slowly up in efficient increments — £2, £5, £8, £10, £12, £15, and so on. Sir John Kerr, the auctioneer, pushes the figures up quietly and the bidders indicate continuing interest with minimal gestures: a pencil half raised, the dip of a sale catalogue, a nod of the head. Like horns and hospitals, too much vocal bidding is frowned upon.

It is a pity that subject grouping of the books proved impossible in the sale. Instead, the listing was in alphabetical order of authors, and this meant that some rare bindings, such as the 17th century vellum enhancing the folio volume of Hooke's "Micrographia", were broken to release a text of lesser value. However the general condition of the books was so woeful, more as a result of desiccation and destructive handling than of damp that the criticism of the presentation of some of the finer volumes is unfair. Dr. Feisenberger had done a fine job.

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The first section of the sale, A—F, occupied two mornings in February 1969. Bright's "Reports of Medical Cases" (1827-31) went for £1,600, a good price for a rare complete set of an outstanding medical text with superb illustrations and the classic account of Bright's disease. A similar figure was reached with Baer's "De Ovi" (1827), a very rare first edition of the discovery of the mammalian ovum. Interest in plastic surgery was shown by the £1,400 fetched by the Carpus first edition (1816) on rhinoplasty which describes the restoration of lost noses to 'two officers of His Majesty's army' by a Hindu operative method employing a forehead skinflap. £400 was paid for a Dieffenbach on a similar subject. Claude Bernard's papers on glycogen formation in the liver fetched £1,200 ("L'Origine du Sucre") and £380 went to a lesser volume, high prices to pay unless one is a collector eager to complete a set. A non medical book written by Caesalpinus in 1583 on the classification of plants sold for £1,200 and a very rare first edition by Auenbrugger, who first discussed the use of percussing the thorax as a means of diagnosis, fetched £750, a figure rather below the market value (though who can accurately predict the monetary value of the rare?). Sixteen works by the physicist Boyle averaged £100 apiece, and those of the neuroanatomist Sir Charles Bell £50 each.

The G—M portion of the sale produced its own surprises. Low prices were paid for a number of the 17th and 18th century collected works: only one of the John Hunter volumes exceeded £50 and the three sets of Galen's opera averaged £20. However £950 was reached by Guillemeau's "The Frenche Chirurgie" (1597), of which only eight other copies are recorded, four in the U.K. and four in the U.S. A collection of Medical Dissertations submitted at Edinburgh University in the 19th century fetched £2,800 and included Joseph Black's dissertation "De humore acido a cibus orto et magnesia alba" (1754), perhaps the most important scientific dissertation ever to be submitted by a student. Hooke's "Micrographia" fetched £750, a book on the anatomy of the silkworm by Malpighi (of Malpighian tubule fame) sold for £380 and, in a later sale, a discourse on bones by Clopton Havers (thus the Haversian system in bone) drew £280. £500 apiece were received for Hewson's "Experimental Inquiries" (1771) (containing the first complete account of the lymphatic system) and Laennec's "A Treatise on the Diseases of the Chest" where he described the use of an early stethoscope. Two first editions of Jenner's findings with the Variola Vaccinae (1798) fetched £480 and £420 respectively, and two later editions (1799) yielded half that value.

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In the third part of the sale the highest figure for a single book was attained with the £2,000 for Parkinson's classic account of the Shaking Palsy (1817), one of the rarest medical texts with no copy available in London, including the British Museum. Despite strenuous efforts to procure this book for Edinburgh the bidding finally rested against the name of a Mr. Campbell whose identity remains a mystery. Two 16th volumes by Vesalius fetched £520 and £300, while the collected monographs of Sir J. Y. Simpson reached the respectable figure of £400. The Society withdrew a later presentation copy of his book on anaesthesia (1849) which is of low financial value but of considerable worth to the RMS.

Runs of various journals fared rather poorly. Undoubtedly the most valuable were the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London, our incomplete set fetching £2,800. Transactions of the Royal Society of Edinburgh sold for £900 and the Proceedings of both Societies for over £500 each. Our runs of BMJ fetched £600, of Lancet £520, of the Journal of Mental Science £400 and of Practitioner £16.

Two other books in this part of the sale sold for over £200. "Die Cellularpathologie" by Virchow and "Opuscula Anatomica Nova" by Riolanus (1649). Riolanus was a persistent critic of Harvey's view on the circulation of the blood and for twenty one years subdued Harvey sufficiently to stop him from writing further on his revolutionary concept of unidirectional blood flow.

This third section of the sale in October 1969 included the largest proportion of the library, over 600 lots accounting for 5,000 books (many of which contained several titles) and 2,700 periodicals. While much of this number was dross, there were good pickings to be had, and dealers and librarians were on their toes for bargain lots. By far the largest proportion of the collection will be housed in the Middleton library, Wisconsin; Helen Crawford, medical librarian of that institute attended all three sales and came away well satisfied with a strong representation from the RMS collection. Her calculations show that, in comparison with the Aberdeen Medical Society Library sale in 1967, prices were up by 44% on comparable volumes. Excluding 16% of the total books in the RMS sale which fetched identical or lower prices than the earlier sale, the average price of the books increased 54%, and this over a matter of 2-3 years. Little wonder the book business continues to thrive. So far the sale has brought in almost £105,000, excluding the interest charged by Sotheby & Co. A further portion of the library has yet to be sold at the time of writing this article, and it should be remembered that some 300 books have been retained because of their intrinsic value to the Society. With the departure of the majority of our books comes a time of unparalleled financial stability for the Society, and if this means a greater exercise of imagination and enquiry is possible for its members, the departure of the Society's books will not have been in vain.