Web-Based Auction Resources: The Sites and How Art Libraries Use Them

by Angela Graven, Christie's

Web-based auction resources have become essential research tools for the world's art auction houses. Web-based auction records help reduce the time it takes to research an item up for auction, and they bring a wealth of information, such as provenance, date of sale, and sale price, to a researcher's desktop.

These auction resources have also become useful for museum libraries, and art divisions of public and university libraries. Public Broadcasting System's popular "Antiques Roadshow" has made many people curious about the value of the art and antiques they discover at local flea markets and in grandma's attic. Librarians can sit a budding collector in front of a computer terminal, and quickly find auction records that match, or are similar to, the patron's property.

Auction Records As Art Research Tools

Art auction houses use Web-based auction record databases during appraisal work, after receiving questions from clients, and when writing lot descriptions for the auction catalogs. Librarians and specialists at auction houses usually want to find sales prices, estimates, auction dates, and, if the database provides them, provenance, exhibition history, and images. If the database does not provide provenance or images, researchers can use the information from the database's auction record to find the hard copy sales catalog that may have the desired image or provenance. While most other art libraries will not use the Web-based auction resources to appraise an art work, the databases, for instance, can help a student conduct research on the ownership and exhibition history of an oil painting. An auction record found in a Web-based database can lead an art researcher towards catalogues raisonnés, exhibition catalogs, journal articles, and other written materials authored by experts in the field.

In the past, auction houses and art libraries relied on hard-copy or CD-ROM indexes of sales records. With the emergence of the Web, many publishers decided to build database sites that are electronic versions of their print indexes. Suffice it to say, both auction houses and art libraries have benefited from having auction records in a Web database. The benefits of Web-based auction resources include quicker access to the auction records, the freeing of valuable shelf space, frequent updates of new and retrospective records, and various ways to search for records, such as keywords, artist name, or auction house.

Many publishers of Web-based auction record databases still produce CD-ROMs and hard copy indexes. For information on these products, librarians can consult the various publishers' Web sites. Presently, nine different publishers produce Web-based auction databases, here broken down into two categories. This article describes each database and discusses the ways they are or may be used by art librarians in auction houses, museums, and other institutions. However, some definitions and clarifications are in order to better understand the text and the accompanying table.

A lot is "a number of units of an article, a single article, or a parcel of articles offered as one item (as in an auction sale)," according to the Merriam Webster Online Dictionary (www.m-w.com). This means a lot can be one oil painting, two mahogany chairs, or three lithographs, etc. In a sale catalog, an auction house chooses various ways to illustrate lots. For instance, it may not choose to illustrate all lithographs offered in a lot because of space constraints in the print copy of the catalog. But, for example, the description in the catalog will inform the reader if there is more than one lithograph offered for sale in a lot. Since Artnet, Gabrieus, AskArt, ArtFact, and Prices for Antiques take the images directly from the auction catalog, their databases will have the same picture of the one lithograph. All these databases note in the record if a lot contains more than one item.

Bought-in refers to a lot unsold because the reserve price was not met.

Withdrawn refers to a lot that was taken out of a sale before the auction took place. This can happen for many reasons.

A hammer price is the sale price before the buyer's premium is added.

Buyer's premium refers to the percentage added to the sale price of a lot. The percentage varies according to auction house. Consult the Web site of the auction house to find its buyer premium rates.

Resources for the Fine Arts

ARTNET (www.artnet.com)

Artnet includes many features on its site, such as a gallery directory and articles, but their Fine Art Auctions Database (FAAD) contains auction records back to 1985. Auction records cover all areas of the fine arts from large auction houses, such as Christie's and Sotheby's, and many smaller auction houses, such as Van Ham Kunstauktionen in Cologne, Germany.
Each auction record in FAAD contains the title of the work, artist's name, creation date (if known), size, medium, sale date, auction house and location, sale title, lot number, estimate, sale price including buyer's premium, and a miscellaneous notes field. If an auction house illustrated a lot in the sale catalog, Artnet will publish a jpeg image along with the auction record.

FAAD offers a straightforward interface allowing the user to search by artist, auction house, or both. Furthermore, the interface has many ways to narrow down a search by title, medium, sale date, price range, etc. Since FAAD will only display a maximum of 200 lots per search (only 100 if the user wants images with search results), using the interface's options to narrow a search comes in handy. The interface also allows the researcher to sort the results in either ascending or descending order by sale date, sale price, or creation date of the work.

Artnet does not include provenance, exhibition history, and lot description with its auction records, but it does publish lots that were withdrawn and bought-in during a sale.

**ARTPRICE.COM**
(www.artprice.com)

Artprice.com was formed through an amalgamation of various hard copy and CD-ROM data sources, one being the ADEC Art Price Annual, and Falk's Art Price Index; Artprice.com still publishes the latter and sells it in both hard copy and CD-ROM formats. The records on the Web site are regularly updated, whereas the CD-ROM and hard copy indexes are published only once a year.

Artprice.com's records date back to 1987, and each record includes the usual information: sale result; title; dimension of the work; sale date; auction house. Due to copyright restrictions, Artprice avoids publishing an image of a lot along with the auction record. Instead of including an image of a lot in the database, Artprice.com indicates the page number in the sale catalog on which the auction house illustrated the lot. For some auction records, Artprice.com includes an artist's biography, an image of an artist's signature or mark, and a reference to the pertinent catalogue raisonné.

Like Artnet, Artprice.com covers all the fine art mediums and publishes withdrawn and bought-in lots in its database. To begin searching for auction records in artprice.com, one types in the artist's last name. The interface will then retrieve a list of hyper-linked names matching the initial query. Unlike the other Web-based databases, Artprice separates works known to be by an artist, and those works considered to be by the studio of, circle of, or style of the artist. By clicking on an artist's name, Art will take the user to a screen where searches can be narrowed down by title, medium, date of sale, and the work's creation date. On this screen, it is possible to sort results, such as by date, either in ascending or descending order.

**ASKART.COM**
(www.askart.com)

AskArt.com sets itself apart from the other Web-based auction databases by specializing in American artists. While AskArt is not as extensive as the other databases discussed in this article, the user may find, for instance, a record for an obscure American artist on AskArt.com from a small auction house in Michigan.

AskArt.com's auction records have the standard information, along with artists' biographies and references to catalogues raisonnés and exhibition catalogs if available in the AskArt.com database. AskArt.com lists the sale prices with the buyer's premium, posts records for withdrawn and bought-in lots, and its records date back to 1987.

To begin searching for auction records, one enters the artist's last name. AskArt.com will provide a list of auction records, with the most recent sale date first. The results screen also provides options for sorting the records. For example, records can display images, arrange the records by sale price, or limit a search to records for works done in a particular medium.

**GABRIUS**
(www.gabrius.com)

Gabrius publishes two auction-record Web databases, artindex and artindex plus. Each database has the same auction records, but "plus" refers to an extra art market research tool that provides statistical analysis based on the auction records in the Gabrius database. Here we will concentrate on the database interface and auction records.

The entire Gabrius site is based on Macromedia's Flash 6.0, so its interface is slightly more high-tech, with scrolling text and pop-up windows, but that is really the only difference from the other databases. Like Artnet, Gabrius covers all the fine art areas (photography records are forthcoming), includes large and small auction houses, and posts a jpeg image of a lot along with the auction record. Currently, its records date back to 1985, and the
database is regularly updated with new sale records. Like all the other Web-based databases mentioned in this article, Gabrius's auction records include all the standard information.

However, Gabrius has added a few extra features to its auction records. The Gabrius auction records include provenance, exhibition history, bibliographies, and notes if these details have been published in the sale catalog. Like Art Sales Index, Gabrius's prices only reflect the hammer price. Also, like ASI, Gabrius limits the records it publishes in the database to auction records for twentieth century works of art that sold for $750 and over, and nineteenth century and earlier works of art that sold for $2,000 and over.

The basic search in Gabrius's index begins by querying the artist's name or auction house. The advanced search option provides extra searching criteria, such as work title, medium, period, and auction date, which will help limit the search. Results can also be sorted by price, sale date, etc.

GORDON'S ART REFERENCE
(www.gordonsart.com/datastore_home.htm)

Gordon's Art Reference Web-based auction databases are limited to prints and photographs. Defining its Web databases as "Datastores," Gordon offers two separate databases, one for print auction records and another for photographs. Gordon's produces hard copy and CD-ROM indexes as well as the databases, but updates the paper and CD-ROM products only once a year, whereas their Datastores are updated soon after an auction.

The auction records in the Print Datastore date back to 1985, and the Photographs Datastore offers records dating back to the 1970s. The Print Datastore also includes records for posters, illustrated books with original graphics, and Picasso ceramics. The Photography Datastore covers nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries fine art and vintage photographs along with books and periodicals with original photographs. Both Datastores have auction records from houses not reflected in the other Web-based databases.

The 'look' and 'feel' of the Datastore interface differs from the other Web-based databases discussed in this article. The Datastore interface has more icons and tool bar buttons, and uses frames to provide three separate areas to navigate through and view search results. It is not difficult to learn to use, but it takes a little more time to learn the intricacies of the Datastore interface as compared to, for example, those of Artnet or Art Sales Index.

The same principle applies to searching Gordon's Datastore as it does to the other Web-based auction record databases; one begins by querying on an artist's last name. The functions and buttons on the interface's tool bar provide the many different ways to limit a search and sort the results. For example, a search can be limited to prints or photographs that sold within a specific price range, or sorted alphabetically by title.

The records provide all the usual information, the sale prices include the buyer's premium, and Datastore includes withdrawn and bought-in lots. The Print Datastore records note information specific to prints such as the print's margin and number (i.e. 13 of 50). Both the Print and Photography Datastores have a data field providing references to a catalogue raisonné for further research on the artist and the work. Within the past year, Gordon's has begun adding images to its auction records. Datastores do not have as many images in their data banks as Artnet or Gabrius, but this is unimportant because each Datastore record notes whether the sale catalog included an illustration of the lot.

Along with having a unique interface, Gordon's Datastores have unique security features. Gordon's is very serious about protecting its data. As a result, it provides a security tool called a "browser key," which is unique to each subscriber and has to be installed on the computer that accesses the Datastore. The "browser key" is a small application that resides in the system tray on the desktop. After the username and password have been entered, the "browser key" communicates to the Datastore the authentication of the operator as a registered user and opens the database for use. This could be an issue with an institution's IT department, since a port needs to be opened so the "browser key" can communicate with Gordon's servers.

Resources for the Decorative Arts and Other Collectibles

ARTFACT
(www.artfact.com)

ArtFact includes fine art auction records, but is best known for its database of decorative arts, furniture, and collectibles auction records. ArtFact's auction records date back to 1986 and it has sales results from smaller auction houses, such as Skinner and Wolf's Auctions. ArtFact updates its Web-based database with auction records soon after a sale.

As usual, the records in ArtFact's Web database all have the standard information: sale date; price including buyer's premium; auction house, etc. Some records include a jpeg image, and the full description found in the hard copy sale catalog's lot description. As a result, many of the records in ArtFact provide provenance and exhibition history. ArtFact also records lots that did not sell at auction.

Unlike the other Web-based auction resources in this article, ArtFact is best searched with Boolean operators. The user can simply enter keywords, but will retrieve better results using Boolean operators. The ArtFact interface has two windows created with frames. One window always displays the query screen, and the main window shows the auction records. The query screen includes options that will limit the results, such as price range and auction year.

INVALUABLE
(www.invaluable.com/collection/products_appraiser.asp)

Invaluable has many features and services on its Web site, but the Appraiser service is its database of auction records. Records date back to 1991. While it covers fine arts and memorabilia, the database's strength is in decorative arts and antiques. It is regularly updated with new auction records soon after a sale takes place.

Appraiser has a simple interface. The search interface has a field for keywords, and offers some options for sorting and limiting the expected results. Appraiser's sale records come from large and small American, British, and European auction houses. The records report all the usual information, such as hammer price, and even include the lot description from the sale catalog. The database does not include records for withdrawn or bought-in lots. Like Art Sales Index and Arprice.com, Appraiser does not include images in the auction records, in order to avoid rights issues.
**PRICES FOR ANTIQUES**
(www.p4a.com)

Prices for Antiques covers decorative arts, antiques, collectibles, and Americana. Sale records are gathered from large and small North American auction houses. Records date back to 1999, and database updates are regularly made.

The records in the Prices for Antiques database include estimates, sale prices with buyer’s premium, and date of sale. Records also include short lot descriptions, dimensions, condition explanation if noted in the catalog, and an image of the lot. At the bottom of the auction record for a lot, contact information and URL addresses for the auction house are provided.

The search interface is straightforward. Searches need to be categorized by type of object, such as banks, or crafts and folk art. Having limited a search by category, the user then limits the search by type and origin. Type usually refers to the materials or medium. For example, the category “banks” will list “die cast” and “wood” under type options. Origin always refers to the geographic region where the item was created. Entering keywords and/or a creation-date range will further narrow a search.

**The Best Auction Record Database For Your Library**

All the Web-based auction record databases cited in this article are subscription services. They have different subscription packages based on size of the subscribing institution and the number of one-time and simultaneous users. Some have flat monthly or annual rates no matter the number of users or searches. Some even offer access to their database based on a per-search cost. To limit the subscription cost, some libraries offer access to a Web-based auction records resource only on one or two computers rather than to the entire institution. For a price quote that best matches an institution and its access needs, the database publisher must be consulted.

When an institution considers the number of computers it wants to allow to have access to a Web-based auction record database, it also has to take into account how it wants users to log in to the databases. A small library, with a one- or two-user subscription license, may enjoy a simple username and password login. A larger library, with an institution-wide subscription, may want an IP (Internet Protocol) authentication login access. With IP authentication, the Web-based auction record resource recognizes a system’s unique IP address, and automatically allows a user access to the database. The user does not have to remember a username and password. Besides convenience, IP authentication blocks unauthorized users from access to the database since the user only accesses it from the institution’s IP address. Secret usernames and passwords can become known, with the result that a library has to change them often to ensure that unauthorized users do not take advantage of library database subscriptions.

Web-based auction resources offer both IP authentication and username and password logins. Some will give a subscriber a choice between the two methods of login, while others offer only username and password access.

The descriptions of each of these Web-based auction resources makes clear that many of them have overlapping features. As a result, finding the right one for a particular library comes down to the needs of library patrons and institutional budget constraints. For example, if patrons are more interested in antiques than oil paintings, either ArtFact, Invaluable, or Prices for Antiques would be the best choice. Art history students, studying painters from various time periods, would find one of the fine art Web-based auction resources more suitable. All these Web-based auction resources provide the user with insight into the art market and with a historical record of fine art and antique prices.

**Further Reading**

**Auction Record Resources**


**Auctions in General**


### Electronic Art Auction Record Databases Features Table

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<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Service Name</strong></th>
<th><strong>ArtFact</strong></th>
<th><strong>Artnet - Fine Art Auction Database</strong></th>
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<th><strong>AskART</strong></th>
<th><strong>Gabrius - artindex</strong></th>
<th><strong>Gordon's Print Datastore</strong></th>
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<th><strong>Invaluable - Appraiser</strong></th>
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