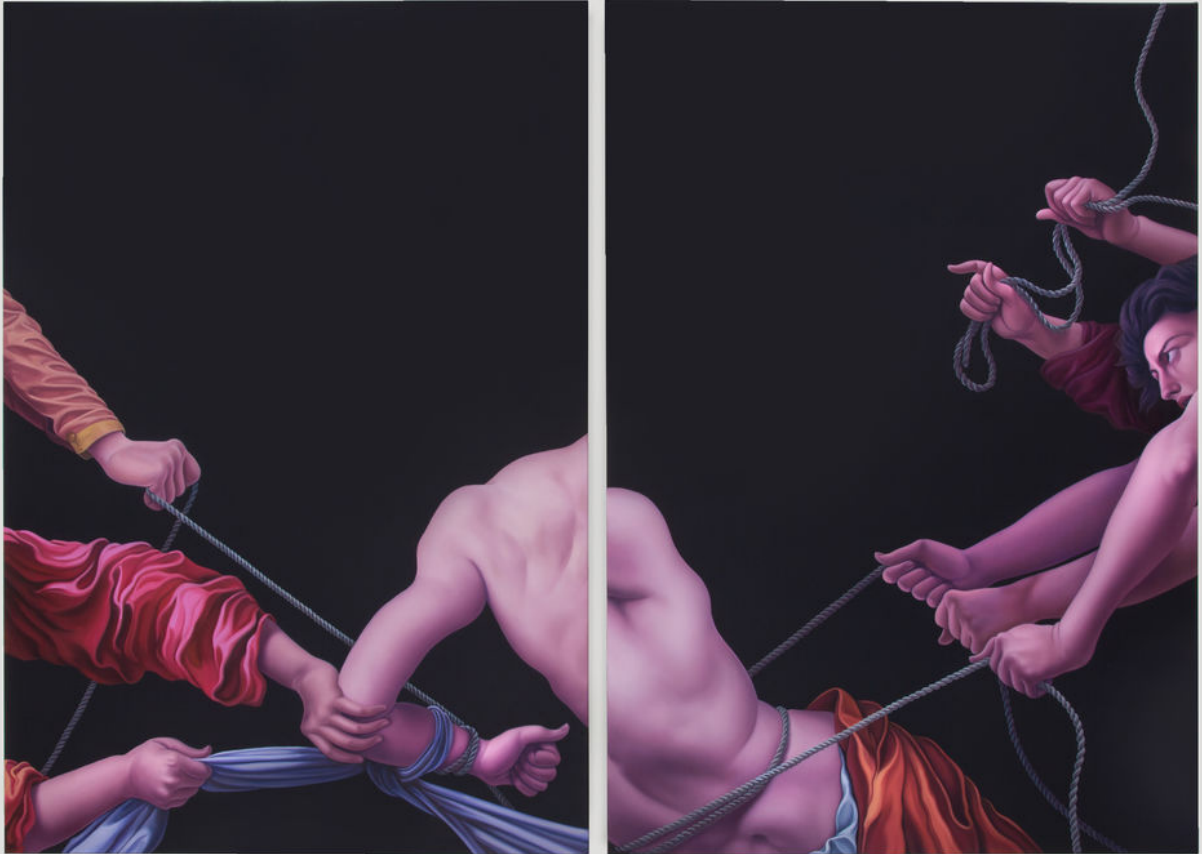


5 Things to Know about Collecting Figurative Paintings



There's a tendency to dismiss as frivolous, intellectually untaxing, and filled with the wealthy, white people who have historically commissioned them. But today a new cohort of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) and queer artists are producing [bold figurative paintings](#) that are not only exciting, but also reflective of the world around us. And even though paintings like 's *Salvator Mundi* (ca. 1500) can command [enormous sums](#), the genre can be surprisingly accessible and affordable, too. When questions of representation—particularly of Black and queer subjects—come to the fore, figurative painting is uniquely positioned to not just respond to political movements, but also to actively produce social change. “Younger collectors today are more ‘comfortable’ acquiring work that is more political and socially engaged in nature; oftentimes that work is figurative,” explained Taymour Grahne, who will reopen his eponymous gallery—where he’s shown emerging figurative painters like , , and —in London after a three-year hiatus with a show of recent paintings by .

Barriers between traditional sale categories have eroded too, reflecting globalization and a less Eurocentric canon. In Asian markets, auction houses are successfully experimenting with offering watches and jewelry alongside art in the same sales to appeal to younger collectors. Juxtaposing figurative paintings from different eras in the context of auctions of post-war and contemporary art has paid off as well, and not only in the case of *Salvator Mundi*.

Sam Mansour, the head of “New Now” sales at Phillips, noted that it became the first house to offer a work by —previously relegated to auctions of American art—in a major contemporary evening sale. That more historical figurative painting, *Before the Shot* (1958), offered in a contemporary setting, surpassed its high estimate of \$2.5 million to sell for \$4.7 million with fees. “This was particularly of note because the work sold to a European collector of contemporary art who may not have paid attention, nevermind bid, if the work were offered in its traditional auction venue,” he explained.

“Calling it a fad would be a bit of a misnomer; the pendulum swings with any progression of taste,” said Mansour. “Whereas process-based abstraction and post-internet art was once the most sought-after and desired cutting edge contemporary work at auction, we are now seeing works of figuration generate strong prices. This is partly a response to what came before, but also a reflection of the current cultural and geopolitical climate.”

Grahne concurred. “Zombie formalism was a fad, but there were also plenty of great abstract and process-based painters who are still around today and who continue to be collected widely,” he said. “There may be plenty of artists jumping on the ‘zombie figuration’ bandwagon now, but the best of the artists will continue on way past this moment.”

Lauren Kelly, a partner at New York’s Sean Kelly Gallery—which represents revered figurative painters such as Kehinde Wiley and Hugo McCloud—also emphasized the historical longevity of figurative painting. “Figurative painting will always be a stalwart of art history, and whether it comes in and out of the current fashion, it will continue to be an important manifestation of how artists reflect and represent our society,” she said. “It is exciting to see more diverse individuals being represented within the canon, but there is still a lot of work left to do.”

Mansour emphasized the current representational shift, too, noting that “much of the most inspired and inspiring figurative works today are self-reflective works executed by LGBTQ, Black, and female artists in the interest of quite literally painting themselves, their cohort, their lived experiences into the historical canon and a narrative where they formerly were given little to no space.”

Dealers, auction house specialists, curators, and artists themselves have a broad range of standards for evaluating figurative paintings, but the most reliable yardstick may be the viewer’s intuition.

“To paraphrase Justice Potter Stewart, ‘You know it when you see it,’” said Mansour. He pointed out that, at times, narrative painting was no different from illustration, and it’s no less important as a result. “Good figurative painting and ‘refined illustration’ are not mutually exclusive and many canonical artists, as well as those garnering significant contemporary attention, have [had] a professional relationship to and engagement with illustration and graphic design.”

Often, technical ability matters less than motivation. When sizing up a figurative painting, Mansour counseled, viewers should ask themselves: “What is the intent of their figuration, and are there solidly grounded reasons for why an artist paints in the manner that they do?” He added, “Larry Pollans always stressed in discussing a work of art to think not just about what is depicted but why...the artist [chose] to paint it in that way. That’s been a guiding principle for me in assessing the quality of any work of art ever since.”

Grahne noted, “I like to look at the concept, narrative, and execution of a painting. Oftentimes, though, it is hard to describe why a work is ‘good’—it’s just a feeling and a connection one has to the work. The term ‘good’ is so subjective.”

Also crucial is the artist's relationship to the subject. Kelly pointed to Wiley's work "focusing on communities who have traditionally been excluded and exalting them to their due recognition." She added, "Whether it is a street cast model or President Barack Obama, what I appreciate most in his work is how Kehinde's respect for the sitter shines through in every painting while simultaneously examining the symbols and visual language of the heroic, powerful, majestic, and sublime."

The pandemic has transformed the ways collectors buy art, whether from PDFs distributed by galleries or through online sales platforms. While such purely digital channels are no match for seeing a work in person, Grahne believes "it is 'easier' to buy figurative work via a JPEG than other types of work, because figurative painting translates better as images as opposed to more abstract or process-based [and] conceptual work."

The move to more digital sales will likely have permanent effects on the entire art market, according to Mansour, not just the buying and selling of figurative paintings. "Perhaps counterintuitively, lockdown actually enabled us to connect with more people," he said. "The online and live-streamed sale season led to a 66% increase in new clients visiting the website, and in July's evening sale of 20th-century and contemporary art, there was a 20% increase in first-time buyers compared to the previous year."

See as much as you can. Auctions, art fairs, and gallery shows—even if they're mostly happening virtually—are great ways to not only learn about what's out there, but also get a sense of what you really love. Kelly encouraged collectors to "seek out work that speaks to them, whether it be visually, or addressing issues that are important to them, the way both Wiley and McCloud portray themes such as race, politics, gender, and environment."



Koak, *Tendering (Having Feelings)*, 2019, Union Pacific



Caroline Walker, *Three Maids*, 2018, GRIMM

Figurative painting is a vast and fluid category, with numerous variations in subject matter, style, process, and medium; countless subcategories, genres, and niches; and a great deal of regional specificity, too, from the Chicago Imagists to the New Leipzig School and beyond. Grahne emphasized that different countries "have their own histories of figuration, often responding to the political issues of the time." Even regions with strong histories of geometric abstraction because of a religious prohibition on displaying the figure, for instance, have their own figurative traditions, which take on additional weight in such contexts.

Emerging collectors want "works by artists who reflect the world in which they live—they want to acquire pieces that capture their 21st-century reality," Mansour said. "The older collectors, too, are gravitating toward this material, sometimes out of their own genuine interest and at other times in an understandable attempt at expanding their horizons and literally diversifying their collection."