How to Sell Art at Auction

A practical guide for consignors

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Illustrative image created for this publication. It does not depict a specific auction house or identifiable artwork.

Main conclusion. Auction can broaden a market and create competition, but only when the property, house, sale, reserve and costs align. A seller should evaluate probable net proceeds and risk, not the headline result.

An auction is more than a sale

An auction house acts as the consignor's intermediary and agent under a contract. It researches, catalogues, markets and offers the property; the winning bidder purchases under the sale conditions. The seller does not control the final price. The seller can negotiate the house, sale, estimate, reserve and timing, while the result ultimately depends on the demand present that day.

Format	Advantages	Disadvantages
Live	Competitive energy; specialists and clients in the room; visible bidding pace.	Travel and staging costs; limited physical access; phones and internet still matter.
Hybrid	Combines room, phone, absentee and online bidders; broad practical reach.	More channels to coordinate; transmission delays; platform-specific terms.
Online only	Flexible calendar, international access and potentially lower operating costs.	Less physical inspection; greater reliance on images, condition and trust.

The consignment process

1. Initial inquiry. Provide front, back, signature, labels, frame and damage images, plus artist, title, date, medium, unframed dimensions, provenance, exhibitions, literature and certificates.
2. Review and acceptance. A complimentary auction estimate is not an appraisal for insurance, tax or litigation. The house decides whether the work fits its market and thresholds.
3. Contract. Negotiate commission, reserve, insurance, photography, shipping, storage, withdrawal, rescission rights, governing law, payment timing and unsold-property treatment.
4. Intake and diligence. The house examines condition, title, authenticity, provenance, sanctions and identity requirements. An attribution may change after physical inspection.
5. Catalogue and campaign. Review description, images, estimate and sale placement before the catalogue closes.
6. Auction. Bidding may open below the low estimate. A lot that fails to meet reserve is bought in.
7. Settlement. The buyer pays first; the house deducts authorized commission and charges and remits the net under the contract. A published result is not the seller's net.
8. Afterwards. Plan return, later auction or private sale for unsold lots; avoid immediate reoffering without addressing the prior failure.

Choosing the house and sale

The largest brand is not always the best venue. Compare verified results for the artist, category, price level and location, including unsold lots rather than records alone. Examine audience, catalogue quality, research, calendar, post-sale service and contractual clarity.

- Obtain the estimate, reserve, seller's commission and every possible charge in writing.
- Ask about guarantees, advances, third-party financial interests and referral fees.
- Confirm who pays for authentication, technical analysis, images, insurance, shipping and return.
- Check currency, taxes, export restrictions and legal place of sale.
- Do not consign solely because of an aggressive estimate; unrealistic pricing can suppress bidding and burn a lot.

Auction, gallery, dealer or end buyer

Channel	Best fit	Main cost or risk
Auction	Competitive demand, comparables and a public deadline exist.	Uncertain result, fees and visible failure if unsold.
Gallery	The work fits a program and can wait for the right buyer.	Long timeline, negotiated commission and limited public transparency.
Dealer	Speed, privacy or specialized access matters.	Dealer spread or commission; conflict if representation is unclear.
End buyer	Trust, agreed price and documentation are strong.	Narrow reach, payment fraud and direct contractual exposure.

Fees and the reported result

Hammer price is the accepted bid. The buyer's premium is added and paid by the buyer; it is distinct from the seller's commission. Some houses publish a premium-inclusive result. Taxes, shipping and resale royalties may be additional. The consignor receives hammer less negotiated commission and expenses, not the headline total.

Illustration. US$20,000 hammer. Hypothetical 28% buyer's premium: US$5,600. Premium-inclusive result: US$25,600 before tax. If the seller agreed to 12% commission and US$700 expenses, approximate net is US$16,900. The gap is not an error; it reflects different obligations.

Before signing

- Document title and provenance; verify certificates with the issuer.
- Obtain an independent condition report when value or risk warrants it.
- Put reserve, estimate, commission, expenses, insurance and payment date in writing.

- Plan export, taxes, packing, shipping and unsold-property treatment.
- Retain the contract, catalogue, correspondence and final settlement statement.

Sources consulted

Current sources reviewed September 21, 2026. The controlling terms are always those of the specific sale and jurisdiction.

1. Christie's, Financial Information for Buyers. https://www.christies.com/help/buying-guide-important-information/financial-information (accessed September 21, 2026; premiums, increments and guarantees)

2. Christie's, Frequently Asked Questions. https://www.christies.com/en/help/frequently-asked-questions (accessed September 21, 2026; registration, consignment, payment and results)

3. Sotheby's, Buy and Sell. https://www.sothebys.com/en/buy-sell (accessed September 21, 2026; buying channels and reported results)

4. Bonhams, Online Conditions for Sale for Buyers. https://www.bonhams.com/legals/34183/ (accessed September 21, 2026; online-sale obligations)

5. Phillips, Buying Guide. https://www.phillips.com/buy (accessed September 21, 2026; registration, bidding and payment)

6. LiveAuctioneers, Bidder Help. https://help.liveauctioneers.com/hc/en-gb/categories/360000633091-Bidding (accessed September 21, 2026; platform bidding)