

Philip Hook, *The Ultimate Trophy: How the Impressionist Painting Conquered the World*, 224pp. Prestel. 978 3 7913 3971 9

At the first Impressionist auction in 1875 Renoir's *La Loge* made 220 francs, to the jeers of hecklers; in 2008 it sold for \$14,800,000. A collection of Impressionist canvasses bequeathed to the French nation in 1894 was dismissed in *L'Artiste* as 'des ordures' that no one should want to see; yet today Impressionist shows sell out more frequently than any others. *The Ultimate Trophy* investigates the vicissitudes of Impressionism in terms of its reception and, primarily, its commercial value. It argues that Impressionism inaugurated the scandal of modern art; moreover, that it marked the start of modern art markets.

Philip Hook's lifelong career in the commercial art world gives him first-hand access to the vagaries of the markets, though this position also presents a problem: would not the dealer and auctioneer's words be inescapably a part of the processes he tries to describe? But Hook, with his experience of writing fictionalized art world satire, manages to maintain a critical distance. Indeed, his clients and employers themselves become case studies, and he even covers the commission-fixing scandal of the late 1990s. Hook in fact epitomises the best feature of the international auction houses today: the ability to balance serious research with commercial interest; but he goes further, in his ability to separate questions of quality and importance from the question of price.

Admittedly, this is no Marxist deconstruction, and Hook is more inclined to draw on personal anecdotes than on any cultural or economic theory; but he assays a range of historical examples, and is unerringly adept at distinguishing between gilded salesmanship and 24-carat criticism. This ranks among the very best of popular explications of art history. Whereas Robert Hughes approaches such material concerns with melancholic truculence, in Hook we find a spritely humour. If we accept Hook's contention that the universal appeal of Impressionism lies in good measure in its direct style and levity of spirit, then his account seems perfectly pitched to reach the widest market; but his prose is the fitting counterpart more truly in the way it effortlessly conceals a wealth of knowledge and experience.

Peter Maber