

# Is It Even Possible to Comprehend a Work of Art Without Seeing a Woman Next to It (for Scale)?

Examining an enduring and strange stock photo phenomenon.

**Ben Davis & Julia Halperin**, May 10, 2018



A member of the Sotheby's auction house staff poses in front of *Blue Sauna* by Adriana Varejao at the press preview of the “Shake It Up Online” auction of works from the private collection of photographer Mario Testino on September 8, 2017 in London. Photo by Leon Neal/Getty Images.

Spend enough time looking at auction reports, as you inevitably will if it is auction season and you are on editing duty, and you'll feel like you are stuck in some kind of “glitch in the Matrix”-style loop of art-business clichés about how the “market is robust” and collectors are willing to pay “top prices for top material.” You'll also find yourself looking at a lot of pictures of auction previews, which *really* occupy the overlapping space in the Venn diagram where the bland, the posh, and the uncanny meet.

In these photos, taken and supplied by press agencies and used in auction coverage across the globe, you'll see a lot of art handlers pictured handling art, lending a little dynamism to otherwise deadly dull installation shots. With high-profile lots like Leonardo's Salvator Mundi at Christie's last year, you'll see major paintings flanked by sour-faced guards or animated specialists, to signify "Importance."

But the really, really notable cliché of the "auction preview" genre is "women standing awkwardly near art for scale." It's seriously weird, and it is undying.

There are many questions that this genre invites: Can the women positioned at these angles actually see what they are looking at? Why in god's name would a photographer ever ask one to sit down? Has there been a rapture just before each photo was taken that sucked up anyone who is not thin, white, and between the ages of 23 and 33?

We think it's pretty clear *why* these strangely positioned images exist—but we'll let someone who's actually worked one of these things explain. Alice Gregory's all-time-classic 2012 n+1 essay details her experience navigating the strange office culture inside Sotheby's, and it so happens that it concludes with her being asked by a photographer to pose in front of an Andy Warhol "Fright Wig" work for just such an occasion:

*"Oh, good. She's blonde," said the photographer. I made a face at him. "For the contrast." He sighed. "You'll stand out against the purple." I followed his instructions and approached the painting, gazing up at it from a few feet away at a quarter-angle to the camera. I shifted my weight subtly from one hip to the other and pretended to see things on the canvas that I hadn't before. Standing next to the painting, I was a live specimen of powerlessness: in service of sums of money too great and too senseless for me to comprehend. "Back up a little," the photographer instructed. "No, that's too much. Yeah, stay right there. I need you to look diminutive."*

So, inspired by the classic post "Women Laughing Alone With Salad" from the Hairpin (RIP), we've pulled together a few years worth of the phenomenon as a demonstration. Happy bidding!



Christie's employees pose in front of a painting entitled *Salvator Mundi* by Leonardo da Vinci at a photocall at Christie's auction house in central London on October 22, 2017. Photo courtesy Tolga Akmen/AFP/Getty Images.



A Sotheby's employee poses next to *Il Minotauro fa Paura alla Gente per Bene* by Bahman Mohasses during a press preview of Orientalist and Middle Eastern Art Week at Sotheby's on April 20, 2018 in London. Photo by Chris J Ratcliffe/Getty Images for Sotheby's.

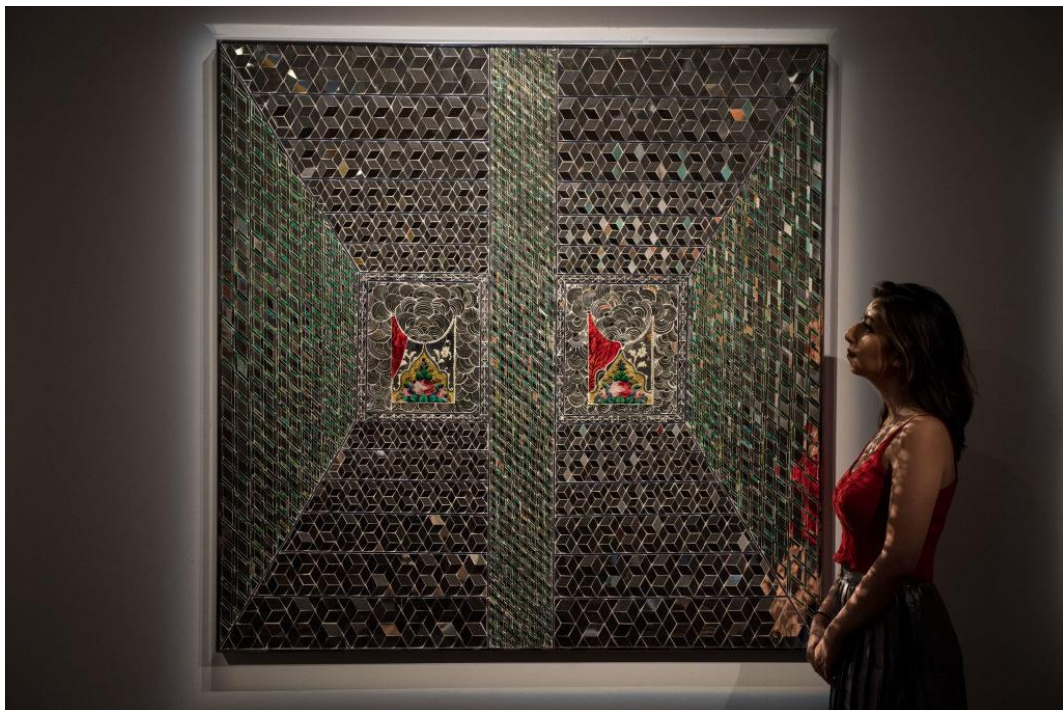


A Sotheby's employee poses next to a samite shirt with ducks during a press preview of Orientalist and Middle Eastern Art Week at Sotheby's on April 20, 2018 in London. Photo by Chris J Ratcliffe/Getty Images for Sotheby's.





A Sotheby's employee poses next to *Untitled (Still life with pineapple)* by Manoucher Yektaï during a press preview of Orientalist and Middle Eastern Art Week at Sotheby's on April 20, 2018 in London. Photo by Chris J Ratcliffe/Getty Images for Sotheby's.



A Sotheby's employee poses next to *Recollections I* by Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian during a press preview of Orientalist and Middle Eastern Art Week at Sotheby's on April 20, 2018 in London. Photo by Chris J Ratcliffe/Getty Images for Sotheby's.



A Sotheby's employee poses next to *Untitled (Tree trunks and village scene)* by Sohrab Sepehri during a press preview of Orientalist and Middle Eastern Art Week at Sotheby's on April 20, 2018 in London. Photo by Chris J Ratcliffe/Getty Images for Sotheby's.

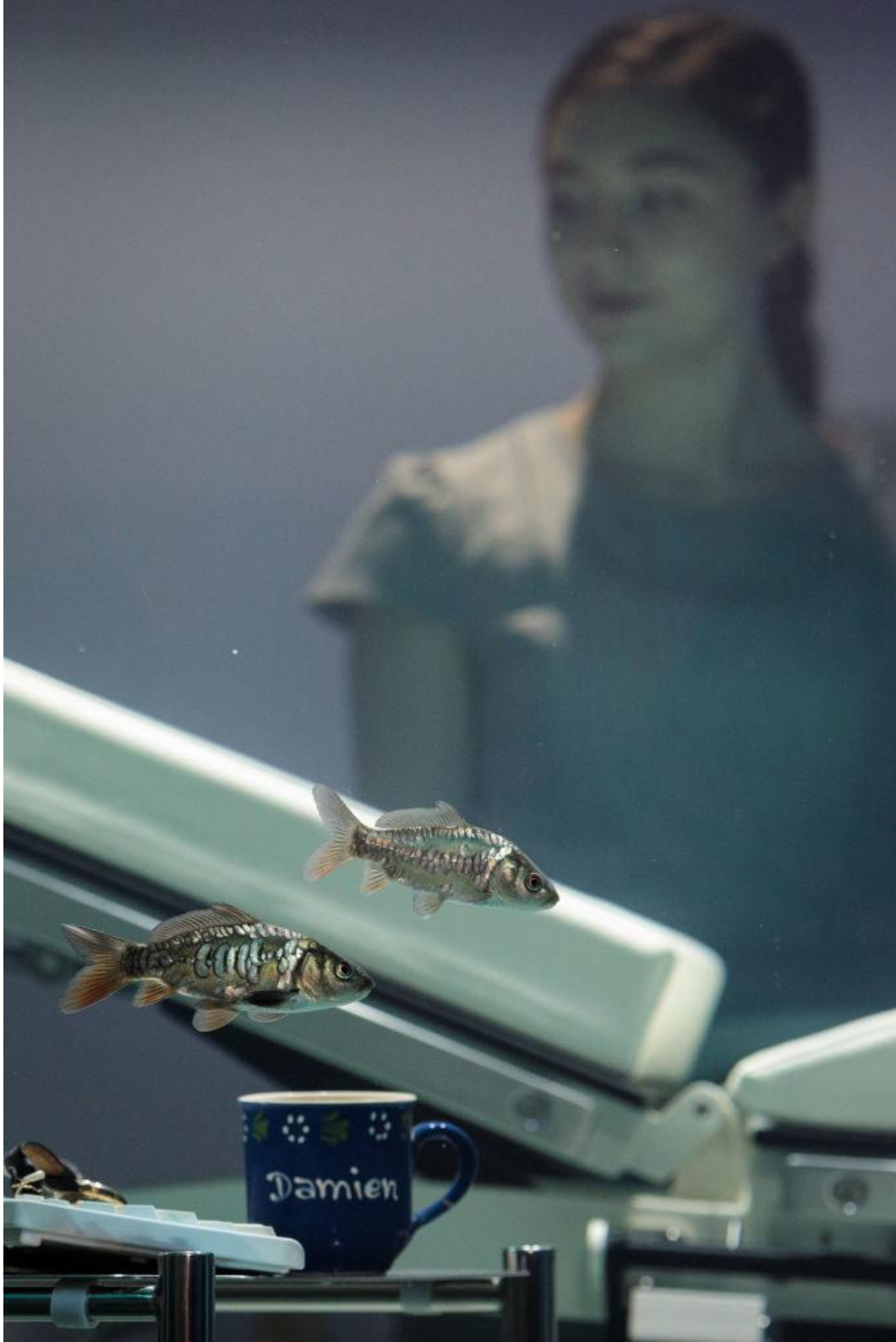


An employee poses with *Red Morning (Hell)* (1977) by Gilbert & George at Christie's London on September 29, 2017 in London, England. Photo by Jack Taylor/Getty Images.





An employee poses with various furniture designs by Allen Jones, the photograph *Charlotte Rampling at the Hotel Nord Pinus Arles, France* (1973) by Helmut Newton, and *Moloch Floor Lamp* (1971) by Gaetano Pesce at Christie's on September 29, 2017 in London. Photo by Jack Taylor/Getty Images.



An employee poses with *Love Lost* (1999) by Damien Hirst, which features 20 live carp, at Christie's on September 29, 2017 in London. Photo by Jack Taylor/Getty Images.





An employee poses with a marble bust of Lord Horatio Nelson (ca. 1800) at Sotheby's on January 11, 2018 in London. Photo by Jack Taylor/Getty Images.



Two women pose with *The Madonna of Mercy* by The Master of 1336 goes on view as part of Sotheby's London Old Masters Evening Sale, on December 1, 2017 in London. Photo by Michael Bowles/Getty Images for Sotheby's.



A gallery assistant poses with *Sept 58 (Iseo)* by Ben Nicholson, at Sotheby's auction house on November 17, 2017 in London. Photo by Leon Neal/Getty Images.



A gallery assistant poses in front of a selection of ballet shoes during a preview of items from the sale of actrees Audrey Hepburn's personal collection at Christies on September 22, 2017 in London. Photo by Leon Neal/Getty Images.



A Christie's employee poses with *Study of a Red Pope, 1962. 2nd Version (1971)* by Francis Bacon at Christie's on September 15, 2017 in London. Photo by Jack Taylor/Getty Images.



A member of the Sotheby's auction house staff poses with *We Work As A Collective* by Enrico David (left), *Saint Francis* by Kehinde Wiley (center), and *Scandalous Magic Par Excellence (with Iggy Pop)* by Nigel Cooke (right) at the press preview of the "Shake It Up Online" auction of works from the private collection of photographer Mario Testino on September 8, 2017 in London. Photo by Leon Neal/Getty Images.





A member of Sotheby's observes Professore Rossi's white marble sculpture *Ruth*, at Sotheby's on May 19, 2017 in London. Photo by Michael Bowles/Getty Images for Sotheby's.



An employee poses with El Anatsui, *Earth Developing More Roots* (2011) during a photocall to promote sale of Modern and Contemporary African Art at Sotheby's in London on May 12, 2017. Photo courtesy Daniel Leal-Olivas/AFP/Getty Images.



Employees pose with an artwork entitled *Composition No. 25 (soleil)* (2015) by Abdoulaye Konate during a photocall to promote the “Sale of Modern and Contemporary African Art” at Sotheby’s in London on May 12, 2017. Photo courtesy Daniel Leal-Olivas/AFP/Getty Images.

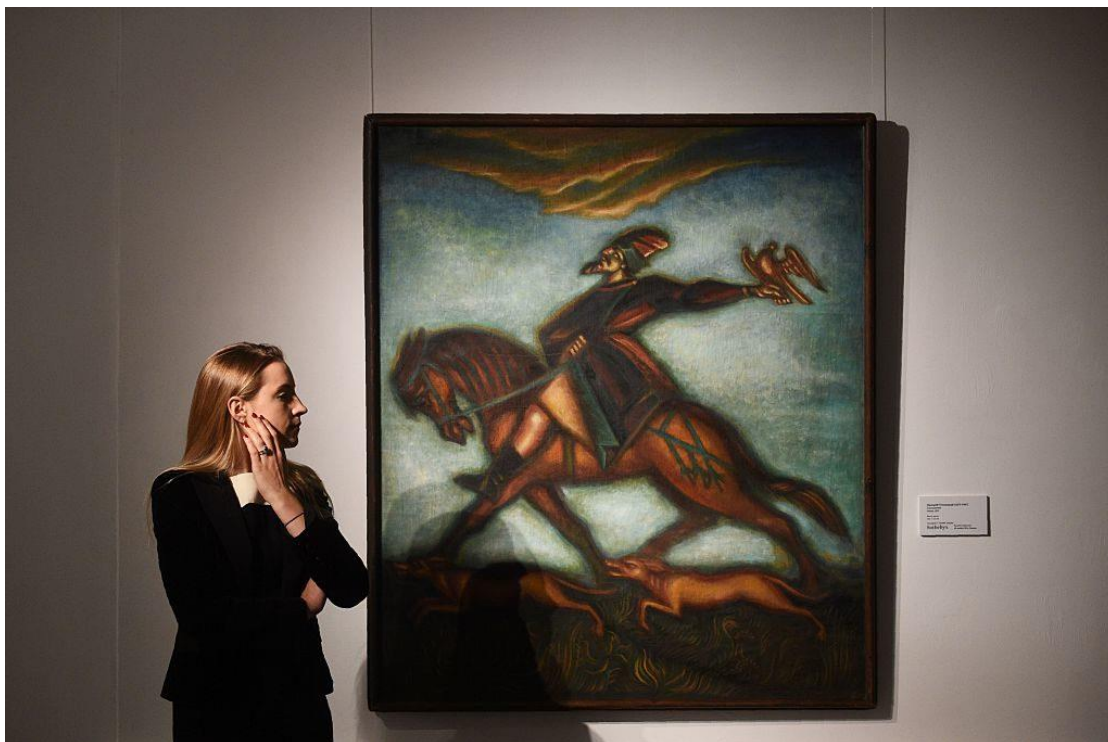


Christie's employees pose for photos with *Three studies for a portraits of George Dyer* by Francis Bacon, at Christie's on February 24, 2017 in London. Photo by Chris J Ratcliffe/Getty Images.



A woman poses for a photo in front of *La corde sensible* by René Magritte, at Christie's on February 24, 2017 in London. Photo by Chris J Ratcliffe/Getty Images.





A woman stands by the painting *The Hunter* by Dmitri Stelletsky during a preview of Sotheby's "Russian Pictures Including the Bar-Gera Collection of Soviet Non-Conformist Art Sale," in Moscow on November 2, 2016. Photo credit Natalia Kolesnikova/AFP/Getty Images.



A gallery assistant poses with *Beautiful, Hallo, Space-Boy Painting* by Damien Hirst with David Bowie during the press preview of the "Bowie/Collector" auction at Sotheby's on November 1, 2016 in London. Photo by Leon Neal/Getty Images.



A Christie's employee poses with *View on the River Stour near Dedham* (ca. 1821-1822) by John Constable at the auction house on May 26, 2016 in London. Photo by Jack Taylor/Getty Images.

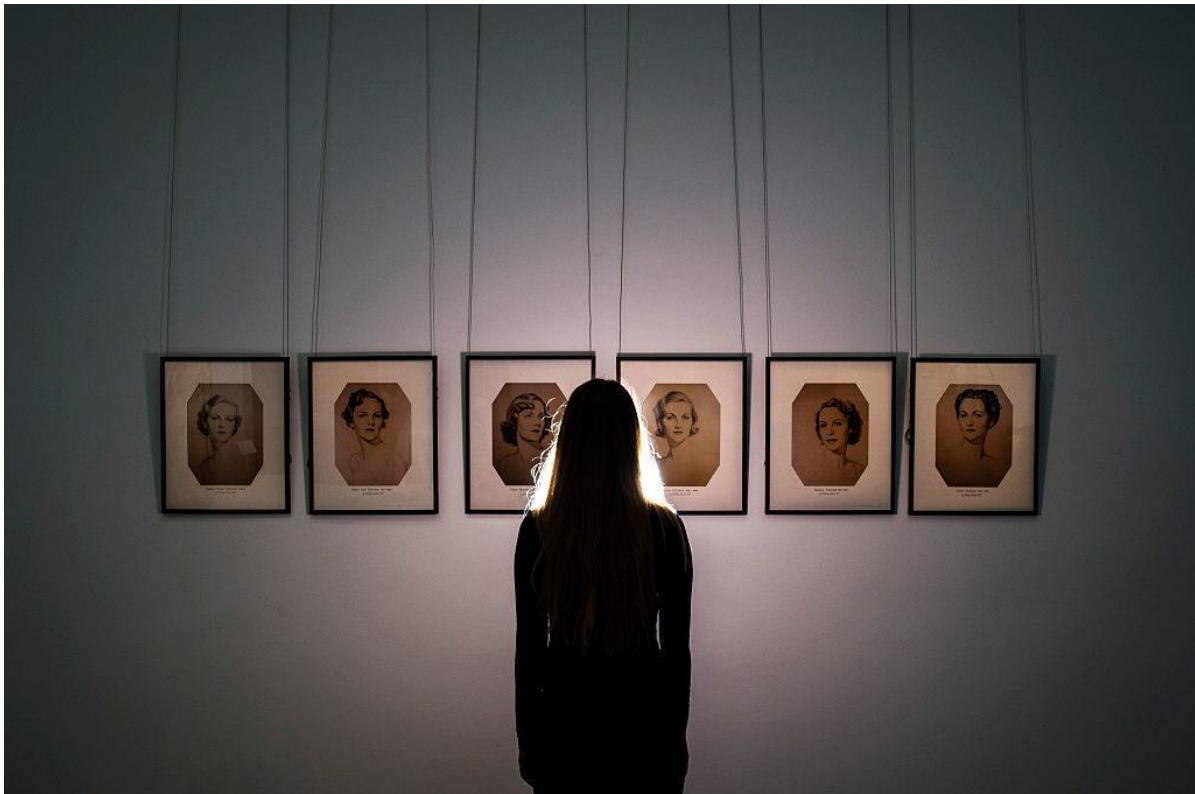


A Sotheby's employee stands with a novelty Elvis telephone during the pre-auction preview of the personal collection of Deborah Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire at Sotheby's on February 26, 2016 in London. Photo by Justin Setterfield/Getty Images.





A Sotheby's employee stands next to a model of a hen by Nicholas Johnson during the pre-auction preview of the personal collection of Deborah Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire, at Sotheby's at Sotheby's on February 26, 2016 in London. Photo by Justin Setterfield/Getty Images.



A Sotheby's employee stands in front of a series of portraits of the Mitford Sisters during the pre-auction preview of the personal collection of Deborah Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire at Sotheby's on February 26, 2016 in London. Photo by Justin Setterfield/Getty Images.





A member of staff is reflected as she poses next to a collection of Henri Matisse original prints from his jazz portfolio at Christie's auction house on February 17, 2016 in London. Photo by Carl Court/Getty Images.



A gallery assistant views *Despues De Un Puno* by Jean Michael Basquiat at Sotheby's on January 28, 2016 in London. Photo by Ben Pruchnie/Getty Images.



A member of staff poses next to a painting by Sir Anthony Van Dyck entitled *Portrait of Queen Henrietta Maria*, during a press preview at Sotheby's on December 4, 2015 in London. Photo by Carl Court/Getty Images.





A member of staff poses beside Franz Marc's 1911 piece *Gemsen*, at Christie's King Street auction house on June 19, 2015 in London. Photo by Rob Stothard/Getty Images.



A member of staff looks at Henry Moore's sculpture *Reclining Figure No. 2*, conceived in 1952, at Christie's King Street auction house on June 19, 2015 in London. Photo by Rob Stothard/Getty Images.





A guest views *Femme Debout* by artist Alberto Giacometti during the preview ahead of “the artist’s muse: a curated evening sale” at Christie’s New York on October 9, 2015 in London. Photo by Ben Pruchnie/Getty Images.



A guest views *Cote Chipote* by artist Jean Dubuffet during the preview ahead of Christie's New York post war and contemporary art sale on October 9, 2015 in London. Photo by Ben Pruchnie/Getty Images.



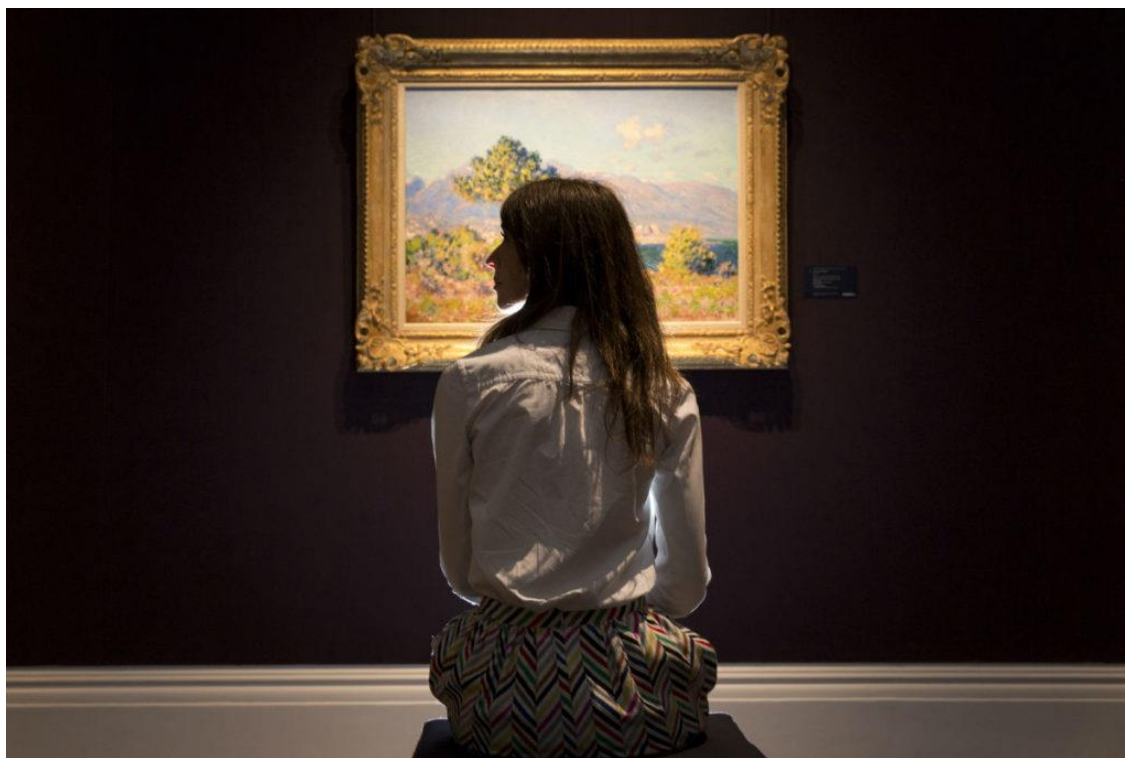


A gallery assistant views *The Brigadier* by artist Lucian Freud during the preview ahead of Christie's New York post war and contemporary art sale on October 9, 2015 in London. Photo by Ben Pruchnie/Getty Images.





A gallery assistant looks up at Andy Warhol's *Superman* (1981), which has gone on show at Sotheby's on April 10, 2015 in London. Photo by Mary Turner/Getty Images for Sotheby's.



A woman sits in front of Claude Monet's 1888 piece *Antibes, vue du plateau Notre-Dome*, on display at Sotheby's auction house on June 18, 2014 in London. Photo by Rob Stothard/Getty Images.



A member of Sotheby's staff poses with Piet Mondrian's 1927 piece *Composition with Red, Blue and Grey*, on display at Sotheby's auction house on June 18, 2014 in London. Photo by Rob Stothard/Getty Images.





A Sotheby's auction house employee views *Venice, a view of Piazza San Marco looking east towards the Basilica* by Canaletto on November 28, 2014 in London. Photo by Rob Stothard/Getty Images.



A Sotheby's auction house employee views *Rome, from Mount Aventine* by J.M.W. Turner on November 28, 2014 in London. Photo by Rob Stothard/Getty Images.





A Christie's employee poses beside a piece of work entitled *Nature morte a la nappe a carreaux* by Juan Gris at Christie's auction house on January 30, 2014 in London. Photo by Dan Kitwood/Getty Images.



Employees pose next to a sculpture by Italian artist Alberto Giacometti entitled *Chariot* during a press preview at Sotheby's on October 10, 2014 in London. Photo by Carl Court/Getty Images.