

Sale of art: from outrage to a welcome gift!

Times are changing

The current spirit of the times calls for change. Last year, a shrinking network of offices, continuing digitalisation and changing working methods prompted ING to give its corporate collection a serious rethink. In prior deaccession rounds, art had been donated to museums as well as educational and healthcare institutions. Art was also sold back to artists, and it was auctioned to staff several times. This time it had been decided to dispose of no fewer than a thousand artworks via a public online auction. The proceeds went to living artists, and the proceeds from the work of deceased artists went to independent art school De Ateliers. This enabled ING to support today's art sector, which had not been having a very easy time during COVID-19.

Tips and tricks

Deaccession (the official removal of an item from a collection) is an art in itself, so I'd like to share some experiences and suggestions. All the internal processes for meeting the strict legal and IT requirements take a great deal of time and energy. Involve departments such as Compliance, Risk, Finance, Legal, Media, external and internal Communication in the deaccession plans on a timely basis. Selecting the artworks also takes a lot of thought. So make a list of criteria beforehand: depending on whether the artwork meets the core values of the collecting policy, decide whether it's replaceable, still representative, etc. Once your selection is final, document this information – including the value of each artwork – and have it signed so there can be no uncertainty about it later. Then present the plan internally to various stakeholders and discuss any reputation risk with your spokesperson, etc. Next, gauge the reactions of several artists and galleries. Do they see the disposal as positive? If they are less enthusiastic about it, you can prepare appropriately and include that in your plan. Make sure that the Dutch Art Galleries Association has also been informed. Another important step is to place all the artworks for deaccession in the deaccessions database of the Dutch Museums Association. Works selected from it by museums can be donated to them, which will give the art a largely public destination, and the artists a representative and nice, new platform. Finally, specify where the proceeds should go, to create a broader basis for the disposal. A publicity campaign can be used to advertise the auction and reach more potential buyers than your own staff and pensioners alone. You can rouse the interest of special customers or employees of your own organisation with an exclusive preview. A good FAQ page can provide clarity and show how everything is organised. Finally, think ahead about how to administer the VAT and the resale right (if applicable) after the auction. That goes for the company and the artists alike.

ING auction

ING's public online auction was in cooperation with auctioneer Veilet, with which it had enjoyed positive experiences in the past. Veilet provided good photos of the artworks and ran the online auction, handling and transport to the buyers. The great surprise was that all one thousand works of art were auctioned for a total of €600,000. Ultimately, in only 2% of all cases were artworks not picked up or the buyers changed their mind at the last minute. The result was an absolute win-win situation: deaccession of the collection with enthusiastic buyers and artists alike. For example, one colleague said how delighted she was to have finally got hold of the work of art that had hung next to her desk for years. And an artist who was initially outraged about having all his work from the ING Collection sold later wrote: "No matter what it [the sum received] is, it'll be a gift from the gods. Thanks."

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