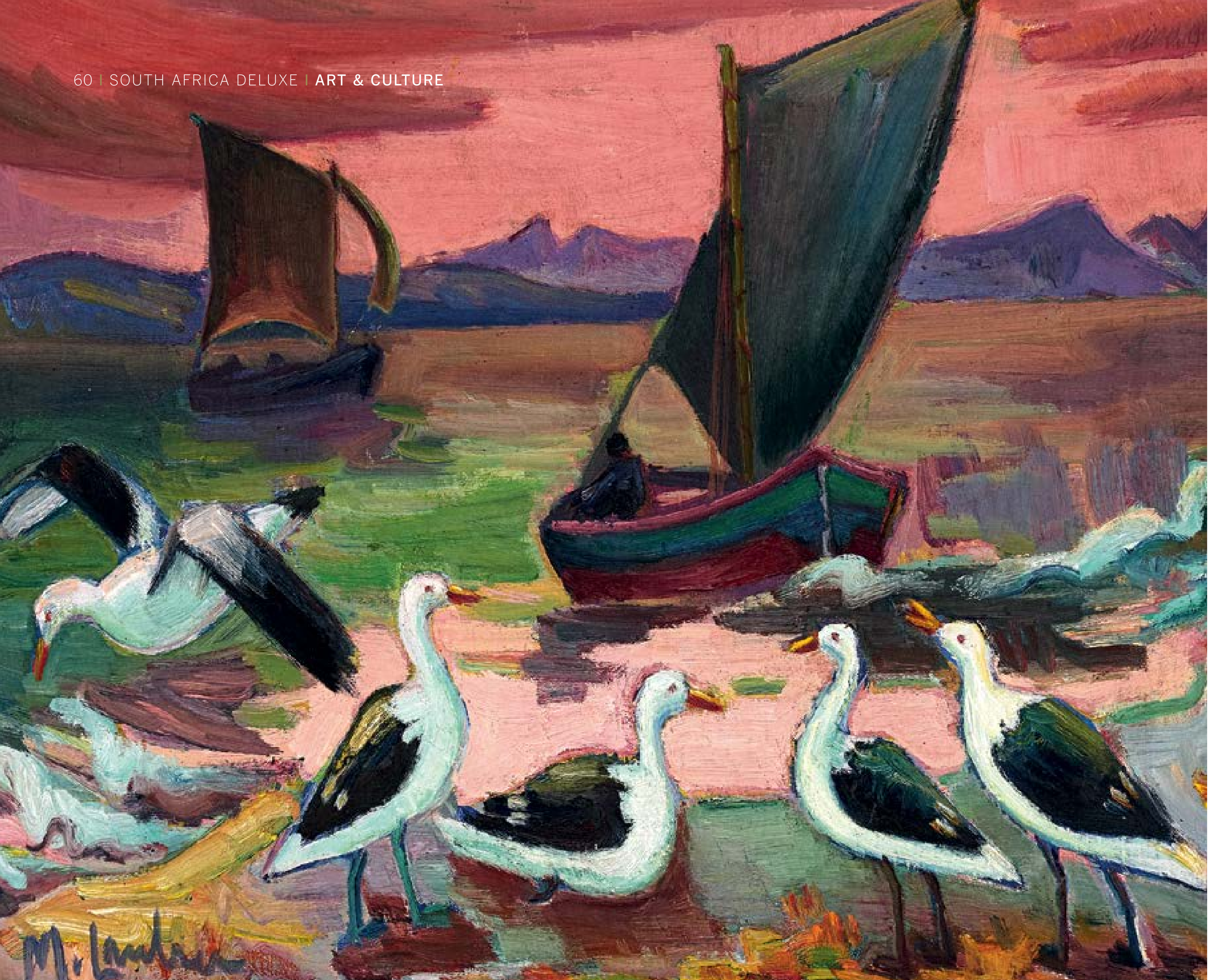
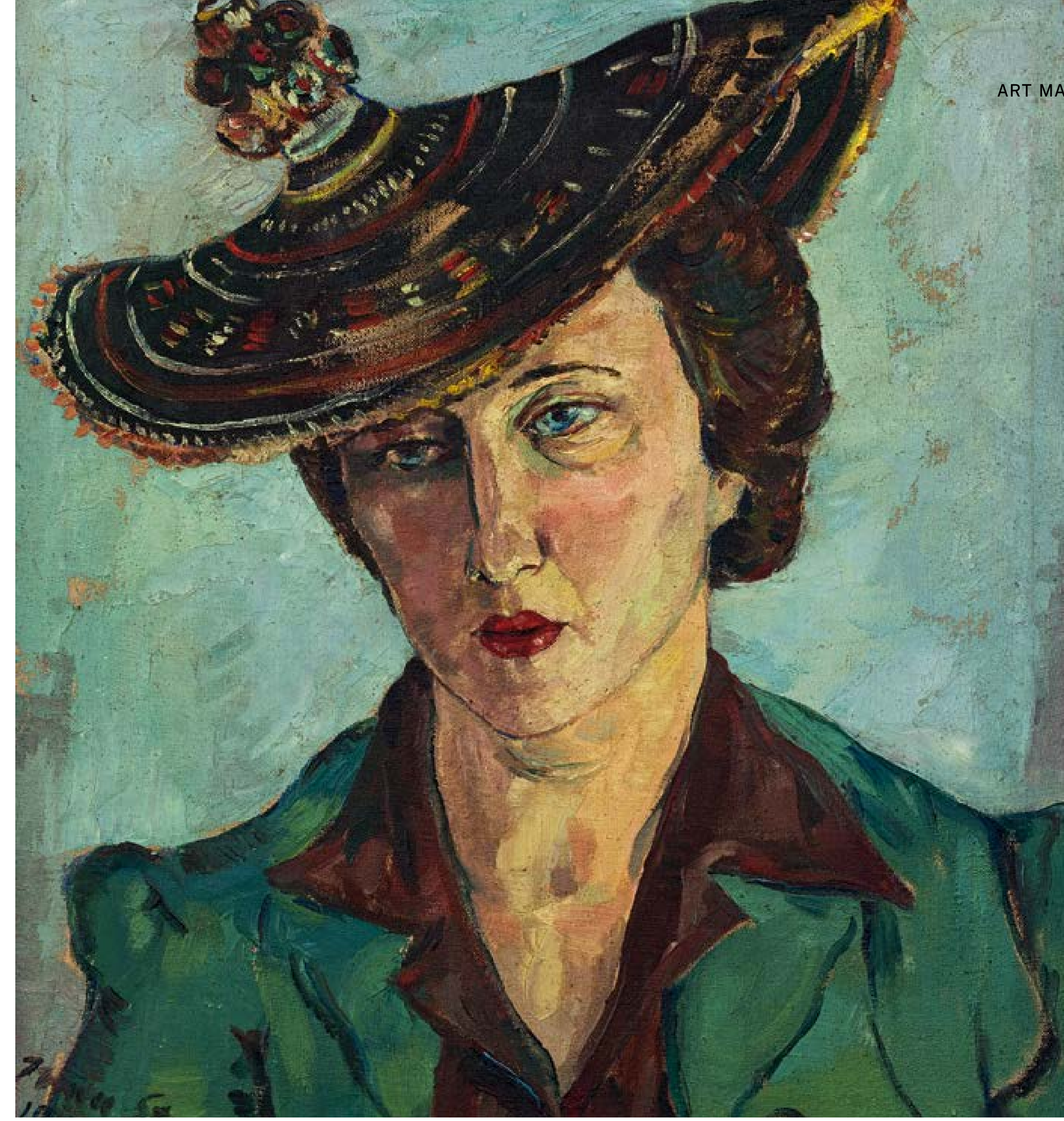


Maggie Laubser, Birds and Boats, Sold R1,477,840 (2016)



Irma Stern, Portrait of Freda Feldman in Basuto Hat, Sold R5,115,600 (2016)

Photos: © Strauss & Co

DYNAMIC AND VIBRANT

A Look at the South African Secondary Art Market

The South African art market is constantly evolving, it's dynamic, and it has got depth to it that it didn't have ten years ago," says Susie Goodman, General Manager Johannesburg at leading South African auction house Strauss & Co. In 2015, the fine art auctioneers set 21 new artist records, the majority of which were for modern and contemporary South African artists.

The international auction world has been active for centuries, one of the most renowned fine art auction houses, Christie's, was established by James Christie in the United Kingdom in 1766. In South Africa however, the concept of buying art at auction is relatively new and the process generally unknown. Susie explains, "People often feel that it is quite an intimidating place to buy art, but it's not, and when you get through that, and once you understand the processes, you realise that if you scratch your nose, you're not going to land up with a R10 million painting, it breaks down the barriers."

We're sitting round the table with her enthusiastic team in Johannesburg, breaking bread and discussing the vibrancy of the South African art scene. "Even if you're just coming as a spectator, when you come to a viewing, you get to see such a wide variety of art, it's not like you're going to see one artist or a group of artists;

Alexis Preller, The Creation of Adam I, Sold R8,526,000 (2015), RECORD

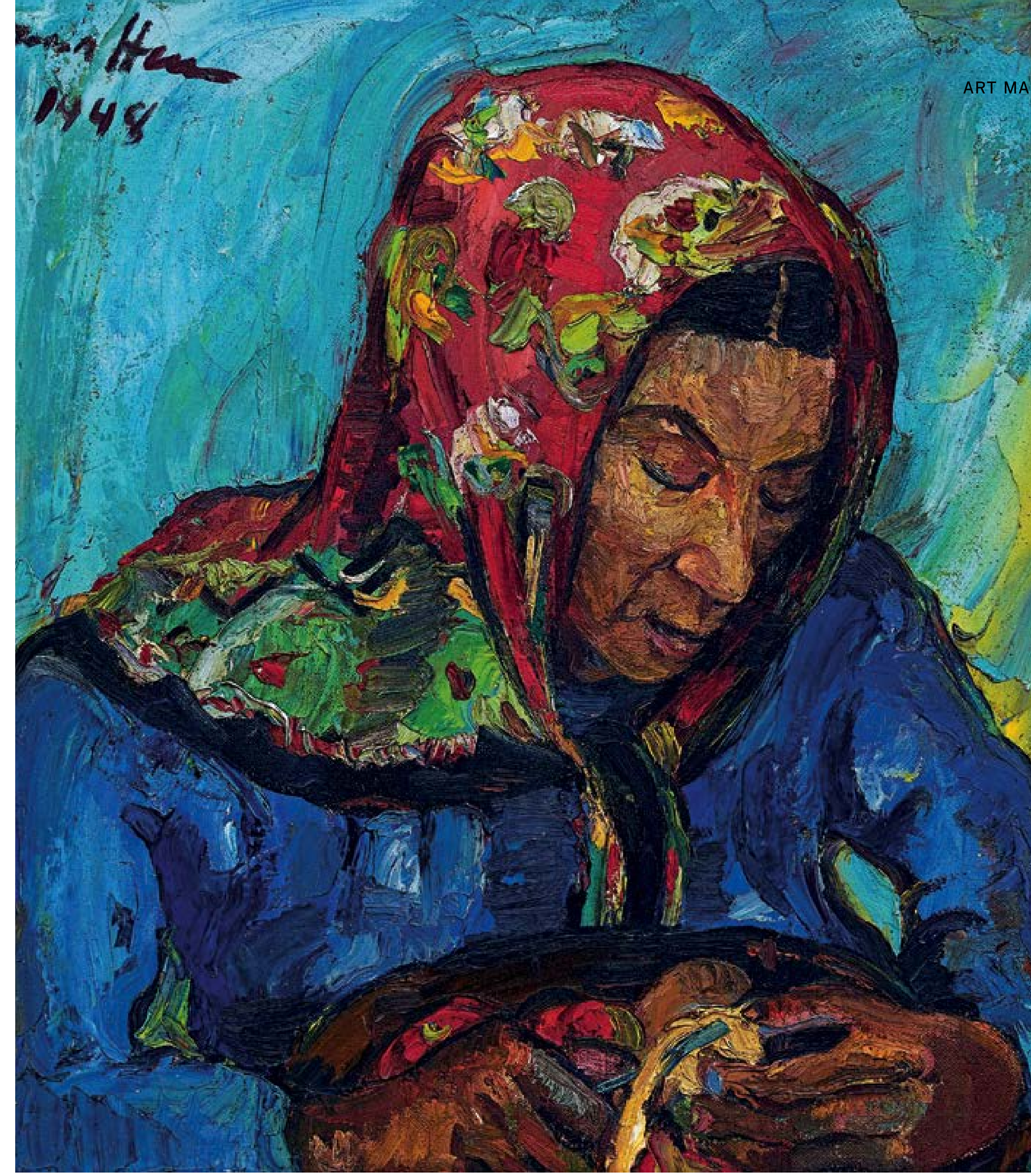
then something that was painted two years ago, so you get such an amazing scope," she shares.

Specialist in Paintings, Drawings, Prints and Sculpture, Marion Dixon, agrees, "For those few days, many paintings that have been in private collections come out for a brief time, before usually going back into private collections. You have the opportunity to see works of art that you'd never see in a museum collection. For that reason alone, if you're interested in art, it gives you the entire spectrum.

Auctions bring a volume of work into one space, so while you might be interested in one particular piece, there might be another 440 on display, so from a 'what's out there' opportunity, it's wonderful."

DEMYSTIFYING THE AUCTION PROCESS

Susie says that the process is actually quite simple. You have the seller or the vendor, who makes use of the auction house essentially to connect them with potential buyers or collectors. There are many reasons why a seller will decide to part with a particular artwork, or even a whole collection. There are the unfortunate reasons such as death, divorce, downsizing or debt, but Susie says that there are many reasons collectors sell, "Frequently you get collectors who assess their collections and realise that they have too many of one artist and maybe it is a good idea to sell and diversify." Collectors also sell when their tastes change the more they learn and get to know the art market.



Irma Stern, Meinkie (2015), Sold R3,183,040

Photos: © Strauss & Co

Susie adds that sometimes people get to a stage in their lives and realise that their heir's artistic tastes are different to theirs and would rather see their collection sold in their lifetime."

It goes without saying that if you're buying or selling, it's important to go through a reputable fine art auction house, as they have a critical role to play in the process, playing an important advisory role to both seller and buyer. Susie says that as auctioneers, they are responsible for vetting the artworks, making sure most importantly, that it is by the actual attributed artist.

The cataloguing process begins, the artwork is measured and experts confirm what medium it was painted on, for example, whether it is painted on canvas, board, or paper and they identify what it was painted with, watercolour, oil, gauche. Once it is catalogued, it gets photographed and it is given and estimate. Susie explains that the estimate is typically two figures reflecting the low-end and high-end price parameter of what they feel it will achieve at auction. How their experts come to that figure, is through years of experience of seeing similar pieces coupled with precedent and secondary market sales figures. "We look at records that are available such as international and local indexes, as well as our own records. You make a comparison to pieces by the same artist of similar size, similar subject and style." she says.

Marion points out, "We don't sell work by artists who do not have a secondary market history, so we don't compete with galleries. The artworks on auction have a history so there is always a body of work with which to compare." She says for Strauss & Co to auction an

artwork, the artist needs to have some track record.
The team discuss some of their favourite pieces that have gone on auction, and when you hear them describe how the hairs on their arms stand up when they see a magnificent painting that ticks all the boxes for a perfect piece, you start to appreciate the passion they have for the fascinating and colourful world in which they work.

A RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

I was curious to understand what constitutes a "perfect painting," and why for example, particular pictures from Irma Stern's phenomenal body of work had done better than others over the past year. What is it about a particular painting that causes it to be perceived as more valuable than the other? Susie explains that there are many reasons a buyer will bid on a particular piece of art. Some people just immediately fall in love with a particular piece, but there are factors which will help to drive the price of a particular artwork up, "The great thing about a great picture is that it's from the best period in the artists career, provenance – where it's come from, whose collection it's been in – what condition it is in and whether it's seen or unseen."
She explains the unseen aspect, "If it hasn't been seen often, if it's been looked after, and hasn't been resold ten times, it's fresh. When it comes onto the market, it creates great excitement. Good piece, good period, good condition and unseen is exactly the recipe you want. Who has owned it can also add hugely to the story, and create great publicity around it and interest in it."
In terms of what makes one piece or a particular artist more famous, and therefore in theory more covetable and valuable, Marion says that it generally happens when they or it, break new ground, "If you look at artists throughout history, even in architecture through the ages, it is about breaking new ground. The artists like Michelangelo, or Roman or Greek architects that started trying new techniques that made better art, became famous. Michelangelo - he used new techniques, he experimented a lot. Picasso was the same, and Matisse, they all developed what we term, their own artistic language. So you also have a visual or a technique that is associated with them. Kentridge is another one - his drawings – nowadays you have got a lot of people trying to copy his drawing style, but it's the films he makes, and the collaborations he does, it's his own style, his own language. He's done what nobody else has done, it's his own interpretations. There is often a huge intellectual contribution as well, as to why, or what you're trying to express."

AN EXTRAORDINARY ENVIRONMENT

Once the catalogue (which is a collectable in its own right) is complete, it is sent to local and internationally-based interested parties prior to the auction. That's when the excitement escalates.
Susie says, "The auction can bring out the most fantastic competitive streaks in people. The auction world has a very different energy. It's an extraordinary environment, with people with a passion for art. Different collectors have different ways of letting on that they're interested in a particular lot, clients preview the sale and the excitement builds into the auction room. The auction environment creates some exceptional results."
She says we're privileged at auctions in South Africa in comparison to say London, "In London the auctions rooms are only really full for the evening sales, and most of the day sales are now conducted over the internet and the telephone. In South Africa we're lucky. Three to four hundred people come to our auctions and we witness the bidding happening in our room.

Photos: © Strauss & Co

Walter Battiss, Red Rock, Sold R1 818 880 (2016)

Jacob Hendrik Pierneef, Winter Bosveld, Sold R1,818,880 (2016)

BUILDING A COLLECTION

I wonder aloud if they think that most collectors buy more because of an inherent appreciation for art, or perhaps more for investment purposes. Marion says for both reasons, though it generally starts with appreciation. Susie agrees and says, "A collection should always be based upon an absolute love of art. You're going to be looking at the paintings on your wall for years, so you don't want to be looking at things you don't like."
They share that the majority of collectors that they come across, on the whole, started their art collections as young professionals. When it comes to building your own collection, Susie says that if you like something, do as much research as you can on it, look at comparable artists or pieces, visit places like The Turbine Art Fair (TAF) which she says is excellent, particularly for young collectors, because they get to visit all the galleries, see who they represent, and discover what they like and what they don't.
Marion says that it is a good idea, if you are a serious collector, to decide which particular artists you want to focus on, which themes you want to collect, and that will form the basis for a strong collection, "the wonderful thing about auctions is that there is already a level of preselection. If you're at a reputable fine arts auction, then they only sell art that has a record. It doesn't guarantee that everything you buy is going to be a great investment, but the artist will always have a track record, a body of work, and that is a very important aspect of collecting."

Cecil Skotnes
Five Figures
Sold R909,440 (2015)

A CONSTANTLY CHANGING MARKET

Susie says that today, the South African fine art auctions are comparable with their international counterparts, and that the market is constantly changing. "The auction market is continually growing and expanding, People are expanding their collections to include the likes of Karl Nel and Kentridge. That's the important thing about the market, it's constantly evolving, it's dynamic, it's got depth to it that it didn't have ten years ago. The other evidence of the market growing and changing has been the development of the Strauss online platform where clients are able to buy artworks, four times a year. This platform has proved hugely successful because it offers those clients who are not able to be in Johannesburg or Cape Town to participate in an auction.

Susie says that one of the things they have realised, is that their clients are very appreciative when they give them more in-depth catalogue information and talks about the artists and the context in which the artworks were produced. "A couple of years ago we sold an extraordinary collection of artists that were part of the Amadlozi Group. We had the opportunity to share an important part of South Africa's art history with our clients, including who the Amadlozi Group was; Cecil Skotnes, Edoardo Villa, Sydney Kumalo and Ezrom Legae, among others. South Africa is so different to Europe where you can go to free art museums and talks, or pop into a museum and look at three paintings on a Saturday morning. That's why I think the movements like First Art on Thursdays in Braamfontein, Arts on Main, and The Turbine Art Fair are fabulous."

Besides contributing to our artistic education, art fairs and festivals have also created greater interest. The number of art fairs grew significantly in the 1990s, and many corporates amassed huge collections globally, prior to the crash. Marion says, "In South Africa, a lot of art collections got a major boost in the late '90s. A lot of new head offices were built, it was post-apartheid South Africa, there was a lot of energy, there was a lot happening. A lot of companies like Gencor, BHP Billiton, Sasol, Standard Bank, previously all had quite conservative collections. They bought art to fill passages and executive suites, and then they suddenly started to curate more contemporary, very self-conscious collections." ■ Lindsay Grubb

William Kentridge
Fish and Chips
Sold R1,364,160 (2015)

Photos: © Strauss & Co