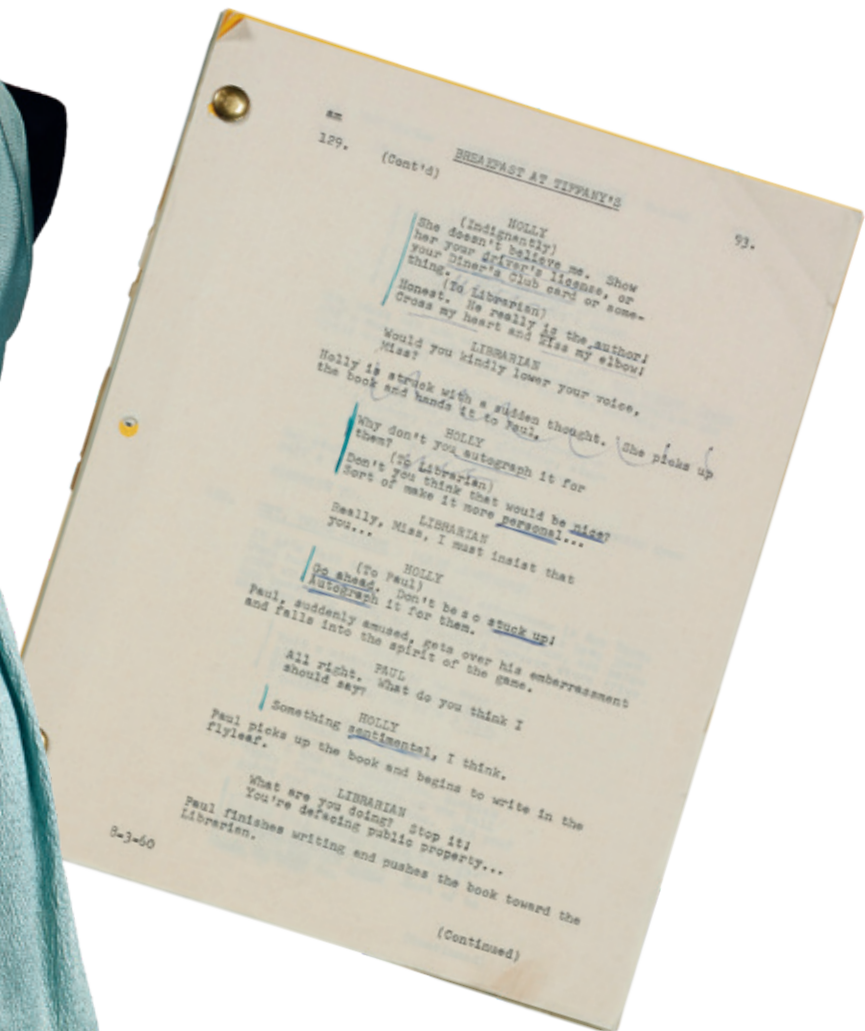




PHOTOS: CHRISTIE'S IMAGES LTD. (AUCTION ITEMS); BUD FRAKER (PORTRAIT)



**TREASURE CHEST**  
(Clockwise from top)  
Audrey Hepburn's  
possessions on auction  
in September included  
her Givenchy dress,  
*Breakfast at Tiffany's*  
script, cigarette lighter,  
powder compact,  
and a 1956 portrait  
by photographer  
Bud Fraker.

## OWN AN ICON

A day in the life of the head of Christie's Private and Iconic Collections and Country House Sales, an exclusive auction division devoted to the most treasured possessions of the world's most recognizable people.

BY NATASHA MEKHAIL







Gemma Sudlow directs the proceedings like the conductor of an orchestra, moving from lot to lot – there are 90 in all – from Stravinsky’s gold pen, to a signed letter from Mozart, to a few bars of “The Blue Danube” scrawled on a postcard by Strauss. With graceful words and gestures she addresses, in turn, the seated clients (“Lady’s bid in the room. Thank you kindly.”), the telephone bidders (“Surely now, this is a piece of history!”) and the overhead screen displaying the online bids (“Come back to me, Malta: What do you say?”). She is poised and charming but, ultimately, she is determined. Her job is to fetch the highest price for the consignors who have entrusted Christie’s with the sale of their collection.

As head of Private and Iconic Collections and Country House Sales, Sudlow works with the possessions of some of the world’s most recognizable individuals: celebrities, politicians and important collectors among them. In her relatively short career, which took her from Christie’s London headquarters on King Street to its US base in New York’s Rockefeller Center, she has overseen sales of such diverse estates as Valerie Eliot (widow of T.S. Eliot), The Reagans and Joan Rivers.

It’s a division unique to Christie’s, representing over 15 sales a year worldwide, and one that Sudlow was fortuitously exposed to on her first day with the auction house.

“I was asked to attend a walk-through of a private home in South Kensington,” she recounts. The home was filled with treasures ranging from Gainsborough portraits to a preserved mirrored room. Sudlow was entranced by how the home revealed so much about the personalities of its past inhabitants: “There were so many stories bound up in its objects. From day one, private collections were where my interest lay.”

From then on, storytelling became Sudlow’s expertise. While Christie’s has an expert for every domain (fine art, manuscripts, furnishings, jewelry, watches, wine), along with every region, period and sub-specialty within them, Sudlow is a self-described generalist, dedicated to uncovering those pieces that held the highest significance to their former owners – even if not of the highest worth.

“People often ask me things like: How do you value Joan Rivers’ dog bowl?” she says. “The answer is that we value it as a second-hand Tiffany silver bowl. But I will have done my job well if I have told the story of the object that has allowed the market to respond and determine the multiple on its price.” (For the record,

the dish belonging to Rivers’ on- and off-camera companion, her beloved Yorkshire terrier Spike, was appraised at \$500–\$800, and fetched \$13,750.)

Similarly, a Han Dynasty gilt-bronze figure of a bear that once sat on the desk of the late New York art dealer Robert Hatfield Ellsworth sold for more than \$2.85 million – well over its \$200,000–\$300,000 estimate. It was a piece that any visitor to his office would have instantly recognized, a poignant symbol of the man after whom a room of the Metropolitan Museum of Art is named.

Sudlow also brought to light a Bulgari ring belonging to Nancy Reagan. The octagonal band, set in diamonds, sapphires and rubies to resemble the American flag, was appraised at \$5,000–\$7,000.

“We managed to find a fantastic image of Mrs. Reagan wearing that ring in New York on the fourth of July, standing and pledging allegiance,” she says. “Being able to tell that story with the photograph, the ring became a part of US history.” (It eventually sold for \$319,500.)

To build the narratives, Christie’s goes beyond the catalogue, creating video and in situ photography of the individuals’ living spaces. These documentaries, showcased online and in printed guides, become key marketing pieces in the lead-up to a sale. They are powerful ones, too: Sudlow recalls a client in London who fell in love with the photos of a consignor’s living room and bid on every lot. “They just wanted to recreate it,” she marvels.

Experiential events are another way potential buyers learn the stories behind the objects and form connections with them. The Betsy Bloomingdale Collection, for example, included personal notebooks describing how the late New York socialite and skilled entertainer arranged guests at table to achieve the most spirited conversations. Each piece in her dazzling couture collection, meanwhile, was hung with its own handwritten list, detailing when, where and with which accessories each dress had been worn.

In the days before the April 2017 auction, the focus was set on Bloomingdale’s personal items by recreating her Holmby Hills villa in the Christie’s showroom and throwing a preview luncheon featuring fare from the celebrated hostess’s own culinary repertoire. It was a fitting tribute to the woman and an ingenious way to build buzz for the upcoming auction. As Sudlow puts it: “These sales need to be codas to lives well lived.”

PHOTOS: CHRISTIE’S IMAGES LTD. (GOWD); SLAVEN VLASIC / GETTY IMAGES ENTERTAINMENT (JOAN RIVERS)



**SHINING ON**  
The Private Collection of Joan Rivers, on auction last June, included the late comedian’s diamond brooch and (opposite) a Tiffany bowl belonging to her beloved dog Spike – which sold for almost \$14,000.





**INTERIOR LIVES**  
(This page and opposite)  
Christie's experts conduct walk-throughs of select estates, like that of The Reagans, and even recreate rooms for bidders to browse.

“I will have done my job well if I have told the story of the object.”

GEMMA SUDLOW, CHRISTIE'S

With auctioneering in her skill set (less than three percent of Christie's global staff have that designation), Sudlow can see her charges through their entire life cycle, from the original call from a consignor to the final hammer drop. She first experienced the thrill of live sales in a professional development course designed to give Christie's staff a taste of what their colleagues experience on the rostrum. Rather than being daunted, Sudlow instead “got the bug.” A pressure-filled audition followed, which she jokingly likens to *American Idol*, in which auctioneering hopefuls compete before a panel of the company's most experienced sellers. She persisted through five elimination rounds and earned her American license in 2012.

What makes a great auctioneer? “First and foremost, we are salespeople, and have the qualities that go with that,” she says. “There is

numerical dexterity required, understanding the increments, the ability to build a connection with others.” But secondly, it's personal style, she says, listing some of her favorite sellers to watch, including Christie's head of jewelry Rahul Kadakia with his “incredible panache” and the company's global president Jussi Pylkkänen who “has authority and dynamism so that you can't watch anyone else when he's in the room.” And, she refers to James Christie himself (“We are named for someone who was a fabulous auctioneer”) who founded the company in 1766, not long before London took over from Paris as Europe's center for fine art dealing in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Finally, she says, great auctioneering “is the consignor saying, ‘My work of art did the best that it could.’ The auction is the final act of the play.”



PHOTOS: CHRISTIE'S IMAGES LTD.





## CODE OF CONDUCT

Gemma Sudlow is one of only three percent of Christie's staff certified as an auctioneer, earning her American license in 2012.

Recently, Christie's has shifted its mandate away from holding sales only during traditional auction seasons to becoming a 24/7 sales hub. That is why, for example, the company can do something formerly unprecedented, like staging two important private collection sales on the same day this September: Paul F. Walter in New York (featuring over 600 lots from the late art collector, including works by Whistler and Japanese prints), and Audrey Hepburn in London (containing personal memorabilia, such as her annotated *Breakfast at Tiffany's* script, Burberry trench coat and seminal portraits by photographers Bud Fraker and Steven Meisel).

Back at the Metropolitan Opera Guild sale, Sudlow keeps up the momentum over the two-hour auction with unwavering energy and a wry sense of humor. "And here is a 1780 letter from Gluck vowing never to return to Paris," she says. "That's quite a statement and one I would never make."

The top lot – Schubert's signed sheet music for the Piano Sonata in A-flat major, dated 1817 – sells for \$475,500, the highest price paid for Schubert at auction in over 20 years. After the last hammer drop, Sudlow descends from the rostrum. She approaches me this time smiling brightly and stops for a quick chat. She can rest easy now that today's sale has secured \$1.46 million for the guild and the Met Opera. We exchange a few words and then she's off again to her office, ready to tell the next story. ■

PHOTO: ANTOINE FORTIN (SUDLOW)

## Paint the Town

A love of contemporary works needn't stop once auction-goers have put down the paddle. These New York City venues are a good bet for an artful night out.

**STAY** Lower Manhattan is having a moment right now and one of the best examples of the new architectural energy is **CONRAD NEW YORK**. Be prepared for drama when you step into the lobby. Fourteen floors of breezeways line the all-suite-hotel's towering atrium, and through it runs *Veil*, a 600,000-cubic-foot suspension illuminated by 16 miles of liquid-crystal polymer cable. The installation by architect Mónica Ponce de León is one of over 2,000 original works of contemporary art to discover throughout the

property. The collection's highlight is the 100-by-80-foot Sol LeWitt painting *Loopy Doopy* that dominates one wall of the lobby and gives its name to the hotel's hopping rooftop bar overlooking the Hudson River. While there, indulge in a prosecco and ice pop cocktail in an ever-changing array of fruit and herbal flavors. This is the bar that started the trend and each of the refreshing libations is a work of art unto itself. [conradnewyork.com](http://conradnewyork.com)

**DINE** Tucked away at the back of the St. Regis, find the cozy **KING COLE BAR**. It may not be new, but it's a classic stop for its Red Snappers (the hotel's take on the Bloody Mary). The bar gets its name from the wall-to-wall King Cole mural created by artist Maxfield Parrish for hotelier John Jacob Astor in 1906, and based on the nursery



rhyme. The two were at odds over the work (not to mention their general worldview), so the artist used the opportunity to poke fun at his socialite patron. Ask for the full story on site as it was deemed too vulgar for this magazine, but let's just say that King Cole bears a strong resemblance to Astor and

may be suffering from a whiff of indigestion. For a very memorable evening book Table 55, directly under the mural. It's the only seat with access to a special chef's menu (think caviar service, fruits de mer and striploin) and a bespoke wine list from the hotel's cellar. [stregisnewyork.com](http://stregisnewyork.com)