



WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF AUCTION CATALOGUE COLLECTING IN MUSEUM LIBRARIES?

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Abstract

Since the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, auction houses have largely shifted from printed catalogs to online publications, impacting transparency in the art market and challenging institutional archiving. The National Gallery of Art (NGA) Library and the Watson Library, Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET), prominent collectors of auction catalogs in the US, have faced a sharp decline in acquisitions; for instance, Watson's annual catalog intake dropped from 2,000 in 2016 to 439 in 2023. This essay examines the role of auction catalogs in museum collections from both academic and collector perspectives, presenting interviews and data analysis to address the archival obstacles caused by this shift. By exploring the evolution of catalogs from client resources to essential academic tools, it proposes collaborative solutions to adapt museum libraries and auction houses to the digital age while ensuring a robust archive for future research.

Keywords

Institutional Archiving, Auction House, Online Publications

Why collect auction catalogues?

Auction catalogs, as the name suggests, is the catalog that lists the items for sale at auctions. They typically encompass four key dimensions of information: provenance (e.g. ownership history, types of previous owners like notable collectors, and past sales records), exhibition history (e.g. displays in renowned museums or galleries), literature references (e.g. mentions in catalogues raisonnés or reputable publications), and certification (e.g. artist-authenticated testimonials or expert evaluations).¹ They are often the only source of information on works in private collections.

Auction catalogs serve two key purposes in the art world. Prior to an auction, they pass essential information for prospective clients. Although advances in printmaking and photography have significantly improved their quality, the primary function of auction catalogs—providing lot information for future sales to perspective buyers—has remained unchanged. After the gavel comes down, the nature of the information in auction catalogs changes, and the information on the artworks shift to one of art historical value.² Collectors and institutions, both private and public, frequently archive the auction catalogues for their enduring value.

For a start, auction catalogs can reveal the history of collecting, inform collectors about what their peers are acquiring, and provide information on the prices of the lots. Historically, the most prized auction catalogues are those marked up with the prices realized and the buyers' names annotated in the margins,³ as the annotations could can often provide clues for a lots' future destination. To document such data, a person would have to be in the room writing the information. At the NGA, 57% of the 286 auction catalogues printed prior to the year 1800 had some forms of annotations on them, including but not limited to notes, prices and buyers' names, though a catalogue with all the names and prices listed is quite rare, which may suggest that many of the note-takers were perhaps buyers

¹ Yuexin Li, Xiaoyin Ma, Luc Renneboog (2022) In Art We Trust. *Management Science* 70(1):98-127. <https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.2022.4633>

² There have been ample studies on the history of auction catalogues and their importance to the art history world: such as Elizabeth Pergam's "Selling Pictures: the Illustrated Auction Catalogue"; "A Conference on Book Catalogues, Tomorrow and Beyond" by Eric Holzenberg; and "Auction Catalogs and Indexes as Reference Tools" by Lee Robinson.

³ Pettegree, Andrew, and der Weduwen, Arthur. *The Library*. New York: Basic Books, 2021, 130.

themselves interested in particular lots.⁴ A fully annotated catalogue, with names and prices of the lots in the margins, can be the product of professional note takers⁵.

For provenance researcher, auction catalogues can offer crucial information about previous owners and the history of an artwork; this research is essential for establishing the credibility and historical context of valuable pieces and in proving the subject works' authenticity. Additionally, appraisers use auction catalogues to assess the value of a piece: by studying sales of similar works by the same artist or from the same period, one can make informed estimations about the potential auction value of an object.⁶ Auction catalogs for an artist estate sales are also intriguing: these catalogs usually include detailed information about the artist's life, influences, and artistic journey, offering valuable context for their works; additionally, they often feature a comprehensive collection of an artist's works, providing an extensive overview of their career and artistic evolution and facilitating the creation of the artist's catalogue raisonné.⁷ In all these instances, auction catalogs provide credibility to the art world, supporting researchers with accurate data to work with.

Most researchers access past auction records through one of three sources: museum libraries, auction house websites, or third-party databases. Auction houses like Sotheby's and Christie's have made some records available on their websites, dating back to the late 1990s. However, these records are often incomplete, and there is a lack of transparency in which records are published. As the New York Art Resources Consortium (NYARC) noted, "For NYARC, it's particularly notable that auction houses are not archiving their own catalogs and sales results, and much of their content does not exist on their webpages for more than a few months before being removed."⁸ Withdrawn lots, bought-ins, known forgeries and misattributions are often not on any company databases.

Similarly, research databases like ArtNet and ArtPrice offer access to past auction records for their subscribers. These platforms acquire the rights to auction house data and charge users for the ability to search their databases. ArtNet claims that its "Price Database is the world's most comprehensive record of art sales, with over 17 million auction results for fine art, design, and decorative artworks."⁹ However, these records often remain incomplete due to limitations in automatic archiving systems, lack of participation from all auction houses, and persistent copyright issues that further contribute to the gaps in the data. Employees of one such database have even disclosed to me that they comply with requests from individuals or auction houses to remove specific auction records from public view, doing so without further inquiry.

Museum libraries have traditionally embraced the role of maintaining an independent, comprehensive archive for auction catalogs—essential for tracing provenance, verifying authenticity, assessing market trends, and understanding the historical context of artworks. They offer a more reliable and transparent source for preserving auction records. However, in recent years, museum collections of auction catalogs have faced unprecedented challenges due to reduced production, logistical barriers, and limitations in acquisition efforts.

Museum Library's Collection of Auction Catalogs

Prior to 2020, museum libraries acquired their collections of auction catalogs through subscriptions with auction houses, sometimes paying a small fee to receive every catalog published—a relationship that Watson Library maintained with many auction houses. Museum libraries have also led the way in collecting and cataloging auction records, providing more detailed indexing than other institutions. This commitment is evident in the databases offered by the Watson Library and the NGA Library, which enable users to search auction catalogs by date, auction house, consignors' name, sale title, and identifiers like the Lugt numbers.¹⁰ However, since the Covid Pandemic, this subscription model has ceased, leading to unprecedented difficulties in collecting auction catalogs. This shift can be attributed to two factors: the reduced production of both physical and digital catalogs by auction houses, and the logistical challenges of acquisition and collection from a library's perspective.

The first major challenge for museum libraries is the decline in auction catalog production by auction houses, with many sales now lacking both electronic and physical catalogs altogether. Auction houses' websites and

⁴ Data collected as a summer intern at the National Gallery of Art DC in 2023.

⁵ A great example of a fully annotated catalogue at the Watson Library is the estate sale of Eugène Delacroix: Hôtel Drouot. *Catalogue de la vente qui aura lieu par suite du décès de Eugène Delacroix*. Paris: J. Claye, 1864.

⁶ Portala, Bethanne. "The Artist as Creator and Collector: The Edgar Degas Estate Auction Catalogues." *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 34, no. 2 (2008): 50-94. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20205625>.

⁷ The New York Public Library. "What Is a Catalogue Raisonné?" Accessed May 24, 2024.

<https://www.nypl.org/about/divisions/wallach-division/art-architecture-collection/catalogue-raisonne>.

⁸ Sumitra Duncan. Web Archiving at the New York Art Resources Consortium (NYARC): Collaboration to preserve specialist born-digital art resources. DH. Opportunities and Risks. Connecting Libraries and Research, DARIAH, Aug 2017, Berlin, Germany. fihal-01636124f

⁹ ArtNet Price Database. "Search Art Prices and Auction Results." Accessed September 12, 2024. <https://www.artnet.com/price-database/>.

¹⁰ National Gallery of Art. "Auction Catalogs." Accessed April 30, 2024. https://library.nga.gov/discovery/search?vid=01NGA_INST:AUC.

digital apps have become the main sources of information for upcoming sales. Many day sales that lack formal catalogs, a basic list of all the lots is sometimes printed on office paper, stapled, and placed on the bidding department's table during the sale to assist in-room bidders; these lists are not intended for archival preservation. For the more exclusive evening sales, where a printed catalogue is produced, auction houses typically reserve these catalogues exclusively for their top-tier clients. Both Christie's and Sotheby's are printing around 500-600 catalogues per sale, compared to some 1,500 to 2,000 copies pre pandemic.¹¹ Consequently, when an "ordinary" customer requests a catalog at an auction house, their requests are frequently denied. This scarcity of printed materials poses significant challenges for archival capture and preservation.

The costs associated with their production, combined with the growing reliance on digital platforms, have contributed to the decline its production. An Artnet article from December 2019 cites environmental concerns as the primary reason for the decline in printed auction catalogues, though cost reduction is more likely the underlying motive.¹² Citing an internal study from Christie's: "Christie's found that 52 percent of lots sold worldwide were purchased by people who did not receive print catalogues. The statistics were even higher—70 percent—for buyers from live (online) auctions."¹³ In other words, the use of auction catalogues as a promotional tool no longer seems as appealing to auction houses as other advertising methods. In response to the study, Christie's aimed to halve its production of printed materials, which amounted to some 700,000 printed materials, most of which were catalogues and gallery guides, per year in 2019, while the cost saved from reducing print was directed toward enhancing digital platforms.¹⁴ The article concludes by stating that Sotheby's and Philips were also moving forward with digital developments, with plans to reduce the number of printed materials, aligning with the growing trend of digital engagement among collectors worldwide.¹⁵

Just weeks after the Artnet article was published, the world was struck by a global pandemic. During the Covid lockdowns, the art business successfully shifted to an online model; however, this transition to online auctions did not aid in the preservation of auction catalogs. In 2020, online art sales reached a record \$12.4 billion, doubling from the previous year and representing 25% of the overall art market.¹⁶ In the fine art auction sector, 22% of lots sold in 2020 were online-only, double the share in 2019. Despite the overall market decline, the considerable rise in online sales highlights a major shift towards digital platforms as collectors and buyers adjusted to the circumstances. Four years since the pandemic, the number of online auctions continued to increase: by 2023, online sales represented 18% of turnover, nearly double pre-pandemic levels.¹⁷ An analysis of 2023 auction data reveals that online-only sales represented 54% of the total number of auction lots, a significant increase from 30% in 2019¹⁸. However, these online sales accounted for only 9% of the total auction value, indicating that the majority of lots sold online were lower in value¹⁹. This shift highlights a key trend: while the volume of online sales has risen, the lower value of these transactions has diminished the practicality and frequency of printed catalogs, as the production costs are not justified by the returns from lower-value items.

The cost of production is only part of the equation; creating a physical auction catalogue is also a lengthy process. Ideally, catalogers must submit the final digital version to the printer eight weeks before the sale: printing takes one to two weeks, delivery takes another one to two weeks, and ideally, collectors would have four weeks to review it.²⁰ While the high production costs are a major factor in reducing printed catalogs, many auction house employees privately acknowledge that finalizing a sale's details eight weeks in advance is an even greater challenge in today's fast-paced art market.²¹ It's now common for details to be settled as late as the day of the sale,

¹¹ Interview notes with Sotheby's and Christie's Employees.

¹² Kinsella, Eileen. "Christie's Is Cutting Its Catalogue Pages and Print Materials in Half Next Year to Curb Its Environmental Impact." *Artnet News*, December 20, 2019. <https://news.artnet.com/market/christies-cutting-print-materials-sustainability-1741302#:~:text=Christie's%20currently%20produces%20more%20than%20700,000%20printed,catalogues%20and%20gallery%20guides,%20making%20the%20new.>

¹³ Kinsella, Eileen. "Christie's Is Cutting Its Catalogue Pages and Print Materials in Half Next Year to Curb Its Environmental Impact." *Artnet News*, December 20, 2019. <https://news.artnet.com/market/christies-cutting-print-materials-sustainability-1741302#:~:text=Christie's%20currently%20produces%20more%20than%20700,000%20printed,catalogues%20and%20gallery%20guides,%20making%20the%20new.>

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ McAndrew, Dr. Clare. "The Art Basel and UBS Global Art Market Report 2021." *Art Basel*. Accessed March 11, 2024. <https://www.artbasel.com/stories/art-market-report-2021?lang=en>.

¹⁷ McAndrew, Dr. Clare. "The Art Basel & UBS Art Market Report 2024 By Arts Economics." Accessed March 17, 2024. <https://theartmarket.artbasel.com/>.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 146.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 178.

²⁰ Interview notes with Sotheby's and Christie's Employees.

²¹ Interview notes with Sotheby's and Christie's Employees.

making it nearly impossible for printed catalogs to keep up. In contrast, online catalogs allow for instant updates with just a few clicks, leaving no visible trace of alterations for viewers.

Eyeing the future, online sales, and hence born digital auction catalogues, are here to stay. The UBS Art Basel report 2024's survey indicates that "... 81% of respondents from mid-tier auction houses thought their online sales would increase in 2024, 19% thought they would be stable, and none predicted a decline."²² Considering such predictions, the printed catalogue is quickly suppressed. This is exactly what Christie's had predicted in 2019, though perhaps the shift has occurred at a faster pace than anticipated. In this context, Covid-19 could be seen as a catalyst for the decline in printed auction catalogue collection, rather than as the cause.

More from the Auction Houses

Christie's archival department at King Street in London traces its catalog collection back to its founding in 1766, with many of the auction catalogues being the auctioneers' copies. To understand how changes in auction catalogues have impacted auction houses, I interviewed Lynda McLeod²³, who was then the Head Librarian and Associate Director at Christie's. I asked her about the challenges the reduction printed auction catalogues has posed to the archive.

McLeod stated that "fowling the pandemic, even internally within Christie's, there were challenges in the record-keeping of current sales."²⁴ She explained that "this is because Christie's primarily uses Amazon Web Services (AWS) to compose (both digital and online) catalogues."²⁵ That is, Christie's utilises editing softwares provided by AWS for their catalogues. Their use of this distinctive format, similar to Google Docs, simplifies online sharing and collaboration, especially beneficial for specialists and cataloguers, but converting them into a format suitable for archiving, PDF or otherwise, is more difficult. She explains that "internally, Christie's archive department keeps a record of all its sales, including a hard copy of any physical catalogues if available, as well as digital catalogues on file."²⁶

Up until 2020, Christie's and Sotheby's sent physical copies of their catalogues to each other for archival purposes. With the pandemic, the co-share program came to a halt. Public access to Christie's Archive also stopped during the pandemic.²⁷ Citing Christie's, Artnews reported in February 2021: "... the whole King Street building has been closed down for the public due to the coronavirus, and we are very limited in its use [online sales and preparatory work only]. Previously we supplied complimentary archival information for research, but as of November of last year (2020) we had to confirm we were no longer able to fulfill these requests or to answer enquiries from external agencies, at least for the time being. So much information has moved online, and a high percentage of requests work out that way, also for internal research."²⁸ When asked if, say, a Sotheby's employee could come and use the archives at Christie's, Ms. McLeod answered that "Christie's does not knowingly facilitate research requests from the other three of the four major auction houses - Sotheby's, Philips, and Bonhams — but may provide a degree of leniency to students and other researchers; Christie's primary goal is to only serve their own staff and specialists."²⁹ The closing of the archive to outsider researchers means that museum libraries may remain one of the last resources where researchers can access a historical auction catalogue.

Throughout our conversation, Ms. McLeod emphasized the fact that "Christie's is a private company, and that they do not have to share any data with the public."³⁰ This could explain why sharing data about auction result is becoming more restrictive. It is now common practice for auction houses to edit information on lots that did not sell from their website immediately after an auction, for they do not want the "bought-ins", or lots that did not meet the reserve, to affect the value of the lot in any further sales, further damaging the client's interests. This results in conflicting objectives: libraries want to provide access to information to the public, auction houses are trying to maintain a degree of control over the information.

²² McAndrew, Dr. Clare. "The Art Basel & UBS Art Market Report 2024 By Arts Economics." Accessed March 17, 2024. <https://theartmarket.artbasel.com/>.

²³ Lynda McLeod (then Head Librarian and Associate Director at Christie's King Street), in discussion with the author, March 2024.

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ Artnet News. "Christie's Has Closed Off Public Access to Its 255-Year Old Auction Archive, a Major Resource for Scholars, Citing Budget Concerns." *Artnet News*, February 11, 2021. <https://news.artnet.com/market/christies-auction-archive-closed-1943266>.

²⁸ Brady, Anna. "Christie's Auction House Closes Access to Historic Archive Due to Staff Cuts." *The Art Newspaper*, February 11, 2021. <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/02/11/christies-closes-access-to-historic-archive-due-to-staff-cuts>.

²⁹ Lynda McLeod (then Head Librarian and Associate Director at Christie's King Street), in discussion with the author, March 2024.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

From the Library's Perspective: Difficulties in collecting auction catalogs

Currently, museum libraries face multiple challenges in collecting auction catalogs. Firstly, with fewer catalogs are being printed, and museum libraries are often not on the mailing list for the limited number of physical copies. Secondly, inconsistencies in format make archiving catalogs digitally difficult. Thirdly, existing web archiving technology has multiple limitations and often fails to meet researchers' needs. Without collaboration from auction houses, it becomes nearly impossible for library staff to maintain a complete collection of auction catalogs in any format.

Auction houses primarily distribute physical catalogs to prospective clients, often bypassing museum libraries, as they are not viewed as potential buyers. Curators, being regarded as prospective clients, typically receive the catalogs first, and these only reach the library after curators have finished with them. Digital archiving, however, is not a simple alternative and comes with its own set of challenges. The process involves finding catalogs on auction house websites—which are not always accessible—downloading and cataloging them, and, when possible, uploading them to the library's server, all while ensuring the necessary legal permissions are obtained.

Even when catalogs are downloadable, links to digitized PDFs often expire soon after the sale, providing only a limited window for access. Increasingly, auction houses provide links only to the Amazon Web Services, which restricts downloading into an archivable format. Watson Library staff have even resorted to in-person visits to auction houses to obtain copies, yet distribution to the library remains inconsistent. This shift in responsibility places a significant burden on library staff, increasing their workload and creating inefficiencies.

Some museum libraries have engaged in web archiving of auction houses websites. The Frick Art Reference Library (FARL) is one of the earliest institutions to start the web archiving process³¹; however, FARL's cooperation with Archive-It software revealed numerous issues, such as incomplete captures, technological barriers like robots.txt blocks and password-protected areas, and the inability to archive certain formats like PDFs and images. Additionally, FARL found that they could not fully rely on external archiving tools: though web archiving softwares can successfully produce a list of the lots on sale, they often miss critical content embedded in web pages for each individual lot.³² Without expanding to detailed record for each lot, it's not possible to view individual cataloging records, raising the usefulness of archiving only a list with lot numbers. Since 2020, Sotheby's Institute of Art attempted to capture an auction house's websites using web-archiving tools; however, this practice eventually became too time-consuming and the practice fell short.³³ At the current stage, PDFs of catalogues remain the most suitable methods for long-term archival of digitized auction records.

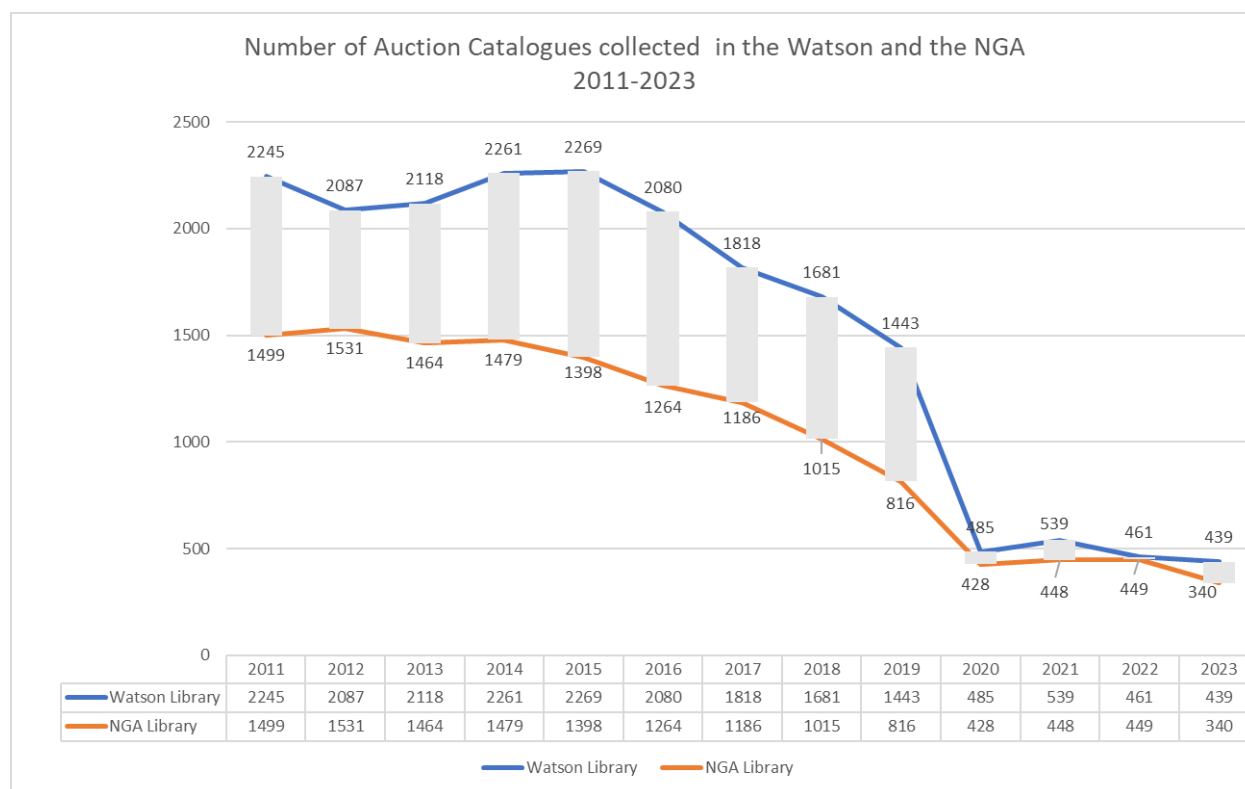
The Collection of Auction Catalogues at the National Gallery of Art Library and the Watson Library.

Due to the challenges described above, the number of auction catalogs entering the Watson and the NGA's collection is deteriorating dramatically. Graph I indicates the number of physical catalogues collected by the Watson Library and the NGA Library in the last thirteen years, with the blue line representing the Watson Library and the Orange line representing the NGA Library, the x-axis being the year and the y-axis being the number of auction catalogues collected during this particular year. From 2011 to 2023, both the Watson Library and the NGA Library experienced notable changes in the number of auction catalogues collected. In 2011, the Watson Library collected 2245 catalogues, while the NGA Library collected 1499. The numbers remained relatively stable for both libraries until around 2015, when they began to decline. For the Watson Library, the collection numbers started to drop significantly in 2017, decreasing from 2080 catalogues to just 485 by 2020, representing a reduction of approximately 77%. Similarly, the NGA Library saw a decrease from 1264 catalogues in 2016 to 428 in 2020, a decline of about 66%. The most dramatic drop occurred in 2020: since then, the numbers have remained low, with the Watson Library collecting only 439 catalogues in 2023, an 81% decrease from 2011, and the NGA Library 340, a 77% decrease from 2011. This decline highlights the significant impact of the subscription model's discontinuation on both libraries' ability to maintain comprehensive archives of auction catalogues.

³¹ Nadasky, Gretchen. "Preserving Web-Based Auction Catalogs at the Frick Art Reference Library," *D-Lib Magazine*, March/April 2014, Volume 20, Number 3/4. <https://mirror.dlib.org/dlib/march14/nadasky/03nadasky.html>.

³² *ibid.*

³³ Wolf, Eric. "LibGuides: New York Library Home Page: Overview and General Information." *LibGuides at Sotheby's Institute of Art*. Accessed July 28, 2024. <https://sia.libguides.com/nylibraryhome>.



Graph I. Number of Auction Catalogues Collected in the Watson Library and the National gallery, 2011-2023.

The correlation between auction catalogues collected and online auction is also apparent. Using Christie's as a further example: in total, Christie's held 332 sales in 2023, about one-third fewer than in 2019.³⁴ However, percentage-wise, the number of online-only sales almost doubled during this four-year period, with online sales constituting nearly half (45%) of all sales at Christie's in 2023, compared to just 24% in 2019.³⁵ Compare this to the number of catalogues collected by the NGA Library and the Watson Library during this time, a clear correlation emerges: despite the total number of sales decreasing by a third, in 2019, the Watson Library collected 82 catalogues from Christie's, while the National Gallery collected 112 titles. In 2023, the Watson Library collected only 39 catalogues from Christie's, and the National Gallery collected just 25, representing a 52% and 78% decrease respectively.³⁶ This data highlights the impact of the shift towards online sales and the cessation of auction catalogue collection on archival research and documentation.

Readers of this article should, of course, be aware that the data above represents only at best two institutions and should not be encouraged to draw direct conclusions about different institutions. While further research is needed to better study other collections among other museums, it's fair to state that two prominent American institutions, historically renowned for their auction catalogue collection, are encountering challenges in acquiring contemporary auction catalogues.

³⁴ Counted from Christie's Auction Results. Accessed April 23, 2024.

<https://www.christies.com/en/results?language=en&month=12&year=2023>.

³⁵ Christie's, "Guillaume Cerutti, Chief Executive Officer, Christie's: "After Two Exceptional Years, Christie's Adapted to a Different..." *Christie's Press Centre*, July 12, 2023. <https://press.christies.com/christies-delivers-solid-performance-in-changing-macro-environment>.

³⁶ NGA: Christie's. "Library - National Gallery of Art." Accessed July 28, 2024.

https://library.nga.gov/discovery/search?query=any,contains,Christie%27s&tab=Auction&search_scope=Auction&vid=01NGA_INST:AUC&facet=searchcreationdate,include,2023%7C,%7C2023&facet=tlevel,include,available_p&offset=0

Watson: "Thomas J. Watson Library Accessed July 28, 2024.

[https://library.metmuseum.org/search~S3/X?SEARCH=\(christie%27s\)&searchscope=3&Da=2023&Db=2023&SORT=R](https://library.metmuseum.org/search~S3/X?SEARCH=(christie%27s)&searchscope=3&Da=2023&Db=2023&SORT=R)
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Discussion: What is the future of auction catalogue collecting?

From a library's perspective, there are three key considerations when it comes to auction catalogue collection: practicality, economic viability, and sustainability. These can be further evaluated through two practical questions: 'What is the scope of our collection?' and 'How will we store them?'

Space is really an issue for museum libraries. Many librarians have expressed a sense of relief that, with fewer physical catalogs arriving in the mail, the challenge of finding enough storage space has become less of a concern. The Watson has become a hub for provenance researchers, housing over 145,000 catalogues in its collection. Auction catalogues, in particular, are frequently requested by researchers. However, storing this extensive collection on Fifth Avenue in New York can be both economically and logistically impractical. A few years ago, based on circulation data, the Watson Library decided to store less frequently used auction catalogs off-site, having them shipped only when requested, while prioritizing commonly used catalogs for on-site storage. With fewer physical catalogues added to the collection each year, librarians can finally feel less pressured to worry about space planning in the stacks.

The question of whether "more is better" is an equally important question. In an ideal archive, every auction catalog from every auction house worldwide would be collected. The Watson Library has attempted this approach, striving to gather nearly every auction catalog across categories, except those considered too far out of scope. In contrast, the National Gallery of Art has traditionally focused on sales aligned with the museum's collection while also seeking important auction catalogs. Realistically, the NGA's model is more sustainable, given the sheer volume of auctions globally. Some restraint in collection is necessary: where should the line be drawn? In this context, more may not necessarily translate to a better collection. Factors such as potential future research value, relevance to the existing collection, rarity, uniqueness, and material condition become crucial considerations. The risk, however, lies in missing information that could be lost forever. This makes auction catalogs both essential and challenging to collect—every page could hold significant information, making it hard to prioritize.

A complete chain of provenance, derived from auction and sales catalogs, remains one of the strongest proofs of authenticity.³⁷ The auction season is in full swing again, and the number of auction catalogs added to the National Gallery of Art and the Watson Library in 2024 is not looking promising at either institution. The survival of archival institutions thus hinges on maintaining public trust in the authenticity of their collections. If the integrity of these archives is compromised by incomplete records, user trust will diminish, jeopardizing the credibility and long-term viability of these databases.³⁸ Without greater transparency and adequate regulations, the integrity of provenance records—and, by extension, the art market—remains at risk. It is my every hope, therefore, that librarians from different institutions can come together and discuss the best practice moving forward. Perhaps a compromise, between auction houses and libraries, could be reached so that we could continue to maintain comprehensive collections of auction catalogues for future researchers.

³⁷ There have even been cases where art forgers attempted to introduce fake auction catalogs into museum archives, later "discovering" them to bolster the credibility of forgeries. See:

The Bailey, Martin. "Exploitation of the Tate Archives: Trial of Accused Paintings Fraudster." *The Art Newspaper - International Art News and Events*, November 1, 1998. <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/1998/11/01/exploitation-of-the-tate-archives-trial-of-accused-paintings-fraudster>.

³⁸ Daigle, Sean, "Protecting the Integrity of Archives" (2024). *School of Information Sciences Student Scholarship*. 5. https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/sis_student_papers/5