

Art, antiques & collecting

Cash in the attic? Now is the time to go looking

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Art and antiques specialists are busy valuing items by email and phone

We now find ourselves in uncharted waters in the art and antiques market with galleries closed and live auctions postponed. However Irish auction houses are still open for business and are busy valuing items by email and telephone.

While stuck at home, many people find themselves rearranging their houses to suit their working conditions. This can be the time to place a monetary value on all the stuff that has been hiding in the attic.

Online valuations are not new. For Rory Guthrie of de Vere's auction house on Kildare Street: "The reality is that 90 per cent of all our correspondence is done by email or telephone anyway; so day to day work has not been impacted. We have taken the view that we are still open for business and are fully functional, albeit from home."

Similarly art expert Ian Whyte, of Whyte's on Molesworth Street, says online valuations are increasing, and not just for low-to-middle value items. "We actually already get about 50 per cent of our consignments through initial valuations by email, including some items with values in excess of €100,000, and in one instance a collection that fetched more than €5 million, which was a large selection of important paintings."

Most auctioneers will give an indication of value for free. However, written valuations to be used for probate and insurance purposes usually incur a fee. It is best to check with the auctioneer.

Recently, a photograph of a Chinese moon flask, sent by email to Sotheby's from a private Irish collector, created a stir at the auction house.

"It came in by email, and we sent the photograph to our Chinese expert in London who became very excited about the piece. It was valued from the images alone, and followed up by a visit from our expert to view the moonflask", says Arabella Bishop of Sotheby's. The item is now consigned to its Chinese Sale later this year with a £150,000-£250,000 estimate.

Adam's of St Stephen's Green is geared up for online valuations. "As online queries have outnumbered 'walk-ins' by a factor of five to one for the past couple of years, we have a team of 10 valuers providing opinions on everything from vintage wine, collectables such as silver, china, glass and oriental artworks as well as furniture," says James O'Halloran.

Philip Sheppard recalls a recent set of photographs that were emailed to him. "An elderly couple from Tipperary

emailed us some photographs of old family medals. I happened to be in Los Alamos New Mexico, and the office sent them through to me. The medals were easily identifiable: a King's South Africa Medal (Boer War with its distinctive green white and orange ribbon) and a British World War One campaign trio (known affectionately as Pip, Squeak and Wilfred).

"Within a matter of minutes I was able to access the owner's uncle's British Army medal rolls index card, confirm he was indeed the recipient and, having accessed the online Census of Ireland from 1911, was able to inform the owner, that his uncle Ed was in fact Edmund and not Edward as the family had thought."

It's essential to have good photographs of items to be valued. For paintings, take pictures of both sides, with additional photographs zoomed in on the signature and any writing on the back. Stuart Purcell of Mullen's Laurel Park suggests taking only the measurement of the painting and not the frame.

Ian Whyte recommends keeping image sizes under

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10MB otherwise they may not get delivered by email, and to be patient in awaiting a valuation, as assessing and authenticating an item can take time.

Kitchen scales

Jewellery is notoriously difficult to photograph well, says O'Halloran "whereas watches photograph very well, and it is also useful to have original papers and certificates to verify authenticity".

For silver valuations, John Weldon, who holds monthly jewellery auctions in Temple Bar, suggests you pop it on the kitchen scales "as we need to know how heavy it is, and this will have a bearing on its value. Also do not worry about cleaning the silver as buyers like to see it with 20 years of tarnish."

Sometimes it takes an expert eye to choose what to photograph in the first place, as noted by Stuart Purcell of Mullen's of Laurel Park: "Our [now postponed] Collector's Cabinet sale includes a very early and rare map of Ireland by Abraham Ortelius, which I spotted in the background of a photograph of a not very valuable Chinese vase. The map however, we have estimated to be worth €2,500-€3,000."

If you find something interesting in the attic, these pages would love to share your story so please email us at homeanddesign@irishtimes.com. deveres.ie, sheppards.ie, lynesandlynes.com, hagartyantiques.com, whytes.ie, jwa.ie, mullenslaurelpark.com, o'reillysfineart.com, sothebys.com