

BRIEFING P14

Fake diamonds
are a girl's
best friend



STRATEGY P16

Three lessons
from Woodford's
downfall



PLUS

Will Scotland tax
itself to death?

CITY VIEW P18



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Making great strides

The future of prosthetic medicine

Page 24



BRITAIN'S BEST-SELLING FINANCIAL MAGAZINE

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Modernising modern art

A key art movement is undergoing a revamp. Chris Carter reports.

Sotheby's held its third annual "Modernités" sale in Paris on Wednesday, alongside the International Contemporary Art Fair (FIAC). The sale included *Medea* (1929) by Francis Picabia. With a nod to Sandro Botticelli, Picabia depicts the semi-divine enchantress from Greek mythology who goes on to marry Jason, the leader of the Argonauts. It was valued at up to €2m.

There was also a large painting by Marc Chagall entitled *Le Cirque Mauve* (1966) and valued at up to €5m, along with René Magritte's *L'Incorruptible* (1940), showing the Belgian surrealist's wife, Georgette, as a statue before a bleak landscape. It was on sale for €1.5m. The event was concerned with "defining modernity", as Sotheby's put it. But that is easier said than done.

Rebooting modern art

Modern art began in the 1880s, more or less – some say ten, 20 years earlier. Either way, its concerns "now feel long ago, forged in a time of rapid industrial change", says Jerry Saltz on New York Magazine's *Vulture* website. Time for a reboot, then. Modernism shapes "the ways we see the world, and how the world sees itself", he says.

But recently, "seismic shifts have occurred" that have stretched the boundaries of the art movement to its limits. Modernism needs to be made modern again. That is something



René Magritte's *L'Incorruptible* (1940)

the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York has been wrestling with for a long time.

Now, after a \$450m overhaul, the gallery is reopening on 21 October as a "living, breathing 21st-century institution, rather than the monument to an obsolete history – white, male and nationalist" – that it had become since it was founded in 1929, according to Holland Cotter in *The New York Times*. (MOMA first opened just nine days after the Wall Street Crash. Let's hope its October reopening this time is less eventful.)

MOMA has long been known for the strict arrangement of its displays along the lines of an "ironclad view of modern art as a succession of 'isms' (Cubism, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism)", says Cotter. But now it is attempting to reinvent itself without hurting its appeal. The result is a sort of "Modernism Plus, with

globalism and African-American art added".

On Thursday a preview of the museum's new layout showcased the museum's 47,000 square feet of new gallery space and the "radical 'remix'" of its permanent collection, says Miranda Bryant in *The Guardian*. Now, for example, Pablo Picasso's 1907 painting *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)* can be found close to Faith Ringgold's 1967 work *American People Series #20: Die*, depicting a scene from a race riot.

That's because, in today's digital world, we consume a wide variety of images that are out of context and outside of traditional settings, as MOMA's director, Glenn Lowry, tells Bryant. "It reframes Picasso differently," he says. "It doesn't diminish Picasso, it simply means that there's another conversation you can have around Picasso."

Auctions

Going...

A letter written by Jane Austen, dated 16 September 1813, is to go up for auction at Bonhams in New York next Wednesday. In the letter to her sister, Cassandra, Austen reports on the latest fashion: "Large full bows of very narrow ribbon... one over the right temple, perhaps, and another at the left ear". She also recounts a visit to the dentist with her nieces, remarking that the dentist "must be a Lover of Teeth & Money & Mischief... I would not have had him look at mine for a shilling a tooth & double it." Austen is thought to have written around 3,000 letters, of which most were destroyed in the 1840s. This surviving example is expected to fetch up to \$120,000.



Gone...

A cache of 65 letters written by Swedish-American Hollywood actress Greta Garbo (pictured) failed to sell at Swann Auction Galleries in New York last Thursday. Expecting interest from film collectors, the bundle of letters had been valued at \$60,000. All of the letters had been written to Garbo's close friend, Austrian actress and writer Salka Viertel, between 1932 and 1973. The inscrutable and reclusive star of *Queen Christina* (1933) and *Anna Karenina* (1935) was known as the "Swedish Sphinx", says *The Observer*. In one of the letters, Garbo writes: "I go nowhere, see no one... It is hard and sad to be alone, but sometimes it's even more difficult to be with someone."

Spiritual modern artists

Modern art has its roots in the late 19th century, when spiritualism was flourishing, says Caroline Marciniak in *Frieze* *Masters Magazine*.

It was also an era of profound technological and socio-economic change. "Railways were vastly extended, suburbs sprouted factories and cities towered upwards."

But with technological progress came disillusionment, and "a sense of longing and decay". Impressionism was too "formal, based on fleeting sensory impressions and grounded in everyday life", says Marciniak.



©The Gallery of Everything

"The renewed interest in occultism was driven by a search for alternatives and origins, for a world that holds both chaos and coherence... its rhythms hinting at key truths."

"At the turn of the century, modern artists and Modernists were all into versions of spiritualism," *The Gallery of Everything's* James Brett told the BBC's Kelly Grovier. "So spiritual art had a huge impact on what became Modernism and therefore art today."

The evidence is in the diversity of visions on display at *The Gallery's The Medium's Medium* exhibition, says Grovier.

From the "haunting Surrealism" of Marian Spore Bush to the portraits of the German artist Margarethe Held, who believed she was instructed by the Hindu god Shiva, the artworks demonstrate "just how far and wide the mystical impulse pulsated". (*The Gallery of Everything*, 4 Chiltern Street, London – until 24 November.)