

# At home with....Christophe Billard

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**Christophe Billard is an international private banker who spent over twenty years in senior management positions in France, the UK, and predominantly in Asia (Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan).**

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**He left the banking industry in 2016 to focus on art, one of his passions, and work at the crossroads of the arts, finance, and philanthropy. He set up Arat-Art Conseils, a consulting company for corporates advising on art strategy and cultural engineering. He is advisor to the UK based art charity The Cornelius Arts Foundation working on a philanthropic and heritage project in the Paris suburbs. Since 2021, Christophe is a visiting professor at IESA in Paris, lecturing international MA students on "Cultural Economics - Financing art projects".**

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**Christophe is also deeply involved with IDEM, the 140-year old company specialised in art & lithograph printing in Montparnasse, Paris as the President of the Friends of IDEM Association and a member of the board of the Endowment Fund of IDEM (Fonds de Dotation de IDEM).**

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**Last year brought about many changes as a result of the pandemic, what were the consequences for you and how do you think this will impact your work moving forward?**

For me it had a positive outcome ultimately. Before lockdown I was working on a new business plan which was consulting for finance companies and banks on their artistic strategy but of course because we were in lockdown, things changed.

I partnered with a group of seven others and co-founded a not for profit initiative supporting artists and the art world in France, *Les Amis des Artistes*, similar to the Artist Support Pledge. A website was set up to provide general information, an Instagram account promoted the project and the artists, and volunteers liaised with the press, organising interviews for TV and radio. We used our personal network to find the artists and of course there was word of mouth and traction on Instagram and Facebook. The community manager of *Les Amis des Artistes* also helped the artists to spread the word via social media.

There was no curation, every artist could take part and the concept was that they would sell their art works on Instagram or Facebook with part of the proceeds going directly to them (70%) and 30% would be donated to a charitable fund to benefit other artists' charities.

The group of seven volunteers looked after these funds, and every two weeks a different charity was chosen to benefit artists, five in total, such as *Maison des Artistes* and *ARTAGON*. This could be to help art students with fees for studios or accommodation, help artists with their utility bills and social security fees or to top up their benefits or pensions.

From mid-April to early June 2005 artists took part, 400 art works were sold (with the majority up to €500) raising €200,000 for the artists and the nominated charities. I am very keen on arts philanthropy and I managed to buy seven artworks myself!

During this time, I also wrote articles about artists, exhibitions, and artist's studio visits, I did podcasts and started organising exhibitions, with one coming up in Berlin later this year, and I am lecturing about art and economics.

### **How did you stay in touch with the art world during this time?**

Of course, I was deeply involved with artists, galleries, and the art press throughout this project but also through my Chairmanship of the Friends of IDEM. We started a newsletter as we couldn't do exhibitions or talks, which we sent once a month to our contacts. It contained news from the workshop, the latest artists we've seen, and news from the artists themselves about what was going on in their life, what they were reading, what they were working on, etc. The close link between the artist, the workshop and the community was phenomenal. I also read a lot; blogs, art reviews, newsletters from arts organisations and I managed to visit artists' studios and galleries as soon as lockdown permitted. I will continue to do these studio visits. Previously artists were hesitant to allow collectors to visit but now they realise it is easy to connect with them. Since the lockdown a lot of things happen online too and not just in the gallery anymore.

**Many people who are new to buying art are looking for inspiration and guidance from those that have been buying art for a while, especially when it comes to buying their first work of art. Can you tell us about your first art purchase?**

Ah this is an interesting question! When I was in lockdown last year, I opened a couple of boxes that I moved from Asia to London and now to Paris, I found the first two works I bought. It's difficult to explain the emotions when you first see them, when you see them again and also when you live with them. I bought these when I was about 20, they're mixed media works by an Argentinian artist based in Paris called Arturo Sierra. It's the colours, the combination of material bronze, transparent paper, rusty metal, chalk, and pencil drawing that I was attracted to.

**Is there one stand out tip that you can give to those who are starting a new collection or considering buying their first work of art?**

Determine whether you are starting a collection for yourself or for investment. These are two different ways of buying art. Are you looking at it as a true asset? This means that you look at the value and what it might return, whether you like it or not. This is not my view; I started a collection because of the emotion, liking the work, living with an artwork, not putting it in storage. The value comes from the emotion that you have and share with the art.

Have a budget. If you can't afford a Picasso or a Jeff Koons, that's fine but buy something that you like. Something that makes you happy when you are sad, something you like to see in the morning or at night before you go to bed. It's about the connection, not the value. I buy what I like, I am not relying on the gallerist or the dealer. I listen to friends, hear their recommendations but I rely on myself and the artists.

And If you can't afford something always ask to pay in instalments, many galleries are happy to provide that option.

**Is there one work that you either own or would like to own that stands out above all others for you?**

I have two works that I really like. One I am very keen on is a lithograph. I was drawn to the colours, I liked the paper, the ink. It's by Zhou Wei, a Chinese artist that I bought in Japan at a small gallery in Tokyo, Tobin & Ohashi. It's a simple composition of a Chinese figure, a big head with a small body, a simple composition with red and green, but very expressive. I actually bought a couple of his works.

The second of my favourite works is one I bought through 1:54 Contemporary Art Fair from Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery in London, she specialises in African artists. It's by an Ethiopian artist, Ephrem Salomon and I saw it about six months before I bought it. It's from the *Recycle Series*, a woodcut and mixed media, a striking work of a man with a red background (I like red, probably from my long time working in Asia). I bought it because I liked it a lot, but this artist has since increased in value.

## **Many new collectors are looking to deepen their knowledge of the arts and the market. Is there a book you can recommend?**

I am currently reading two books. One is called *Le mythe de l'artiste* by my friend, the art critic and curator, Isabelle de Maison Rouge. It's a fascinating book in which she is killing the myths around the artist, often seen as bohemian, solitary figures.

The other one is *L'Affaire Ruffini*, by the French The Art Newspaper journalist, Vincent Noce. It's about collector Guiliano Ruffini who sold numerous forged works attributed to Old Masters such as Lucas Cranach and Breughel. The extent of the faking and the forgeries is incredible. He had many connections with experts and art historians who authenticated his paintings, saying they were typical of the style of the artist. Some sold to international museums such as the Louvre.

## **What do you feel is the role of art advisors and how do you think they can help collectors?**

We sold several works for *Les Amis des Artistes* through Instagram with the help of curators and art advisors, who selected art works that they liked to show to their clients and feature on their platform.

An art advisor has a key role for me. They are mainly a guide, their role is to be neutral, listen to their client and considers questions such as 'What does he like, what does she want, why do they want these works?'

If you want to start a collection and you have €5000 you can buy one good work but that doesn't make a collection. So, you can buy several ones at lower prices, such as lithographs or other prints. You might want to support a specific artist and commit to them.

Jean-Michel Alberola sells lithographs for €500, €2000 can buy you a David Lynch lithograph. Izumi Kato, one of the top contemporary Japanese artists has beautiful prints. I bought a few of his lithographs for €2,000-€3,000, these have doubled in price recently, but I bought them because I liked them.

## **What is the one thing you look forward to in the art world in 2021?**

I've been very good to the art world and I'd love the art world to be good to me this year! I am looking forward to meeting more artists and being involved in more projects.

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