

Everyfan's Guide



to the



AUCTION



by

Jack L. Chalcker

WITH GRAPHIC
BLANDISHMENT BY

Tim Kirk



Good
Good
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My sincere thanks to Tim Kirk for the illustrations, which more than adequately represent the subject and problems of same--these being little gems of the Auction Experience.

A similar booklet is planned on Masquerades if demand warrants.

JACK CHALKER'S AUCTION FIGURES

Chalker's estimated gross auction total to date: \$87,986.

Average Worldcon Art Show Gross (recent years): \$20,000.

Average Worldcon General Auction Gross (recent years): \$5900.

Average Regional Con Gross--General Auction: \$350.00.

Largest Regional Con Gross to date: \$1170.00 in 45 minutes at a Boskone.

Largest One-Session General Auction Gross: \$3900.00 (Chalker & Harlan Ellison at St. Louis).

Conventions currently holding auctions and publicizing the fact in the U.S.: Creation, Balticon, Star Trek Con, Boskone, Lunacon, Disclave, Midwestcon, Westercon, World Science Fiction Convention, Pghlange, International Comic Art Convention, Fantasy Film International Convention, Philcon, Southwestcon (Dallas or Oklahoma City), Witchcraft & Sorcery Convention. Others may have them as well. Best general grosses have been at Star Trek Con, Comic Art Con, Boskone and World SF Convention (not in that order).

Jack Chalker is running all phases of the Discon II auctions and anyone interested in anything from auctioneering to cataloging to donating material for the 1974 World Science Fiction Convention should contact him at

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Introduction



This booklet had its genesis in a conversation I had with Tony Lewis a few years back, at which time he complained of the dearth of good auctioneers around the incredibly prolific conventions. Oh, sure, there's no end of volunteers for the job, but a good auctioneer is one who can somehow do what others can't--that is, to sell at the best possible prices while being entertaining or en rapport with his audience so they stay and enjoy paying money. Tony's New England Science Fiction Association has been trying various kinds of auditions and break-in methods, but to date nobody's really done a proper job of putting down just what makes a good auctioneer, what the customer in the audience should look for to avoid being fleeced, what the contributor of the work being auctioned can reasonably expect in an auction, the advantages and disadvantages of auctions, the proper con set-up for auctions, etc. Maybe it still hasn't been done with this booklet, but I hope that the practical experience of my hundreds of con auctions, both as auctioneer and as set-up man, can be helpful to those aspiring and those who use auctions--and those who buy from them.

Let's set the scene:

A letter comes from a west coast regional convention asking if I will do their auctions for them. Since I had few other plans for the con, I agreed. The con was to last four days, and was held in a two-story motel. After checking the auction schedule I went on my way, stopping off at the con suite the night before the first auction at the invitation of the committee in order to show me some of the artwork for the convention's auction. There was no catalog of material, but I was assured that the material was well-marked.

The next day's auction was scheduled for mid-afternoon in an otherwise unused room. At about 2:45 I closed my own dealer table and went over to the con suite to find out the set-up, and discovered that there wasn't one. None. Not even a committee member. I finally located a Vice Chairman, only to be told by him that the auctions weren't his department. He referred me to another whom I finally located and asked, "Where's the auction material?" In response he gave me the keys to his car! In other words, I was to unload the boxes from the car, sort and auction them after carrying them across the length of the parking lot and up the stairway! I managed to draft a couple of Baltimoreans out West with me and we got it up to the auction room--about a dozen large boxes filled with unknown material. I next sent down for the art and discovered (A) a Medieval Madrigal Society practicing in the con suite, and (B) the art was gone. Nobody knew where--the Chairman was finally located and when told the art was gone he panicked and ran off to parts unknown for the next half hour. In the meantime a small audience had gathered upstairs and was impatiently awaiting the auction. No one was located who could give me any idea what the boxes contained. Finally we decided to start by simply opening the first box and going through it. It was then I discovered that there was no cashier. I sent out again, only to have word come back that the

con treasurer had locked the cash box and all receipts in the safe and set off for a restaurant in town.

To make a long story short, we started auctioning without any cash on an exact-change or check basis, then finally got some money when one of the con committee members who was running the huckster room advanced the con some ready change. However, with all this the hapless audience was in a bad mood (who could blame them?) and, worse, they knew what they wanted--but I didn't know where in the huge number of cartons the stuff was, or if it was. When I hit on a type of item they went for, I still had no way of getting more of the same up. The scenario was a farce, made even moreso by the fact that all 3 people working the auction were from 3000 miles away and the acting cashier was from 400 miles away. The art was found near the end of the initial auction, in a room upstairs where an overeager committeemember had taken it a half hour before the auction to catalog (!) and hadn't told anyone.

The aforementioned fellow who ran the huckster room saw as he delivered the change that things were going poorly. His reaction was to run to a New York fan downstairs and say, "Chalker's terrible--I can't understand how he got such a reputation! Will you take over?" The aforesaid fan was flabberghasted and refused; the con man came back up as I'd hit a stack of vintage fanzines the audience loved and prices were going astronomical for that kind of material. This fellow then ran back down to the New York fan and said, "That's all right--they're warming to him now." The New York fan was Elliot Shorter, and it was months later before we put both versions together. Elliot was later to have his own day of woe with these people: they asked him to do the almost 500-item art show single-handed, provided no one (Project Art Show provided the cashier, etc. and later on a little help as Elliot went through Hour Four and his voice was cracking) to help him at all. I finally took over for the last twenty or so items because Elliot's voice gave out.

I might conclude this by saying that subsequent editions of the auction went worse.

Subsequent reports by committee members and some attendees blamed me for the auction failure. Despite all, by the way, we pulled in over \$1,000.

The situation is an unrepeated classic. It is the only known case of somebody doing everything wrong, even the common sense parts. A later convention put on by the same committee at which I did not auction was more successful but not in this category, apparently. I have no idea who or what auctioned, but a number of people came by the sales table saying that they'd walked out on the auction because they couldn't stand it in there much longer. Apparently this manual is needed.

Why?



The auction in times past was created to supplement convention income. In these days of world conventions and a few regionals with hundreds to thousands of dollars they don't know how to get rid of it seems hard to believe that in the past all conventions and in the present many, many small conventions depend on the auctions. Even if your convention doesn't need an auction for money purposes, the auctions of the past few years are a necessary programming element to all conventions if material is obtainable.

First and foremost, they are the primary and in many cases the only way in which the fans can obtain original art, manuscripts, etc.

Secondly, they provide a method by which such original material may be gotten into the hands of people who want it and will enjoy it rather than rot in some publisher's warehouse until ruined.

Third, they are an important source of new talent exposure, particularly in art, where amateur work can be put up, displayed, and exposed to the marketplace. Although the fanzine is possibly the first line, the auction is the ultimate test of worth and future. Professional artists also like exposing not only their established work but their variant work at auction, as it's a much better test of their artistic as opposed to commercial reputation.

Fourth, there is the public relations aspect as major publishers find their old line art and galleys get them plugs and gratitude before the most responsive of audiences.

Finally, it's fun--a contest in which the person who can't afford the enormous prices artists charge for their major work who just might get a bargain he can afford, keep, and cherish.

A world convention without auctions is unthinkable. Even a small con without an auction generally lacks punch. They are as essential as any other part of a program (and even Midwestcon, which has no program, has started a poolside after-dinner auction which has brought exposure to a number of Ohio artists).

The following is a step-by-step system for acquiring, establishing, promoting, and putting on a good con auction. If all of the people involved, from committee to donor to auctioneer to buyer, do their parts with intelligence and common sense, then there's no reason why any auction can't be an exceptional experience.

Starting



First, of course, the convention committee must decide that they want an auction (I'm obviously prejudiced when I say the answer should be "Yes" if the committee is willing to do the proper things to put it on properly).

The first thing to do is to find a masochist--no, check that. Everybody on a con committee is a masochist by definition--a volunteer to do the auction work. If you have someone with experience in running an auction (as opposed to mere auctioneering) all the better. If you don't, then get a copy of this manual and also write as many people with experience as you can.

Second, PROMOTE THE AUCTION IN YOUR PRE-CON PUBLICITY. This is vital, particularly for smaller or newer cons, since the attendees have to know that there will be an auction or they're not going to bring the money to bid on material. Seriously, I've done more auctions where the audience was drooling over the art and wanted to buy but their checkbooks were in Pokeepsie. The word AUCTION should be as prominent on your promotional publicity--from flyers to notes in LOCUS, etc.--as parties, art shows and other things.

Now you have to acquire the material. This is often the biggest stumbling block to any con, particularly small ones. The best way to do this is to simply make a list of everyone who might conceivably give to an auction, put your plight in polite but essential and believable terms, and send those letters to every artist, collector, and editor you can think of (never neglect the magazines and some of the paperback editors--this is free publicity for no extra cost). Don't be bashful or hesitant.

Also, if there's an organized art show, you'll have to give at least the same percentage to the donor (unless it's an outright gift--be a good businessperson and discuss splits in the follow-up) as the art show, and, if possible, give them a little more than the art show since they'll get slightly less exposure. One good argument for a general auction is that, if planned right, it has a much larger audience than the art show bid-offs, where many are scared away by high pre-bid sheets or just by the reputation of astronomical prices.

Since you'll have miscellaneous set-up expenses and want to make something for the con, a 70-30 split is one of the best and most common (the con gets the 30%), but if your financial situation depends heavily on the auction a 60-40 (the con gets the 40) is not unreasonable. This goes whether the item to be auctioned is a painting, a mimeo, or a tribble.

Be certain in your promotion to the prospective donors to spotlight the positive aspects--free-marketplace, the fans really want this, past auctions have brought in a lot, etc. Don't lie but put every positive aspect you can in a strong light. Remember, you are competing with about 20 other cons including some really established ones.

Above all, assure the donors that the items will be (A) displayed prior to being auctioned, (B) cataloged if it arrives within a couple weeks before the con, and (C) that the con's cut goes to the con and pays needed expenses.

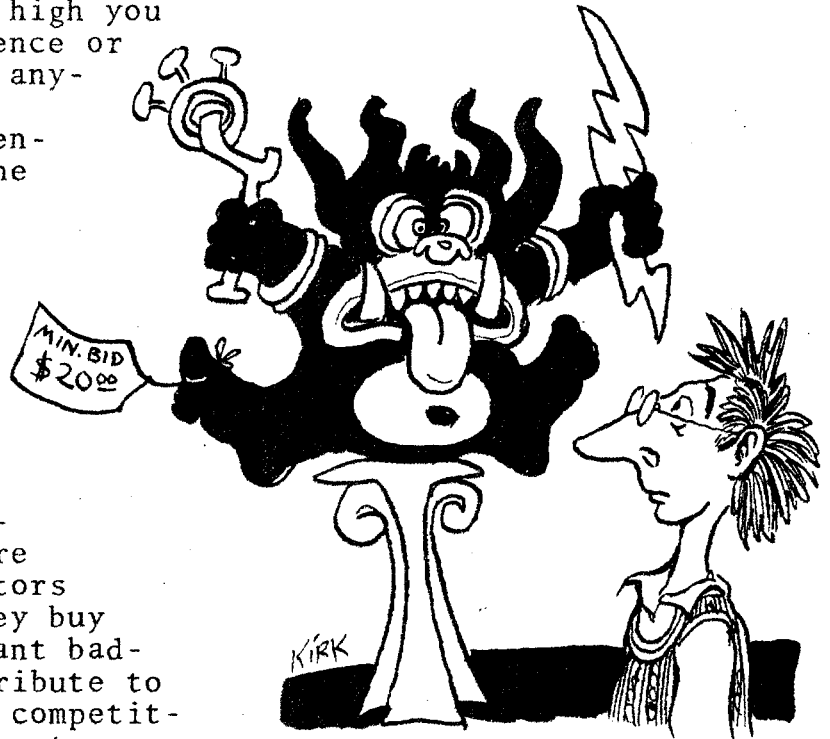
To Sell Or Auction?



An auction can be extremely ego-inflating--and extremely ego-deflating. Thus, the donor is taking a risk at all times. We'll address ourselves to the artist--amateur and professional--first, since he or she is the majority of all donors and the artist's problems are among the most common to all types of donors. We'll address ourselves briefly later on to the particular problems of the non-artist donors.

First of all, no matter who you are, be certain of your objectives before you donate. The alternative is simple: put a price tag on your work and exhibit it yourself and try to sell it at your price. If you have a clearly defined idea that a particular piece of your work is absolutely worth \$X in the sense of work put in, actual artistic brilliance, etc., then don't do an auction. Sell the painting. If you put a huge price tag on it then you probably will be unhappy with the auction anyway--and if it's really high you either have the wrong audience or you didn't want to sell it anyway. Remember not only the vast talent that is represented in every auction and the fact that SF fan's supply of millionaires is thin--and they usually spend a lot less than the life savings of the average fan.

An auction is a gamble and you should understand that from the start. However, remember your audience, too--these people are the world's great appreciators of good SF/fantasy art. They buy because they love it and want badly to own it. No greater tribute to your art, put up in strong competition with the best of your contemporaries, can be paid than by spirited bidding by the best people to appreciate your labor. But you still want the best possible price. How to combine both and guarantee a sale?



First, read what I said in the earlier section on promotion. If the public knows there'll be an auction it's a better auction. Check out the past performance of auctions at other cons, too. Don't be misled by size, either. At the gigantic 1500+ person Lunacon in New York the crowd is usually predominantly off the street--and thus prices are lower (this is offset a bit by exposure to over a thousand new potential fans, of course, and the fact that editors attend the New York cons, so you have added promotional value). Boskone, held in Boston in March of each year, is not well attended--a few hundred

is a good crowd--but the people who attend expect a superb art show and auction, bring all they've got, and spend high. Here promotional value is offset by higher prices. The World Science Fiction Convention always brings the best prices, of course, but remember that at a large convention like the Worldcon your work(s) will be a few in a vast sea of hundreds, possibly a thousand or more, works and consequently will receive less attention than at a small but appreciative con.

Art Shows always have an edge, of course, since the work is on display for up to 3 and a half days before the bid-off, but, again, remember that your work tends to get submerged in sheer numbers in an art show. In general, particularly if there is a pre-showing or display of art to be auctioned in the general auction, you'll never do worse in the general auction and quite often better. Again, it's promotion versus price, and you have to decide which is primary.

O.K., so you decide to display some of your work at a con, either at a general auction or an Art Show. How are your nerves? How's your ego?

Remember, as I said earlier, the auction's a gamble. You might not get the price you think it's worth--if the public doesn't think so. On the other hand, you might have underestimated your work--and an auction's the best place to find out what the public really thinks of your art. Which brings us to minimum bids.

The auctioneer and the committee can help, but you can wreck a good thing by placing a poor minimum bid. Many artists, particularly those not extremely well established, tend to put on their art the minimum bid that's really the price they'd ask if they were selling the work themselves. Remember the competition, the limitations and finances of your audience, etc. If your minimum is the price you want for the work anyway, don't put it up for auction--put a price tag on it and sell it. An auction is the last free marketplace, where the value that the audience places on your work is the only thing it's worth. Most artists with high minimum bids, I suspect, suffer from inferiority complexes--they are afraid their great work of true art will go for a pittance. And when it doesn't sell at your high minimum, this feeling is confirmed.

Of course, the work could indeed sell for less than it's valued by you--but that's your subjective value. It will always sell at the true value placed on it by the marketplace.

I have seen \$50 minimums die horrible, lingering deaths--after all, that's a lot of money to most people and they have to think of what else they could get for the money.

Everybody knows Jack Gaughan, or at least his work. Jack is the smartest artist I've ever seen at an auction. He comes up with some really superb pieces of art--much of it better than what he's doing to some editor's whims on a cover--and puts a \$5.00 minimum on the items. Usually the smart auctioneer will start it at what the aud-

ience has been biting best at--and it'll sometimes go well over the \$100.00 mark, almost never lower than the price Jack would have put on it in a cash sale. So maybe he loses on one--he gains far more.

For an auction is a contest requiring three people--the auctioneer and two bidders (one bidder and it's a sale). The more bidders the more spirited the bid and the higher things will go.

Amateurs in particular should keep this in mind: if your name's not one of the tops in the field the audience must be convinced by the talent in your piece--and at \$50 for a color or \$25 for a black and white, it'd better be some piece. And yet amateur pieces have brought up to \$500 at auction--but they all started low.

Make certain that the audience can make a contest of it. Otherwise, even though it might be worth more than your price and might even have been bid up to that or higher, they'll wait for the 30 other pieces and see if there's something else they like just as much. But get some competitive bidding and you've got it made.

You \$100 minimums--remember that 70% of \$70 is \$49.00, but 70% of no sale is 0.

Sell it or auction it--but play fair with your audience. If you are not willing to test your wares in the free market then you are slowing the pace and are definitely in the wrong spot.

If it's really as good as you think, it'll go that high.

A few practical tips, too: get your percentage agreement in writing from the committee before sending everything. Pack it right and send it to the right place--and keep careful track of it while it's up. Insist on immediate payment before the con closes. If any of the foregoing are not followed, whatever happens is your own damn fault.

And a word to the non-artist donors as follows:

PUBLICATIONS

Amateur and professional publications can get a lot of mileage out of donating originals, galleys, whatever. You've already got the material--this is a free ad to a most willing and appreciative audience, and the plugs come thick and fast.

BOOKS AND SUCH

Unload all the books, tribbles, zap guns and other oddities you like at an auction. They will generally go for a good price and will be appreciated, not despoiled. Old fanzines go well, too. Clean your attic, cull your duplicates, and make a little on the side. The percentage is equivalent to a large ad or ad series, and the money's at least as good. Even old mimeographs and such go well. Remember my comments above on minimums, though, and the gambling aspect.

Cataloging



Once the material starts coming in, it's your ball game. Catalog everything and print a catalog. Number each item serially as it comes in (pay no attention to numbering according to the order of auction--the number's to help with the records later).

Cataloging will actually take two forms--one for the public and one for your own people. The public one, alluded to above, is a simple mimeographed list with the number of the item, title, and description, with minimum bids. This can be given out either in the registration package or on a table near the pre-auction display of good to go up. An introductory section should state in brief and clear manner the operating rules of the auction. It's recommended that at least the following points be emphasized to the public in this catalog: (1) Minimum bids are



set by the donors and can not be altered without permission of the donors; (2) bids should be loud and clear, and are a binding obligation; anyone bidding on a piece and winning it will be expected to pay up; (3) materials to be auctioned each day are noted along with which day they'll be auctioned; (4) materials to be auctioned that day will be on display in a secured area on that day up to auction time; (5) cash or checks accepted, but the latter must be accompanied with a valid ID (driver's license, etc.); (6) the exact time and place of each auction session; (7) items put up but not bid on will be put up a final time with the donor's approval after all items have been put up once (that is, the final day of the con) and then, if still unsold, will be returned to the donors.

Now you must also make up your own convention catalog, and this is quite a different matter. First, buy a lot of 5X8 file cards--at least 100 more than the items you have in before the con--and on each card place the printed catalog number from the public catalog above, the title of the piece, the name and address of the donor, the minimum bid asked, and the split agreed to. Arrange the cards in numerical order and get a small plastic or metal 5X8 card file to hold them. This makes accounting simple, as you merely have the auctioneer call out the number and title (the latter as a check) before auctioning and you can look up the card and have the information handy during the auction. This brings up the other step--in a convenient and nonvisible place (or on a slip of paper if that's impossible) put the number you assigned to the item on the item itself. That way the auctioneer can give it to you. Once the item is sold, write the name of the buyer and the amount bid on the card; the card then goes to the cashier, who simply marks it "Paid" when

the item is paid for--and you have a complete one-step accounting system.

Some variants of the system are favored by others and I should mention them here although I favor the above as the simplest and most manageable.

Len Moffat creates a mini-catalog/graph, with number, donor, and title on a single line and then a series of columns to record the information. It works fine but seems like a lot of extra work and certainly seems to me to be harder to read. It works best when items are auctioned in strictly numerical order, something which, even if you plan it, will almost never be possible.

Project Art Show uses the pre-bid sheet to record the information but keeps a card file cross-check, which is fine. Other cons have adopted a similar slip for the general auction, but again it runs into excess paperwork and is generally harder to get ahold of.

Many cons tape the card or slip with all the information on to the piece itself. This has the advantage of giving all the information to the auctioneer all the time and might be considered, but be warned that those slips don't always stay where they're stuck. Although this method is the most efficient system, I would not try it without two sets of cards for insurance.

A few cons try to make up the card as the item is being auctioned. This generally results in mistakes, misidentification, and at best backs up the accounting and cashier departments horrendously.

Using the public catalog for this is a bit of a problem since it's going to be hard to find things in a pinch and will in no way have the room for the required information.

What's the extra cards for? Well, often you'll get a lot of items not submitted in advance and therefore not cataloged. Just number those blank cards sequentially after the last completed card and make sure the number goes on the "new" piece.

NEVER CATALOG ANYTHING YOU DO NOT PHYSICALLY HAVE IN YOUR POSSESSION. If you do you'll regret it--some of those folks just won't show up, will change their minds, or will forget the stuff. Disobey this rule at your peril.

O.K., so now we have the auction publicized, donors written, splits agreed to, the material in and the material cataloged both in print and on cards as well as numbered on the pieces themselves. All you need now are personnel--a minimum of ONE person to handle the records and a SECOND person to be cashier. Make certain that these people are solid, dependable, and reliable. Also get a THIRD person as backup in case either of the others fails for any reason. Don't worry if they don't--the third person can speed up cataloging, or spell the cashier.

The two most important people in your on-site auctioning itself are the auctioneer and the feeder. We'll say a bit more about the auctioneer in a moment, but let's not overlook the feeder. It's his (or her) job to keep the flow of items to the auctioneer uninterrupted, to keep track of where the items are and what they are, to make sure the proper number/tag is on the item, to preidentify the item if it's not clear whose or what it is, and, in general, keep things moving. This is a vital job--without it the auctioneer must take time between each item to sort through the pile, locate the proper material, identify it, and put it up. This greatly slows the auction, bores the audience, and results in embarrassing mistakes--a muffed minimum bid (that, of course, should be on the painting or number slip), a misidentification of an artist, the identification of a print as an original, etc. The feeder's job is vital to a smooth auction.

In general, pick someone to be the feeder who is very familiar with the specific auction material and therefore can have done the homework in advance of the auction. A good feeder shouldn't have to do more than arrange the articles in a logical order, having already noted and written on the number slip or back of the item the donor/artist/writer, the pertinent data for the auctioneer to tell his audience, and the minimums. As for arrangement, just make sure that you sort the art by artist and by minimum bids, and try and put up a variety of materials if available--art, books, zap guns, etc.--rather than get monotonous on one item. Always keep some of the best stuff displayed, on chairs on stage or otherwise, as a come-on to keep the audience waiting.

The final non-auctioneer staff are the runners, and a minimum of two should be gotten, although these are not critical jobs and members of the audience can be drafted if known. One runner takes the item from the auctioneer after he's gotten the information off it to start his spiel and makes certain that all interested segments of the audience get a look at it. The other runner takes the data tag as a double-check to the records-keeper so that the item can be confirmed as the one on the card. If using the ideal two-card system, the card attached to the item should be taken to the records person as soon as the item is sold.

Runners can help out the feeder where needed, too.

Essentially, the task of these people and this background work is simple: GET ALL THE ESSENTIAL INFORMATION WHEN NEEDED TO ALL THE PEOPLE WHO NEED IT.

A few final remarks on the set-up: make certain the cashier has at least \$100 in small bills; if a small auction, add a couple of rolls of quarters. A minimum of \$25 in ones and \$25 in fives are necessary for even a small auction (gross \$250 or less). Have a lockable cash box handy, and pick up a PAID stamp for the card. A small calculator will come in handy, too. If a larger auction, the records keeper can keep a TAB for people bidding on many items; just write the name of the bidder on a blank card and keep track of the item number won and the amount bid. It simplifies things later, but don't run away with this tab idea--best customers only.

On the set-up itself, keep the area in front of the stage clear of people at all times; take the items to them using the runners, don't make them come to you or you'll have chaos. For the records person and cashier, a table off to one side of the stage is best, so people picking up and paying do not interfere with the view of the stage and hamper the ongoing auction.

And that brings us to the

Auctioneering



The auctioneer is the key to the auction process not because he does the real work but because he's the one the audience sees and identifies as the personification of the auction. This may be unfair, but it is nonetheless true, just as the person who really runs the masquerade isn't the one who gets the credit. He's far, far too busy to be on stage and calling the contestants and yet the caller gets the credit. Same here. See what I mean about a masochistic streak being necessary?



Picking an auctioneer is fairly easy--get somebody who's done a good job at past cons or at another con. And never mind his style--what was his gross? If at all possible pair the experienced person with a newcomer who shows promise. In one major auction the newcomer will either learn a lot or never do it again. Local club auctions are the best source of potential new talent. It's essential that this new talent be developed and in this manner, first because experienced folk aren't always available and second because nobody is that crazy to do it forever. A continual infusion of new blood is required in all fields. Newcomers usually start by imitating the old hand's style, particularly when they gross less per item, but soon develop a style of their own or they don't last.

Auctioneers at cons generally work for nothing. On small cons it's customary to do something if the person's given their all for you, but this can be free membership or dinner or something equally small. It's the gesture that'll get him to do it again next time, not what you do. If you're really strapped for money a sincere thanks is often good enough. Don't pay percentages, though--I am of the opinion that nobody should get paid for working a con. If he's doing it for money the fans will know and be turned off.

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If the con's particularly affluent, dinner's not a bad gesture. This is not a plea for favorites for me, but for all auctioneers and the staff as well. BUT NO AUCTIONEER SHOULD EVER VOLUNTEER IN THE EXPECTATION OF RECEIVING ANYTHING, and if that's your motive sit down and keep quiet.

But what makes a good auctioneer? I wish I knew. I have never seen nor heard myself doing this sort of thing, so I don't know what I do that's right. I have some superficialities, though, that I can list:

- (1) A good speaking voice that is clear and enunciates properly.
- (2) A personality that is at least neutral or non-abrasive; charisma, whatever that is, helps a lot but who can manufacture it?
- (3) Experience speaking before groups. There's no substitute for it.
- (4) A lack of self-consciousness. Whether it's an embarrassing mistake you make, if your pants split or your fly's open, no matter what goes wrong you must have the ability to laugh at it with the audience. The old show-biz rule goes: no matter what happens, keep going. The audience will forget it.
- (5) An enjoyment of performing. You must have a touch of ego-mania and you must be a ham. You must love being in front of that audience.
- (6) Improvisational skill. Be ready for any situation--sooner or later your wildest dreams will be realized.
- (7) The ability to maintain a firm control of your audience. Always control the action and time it properly.
- (8) Common sense. If the audience is going for those \$5.00 spot illos keep putting them up, by all means--but put a few slow items in between to keep your audience. Give the audience what it wants--but make them take a look at everything.
- (9) Showmanship. Develop a patter of funny lines, gestures, a sense of timing. Talk directly to the audience and spotlight your bidders. Note their mannerisms. Argue with them, joke with them.
- (10) Objectivity. No matter if what you're auctioning is really a piece of crap don't say so. Promote it just as you would a top quality oil by the best in the business. What's crap to you most certainly may not be to the bidders and most especially the donor.
- (11) Position. The item is the thing--always keep it before their eyes. Galley proofs are as good as oil paintings--hold the galleys high. If you're holding the item keep moving. Never stay still unless the runner is carrying the item--then keep him moving.

(12) A genuine feeling for the donors. You're there for their sake. Remember it and keep them always in mind. The audience knows what it wants.

(13) Fair play. Kid around with the audience and play up the merits of everything, but don't be a cheat. Give them an honest and complete description of the work and urge them on to bid but don't shill, don't insult the audience for not buying, etc.

(14) Energy. Treat the last item as enthusiastically as the first one no matter how rotten you feel.

In general, if you've got the personality for it, try it. The audience will tell you.

Above all, remember that you are a salesman and you are there to sell the merchandise. Forget this and you'll treat the audience to a good show but the donor to poor sales. The objective is to fairly present and sell goods at the highest possible prices. It is only important to make the audience enjoy the experience.

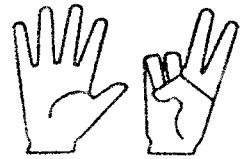
Remember, too, to keep up the pace, never have any real dead periods. Keep shoving new things and promise more. Keep that audience.

WHAT YOU SHOULD EXPECT OF THE CON COMMITTEE: That all the foregoing preparation is done (particularly if you're from outside the area--if from the same area try to participate in the set-up process as much as possible). Also, you should expect that the committee will provide the necessary hands (draft quickly if not) and INSIST that the committee keep a reasonable supply of liquid refreshment on hand or your voice will dry out. From water to beer to coffee, depending on time and disposition, insist on this at all costs.

Also expect help on the auction front. An auction that either is expected to run over 45 continuous minutes or which has more than 30 items should have two auctioneers, not only for breathing space but also because it speeds things up--the auctioneers alternate and the auctioneer who's off assists the feeder, selects items, and gets the facts on them before the auction. Also, on long auctions a second auctioneer can spell you for bathroom breaks, etc. Never break the auction--once started, go to conclusion. For marathon auctions like the Worldcon Art Show bidoffs, which run to hundreds of items and many hours, three auctioneers in rotation are a necessity--and don't forget the poor records people, cashier, and feeder, who also need breaks!

WHAT THE CON COMMITTEE SHOULD EXPECT OF YOU: That you first go over all the material with the feeder and auction chairman well in advance of the auction; that you familiarize yourself in advance with the material and the set-up, that you make certain that all items are clearly identified and marked, and that you be there on time and stay to the end. Arrive at every auction about 15 minutes ahead of schedule.

Misc. Details



Always schedule general auctions either just before, just after, or between two major program items. That keeps your audience, and nets the largest audience, too. The bigger the better.

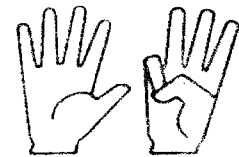
Always schedule Art Show bid-offs opposite major programming. If there's too much stuff, split the auction into two or more days (but be sure to mark with a color tag or some such which go up on what day). Art show bid-offs are usually limited in room and unlike the general auctions have a lot more items and have been on display and pre-bid. For them you want serious bidders only. On art shows, put up all material with pre-bids before you put up anything without a bid.

Pay your donors the agreed-upon split by the end of the con, sooner if possible. Keep a careful accounting record on each card. This is done by simply re-filing the PAID card stack by donor name and adding the totals then multiplying by the percentage the donor gets. If you pay out in cash get a signed receipt.

It is your responsibility to return unsold items. Do so in person if possible, or by secure and well-packed mail if not possible to return it in person.

Insist as a condition of auction that an item once donated must be put up once at the agreed upon minimum before it can be withdrawn from the auctions.

Art Shows



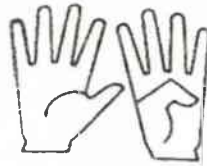
Art shows work pretty much like regular auctions except that the material is put on display for a long period before a bid-off, and the cards have been replaced by data-filled pre-bidding slips. Slips should always show Artist's Name, Title, Medium, Minimum Bid, Day of Bid-Off, and have room for the bidder to write in his bid. Leave room for at least 8 bids, more if possible.

Hangings are provided by the art show, so committees beware. As for the money split, this can be handled by a percentage split just like the regular auctions, or the NESFA method of charging a fee for the service of setting up and maintaining the room with the bid price going to the artist 100%. The second has obvious accounting and psychological advantages--but make certain the artist and the customer knows the method of sale. Is the written bid last down the final one and there's no bid-off? Or is there a bid-off and full-scale auction? I favor the latter in the interest of the artist, since it costs not a cent, but the important thing is that, either way, the customer and displayer must be informed of the bid-off method in advance. Otherwise you get misunderstanding and potential bad feeling where none should exist.

In general, MAKE CERTAIN EVERYBODY KNOWS YOUR GROUND RULES.

With all that now in mind we turn to the last but not least person on our auction component list....

The Bidder



Ever have the feeling at an auction that's so eloquently expressed in Tim Kirk's illustration on the right?

Auctions are almost hypnotic experiences, and a good auctioneer, whose duty it is to run up the price, can have you spending a lot more than you've planned.

The first rule of bidding at an auction is the same as the rule for getting into a poker

game--NEVER ENTER THE BIDDING UNTIL YOU HAVE FIRST SET A MAXIMUM LIMIT TO THE TOTAL AMOUNT OF MONEY YOU CAN AFFORD TO SPEND. And no matter how tempting that next Freas is, once you've spent the limit, quit.

The highest prices are gleaned from people with no self-control. If you haven't the will to quit, don't start.

Never make a non-serious bid--that is, a bid for the purpose of bidding up somebody else, or because it's fun to see people squirm, or for a joke. If you win you will be expected to pay for the item, and if you can't or won't you have deprived someone else of the right to buy the work. You're cheating everybody when you do, and that's the reputation you'll acquire.

Yell out your bids--don't gesture or point alone. For one thing, the auctioneer may have been calling for several different amounts--and a gesture will be interpreted as the highest amount asked, most times. Also, gestures are confusing and slow the pace, since while you might gesture OK somebody else might scratch his nose and wind up outbidding you to the auctioneer's eye.

If you've got a very limited amount of money and there's more than one other bidding against you, it's probably not worth it and you might find yourself quickly bid over your limit.

Bid confidently and in a determined voice. Hesitation encourages the other bidder.

Jump the bid a high amount early in the game (i.e. if units are \$1.00, jump it \$5 or \$10 if you really want it) to scare out the opposition. They may chicken out while if it's going up only a buck at a time they might stay in longer. Never give a massive jump late in the game--if the opposition's bid \$200 in \$5 units a jump to \$225 will have little psychological effect and may cost you money.

No matter how good it would look on the wall never bid more than



you honestly think it's worth. You'll hate yourself later.

Don't bid on the auctioneer's performance or to impress him. He is there to sell and will take advantage of this. A case in point is Harlan Ellison's auctions, where people often bid to astronomical prices. Later they find that they haven't even got that much money and the whole auction has to be revised. An auctioneer will hypnotize you if you let him and he's good. Both Harlan and I have this knack, tho from far different roots I suspect, but we'll expect you to pay up.

Pay cash where possible. It's a good self-limiter.

If you don't have cash or check for the money, don't bid it. No charge accounts, you know, and asking for credit's unfair to the committee, the donor, and the folks bidding against you.

Show up at early morning auctions and last-day auctions. There's usually less people and therefore things go cheaper. On the last day some starving donors lower their minimums on unsold work.

Attend small cons with an object to buy--you'll get it much cheaper and easier than at a worldcon about half the time. Less competition, less money in the audience.

If a painting or other object has a high minimum you can afford but can't afford to top wait until the auctioneer has almost retired it as unsold, then bid at the last second. Chances are you'll get it at the minimum.

If you're unsure of how the bidding will go and there's a lot of competition, hang back until the spirited bidding bogs down--then start bidding if the price is still within range. Auctioneers love to play bidders off against each other, and for the bidder that's a sucker game.

If you're going to bid on a large number of items set up a tab in advance with the records person. This way you write one check for all the purchases. But if a tab's established make sure you know the exact amount you've already spent!

And that, friends, is that. Maybe I missed a lot of information and good arguments, but if you say I did and point them out you probably wouldn't have if I hadn't written this anyway. Maybe if this goes over well and is considered some contribution to con running I'll do one on masquerades--but not until after the Discon, where I have to run the masquerade and the auction. In the meantime, I've given you some of the arguments and the tricks, and the next time I see you all it will probably be at an auction, where I'll try all my usual tricks and we'll have fun selling stuff. It sure beats the huckster room....

...Jack L. Chalker
January 25, 1974

