

Two worlds collide

Exceptional paintings by **Claude Monet** and **Mark Rothko**, bringing together the old world with the modern age are the highlights of this May's art auctions at Christie's in New York. Christopher Kanal was granted a sneak preview.

Christie's is auctioning one of the greatest Impressionist pictures left in private hands, Claude Monet's (1840–1926) *Le Pont du chemin de fer à Argenteuil*. Painted in 1873, it is a luminous masterpiece of high impressionist style and a hugely significant work in Monet's oeuvre. The work will be sold during Christie's New York impressionist and modern art evening sale on 6 May and could break the world auction record for the most well-known and sought-after impressionist painter.

'This is the truly exceptional impressionist picture the market has been waiting for,' says Guy Bennett, head of impressionist and modern art, Christie's Americas. 'Appearing at auction for the first time in a generation, its sale will be a great moment for the market.'

Argenteuil was a picturesque suburban town just outside Paris and its surroundings provided this central motif for Impressionism. In the early 1870s, Monet, Renoir and Sisley all painted in the town, giving rise to its status as the locus classicus of impressionism. At that time, it had become a centre for pleasure-boating by the affluent

Parisian middle classes, and the sailing boats in the picture allude to this new status. Monet rented a house in the town, close to where this picture was painted. The painting is full of the novelty and drama of Monet's fascination with modernity and art.

A fine contrast is provided by Christie's auction of another defining work of art, Mark Rothko's (1903–1970) *No. 15*, painted in 1952. This abstract expressionist work will go on sale on May 13 together with two others from the same private collector, Sam Francis's (1923–1994) *Black* (1955) and Adolph Gottlieb's (1903–1974) *Untitled* (1960). 'This is an extraordinary grouping of abstract expressionist work, in which each painting is of the highest museum quality and has the potential to achieve record prices at auction,' says Brett Gorvy, international specialist and co-head of Christie's post-war and contemporary art sales.

With its scale and glorious red and yellow colours, Rothko's *No. 15* demonstrates extraordinary power and monumentality. There are few better examples of his signature style. *No. 15* has the potential to set a new world record, as it did when previously sold at auction in 1999. ■

Mark Rothko. *No. 15*, 1952. Estimate on request – in the region of \$40 million