

Don't miss

● The collecting page will return next month

Inspired by bullfights, obscured by youth

FINANCIAL TIMES, AUGUST 2-3, 2003

With his famous fans, Roger de Montebello is a painter we ought to have heard more of.

Teresa Levonian Cole profiles a young talent

Type the name Roger de Montebello into Google and what do you get? References to obscure champagne houses, Parisian boulevards and the odd Vietnamese dog-handlers' association.

But nothing that would link the man to his galleries in Paris, (Artemis) and New York (WM Brady & Co) or Bernard Chauchet, his agent in London. Nothing about his solo exhibitions in New York (1993 and 1999), Venice (1995) and Paris (2002), or his group shows. Nothing about renowned art historian, member of the Académie Française, and fan, Ren Huyghe. And nothing about the fact that Michael Palin – he of *Monty Python* fame – in his recent BBC documen-

tary, *Michael Palin and the Ladies who loved Matisse*, earmarked Montebello as a talent to be collected.

So what's up? If he's that good, how come we haven't heard of him? Blame youth

Having a family ennobled by Napoleon is enough to overshadow any fledgling artist

(Montebello was born in 1964) and a family, ennobled by Napoleon for military services rendered, that is col-

lected in computerised systems, abandoned the costly experiment of selling over the internet and they have mostly stopped trading in peripheral markets. If they haven't modernised, they are handling those markets differently.

Sotheby's, for example, no longer sells classic cars or coins and stamps, but has instead invested in autonomous operations set up by its former specialists

first time that works by contemporary artists had exceeded in value those of the Impressionists, which had managed only \$60m a week earlier.

London cannot quite match this, but does well selling European contemporary artists. At Sotheby's a record £1.37m was paid for work by Lucio Fontana, famous for slashing his canvases, while among British artists Jenny Saville, painter of

such as John Martin and Landseer when selling the celebrated collection of Victorian art assembled by the Forbes family in February, but the total of £17m was slightly disappointing. There are just a handful of big money buyers in this field. The pattern is the same across the art market: there is strong demand for rare masterworks, but little interest in the mediocre. This is particularly true of

pictures was unsold. Outside of paintings, some other traditionally popular areas are struggling. In furniture, the very best 18th century objects attract exceptional prices, but silver and ceramics have limited appeal despite oriental works of art going down a storm in Hong Kong, where Chinese collectors are fuelling demand.

The main problem for the auction



'There is nothing sentimental or picturesque. This daub of brown is the bull, that dab of red is the picador's banderilla'

work looks anything like Pollock's. Although Roger settled in Venice in 1992, and has a studio that overlooks the Grand Canal, his paintings are almost all executed *en plein air* and, in the manner of watercolourists, com-

pleted in one session with no touching-up in the studio. Oil on small panel (usually 16 x 22cm) is his medium of choice, with form, light and ambience conveyed with extreme economy of means.

Venice has provided a rich

source of inspiration, giving rise to various series: buildings in the Zattere, Arsenale or San Marco; the cypresses of San Michele; the eagle of Burano. Sometimes buildings become abstractions, or are given the merest sugges-

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in its hunt for glamorous properties. Sotheby's already has two auctions set that should attract considerable publicity: in September Sir Elton John is having another clear-out, and in October it's the turn of the costume gallery at Castle Howard. The days when auction houses mainly attracted dealers to specialist sales in Old Master drawings and rugs is over; now they are aiming to be part of the entertainment industry.

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Roger de Montebello's grandfather - also called Roger - was a portrait painter, art critic and inventor who, with his wife, experimented with the early development of 3-D photography. She, for her part, was a descendant of the Marquis de Sade, and granddaughter of the woman who inspired Proust's Comtesse de Guermantes in *A la recherche du temps perdu*.

Roger's uncle - the first Roger's son - is Philippe de Montebello, the *éminence grise* of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, a man of fearsome reputation, often criticised for his hostility to modern art. Still, it was Philippe who introduced his young nephew to the painting of Jackson Pollock and got him hooked on art.

Not that Montebello's



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source of inspiration, giving rise to various series: buildings in the Zattere, Arsenale or San Marco; the cypresses of San Michele; the eagle of Burano. Sometimes buildings become abstractions, or are given the merest sugges-

tion of form suffused in mist; at other times, the subject is depicted with alienating clarity, in a manner reminiscent of De Chirico. Much is made of reflection and the ever-changing effect of light on sky and water.

Another subject is the Spanish bull-fighting circuit (Montebello spends his summers in Spain). The *corrida* scenes are painted in real time, the pressures of *plein air* painting adding to the drama of the scene. There is nothing sentimental or picturesque; even less of brutality. This daub of brown is the bull. That dab of red is the picador's *banderilla*. Imagination fills the gaps.

Plans are under way for a one-man show to be held in

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London in November. So far the highest price achieved for a Montebello work has been \$12,000 in New York in 1999 for one of the Venetian oils, but in general, he's a steal at \$750 for a small painting. Palin has already bought three.

For further information, telephone Bernard Chauchet on 07711-436868