

black artists and elite taste culture

by patricia a. banks

In spring 2017, Sotheby's auction house held the exhibition preview for one of the biggest events of the season—the evening sale of contemporary art in New York. As I walked through one of the

galleries in their York Avenue headquarters, I encountered a painting that would make history in the coming days. Hanging in a cavernous room on a wall by itself was "Untitled" by the painter critics had called "the Black Picasso," Jean-Michel Basquiat (see below). Featuring a large

skull rendered in Basquiat's signature neo-expressionist style, "Untitled" was

a focal point amid the work of the "who's who" of the contemporary art market. After "Untitled" sold for a record-breaking \$110,487,500, it was highlighted in news stories across the globe. While "Untitled" was exceptional for its price, its presence at the auction was not out of the ordinary. That same week, ten other Basquiat works were offered in the evening sales of Sotheby's and its longtime rival Christie's, part of a broader trend of Black inclusion in the

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"Untitled," Jean-Michel Basquiat.

contemporary art market.

The growing presence of art by Black artists in contemporary auctions supports sociologists' claims that elites have become cultural omnivores. The omnivore perspective asserts a historical shift in elites' cultural repertoires, such that instead of prizing exclusivity they come to value inclusivity and eclecticism. One mark of this cosmopolitanism is the championing of cultural products associated with racial and ethnic minorities.

To gain insight on the historical evolution of elite taste, I analyzed archived auction catalogs from Sotheby's New York and Christie's New York. Starting with Christie's, I analyzed their contemporary May and November evening sales, from their 1970s inception through May 2018. Because it is a leading auction house and site of consumption for wealthy art buyers, Christie's sale offerings provide important insight into elite taste culture. The evening auctions, where the most expensive art is sold, are especially revealing of upper-middle and upper-class cultural preferences.

In the first few years of the sales, I found only one work by a Black artist—a collage by Romare Bearden. A work by Basquiat appeared in 1984, but works by Black artists generally picked up in pace in the 1990s. By the 2000s, works by a wider range of Black artists, such as Glenn Ligon, Kara Walker, Mark Bradford, Kerry James Marshall, Julie Mehretu, and Wangechi Mutu, were introduced (see works at right). Mutu's collage, "Shake a Tail Feather," offered in 2011, was the first work by an African-born Black artist in the sales.

Christie's sales history points toward racial diversification in elite taste culture, yet it also suggests that gender diversification has not unfolded evenly. As a whole, Black artists are now more present



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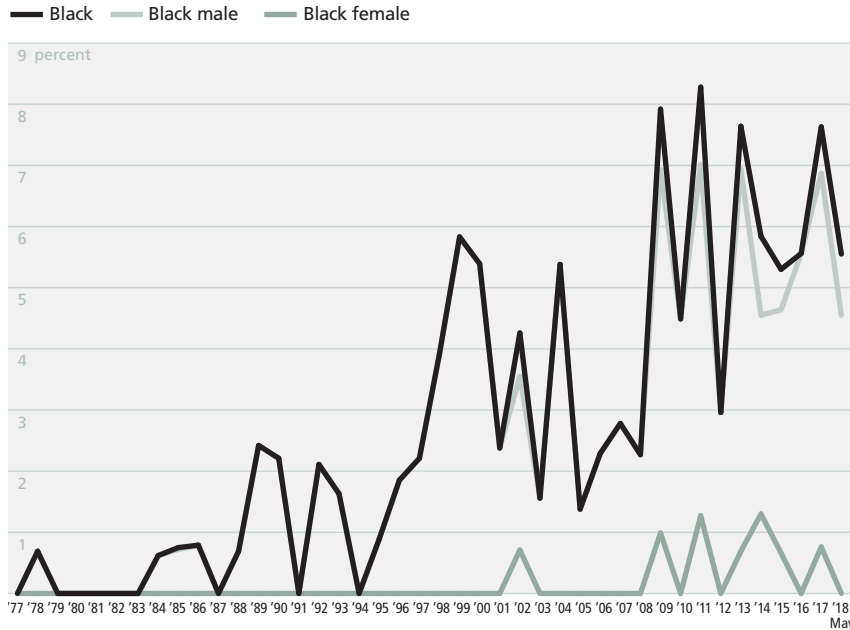
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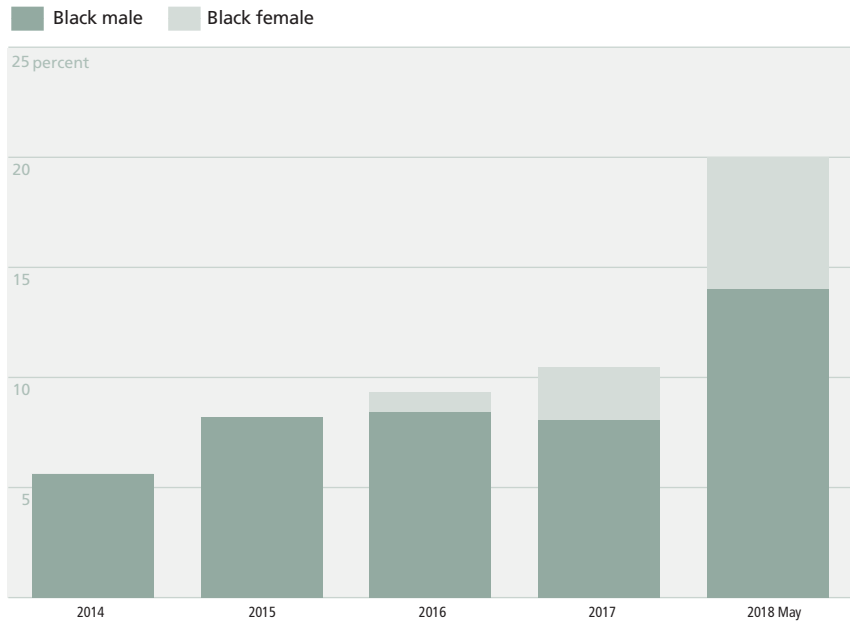
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A wider range of Black artists came to be featured in Christie's auctions by the early 2000s.

Work by Black, Black male, and Black female artists in the Christie's New York May-November evening sales, 1977-2018



Work by Black, Black male, and Black female artists in the Sotheby's New York May-November evening sales, 2014-2018



in the sales, however Black women's incorporation has trailed Black men's (at left, top). For instance, works by Black men entered the sales in the 1970s, and work by Black women debuted in the 21st century. The majority of works by Black artists in the sales are created by men.

To gain further insight into the integration of Black artists into elite taste culture, I analyzed auction catalogs to reconstruct the history of Sotheby's New York contemporary evening auctions from 2014 to 2018. As I had seen in the Christie's catalogs, Black men's works were consistently present in these sales over this period (at left, bottom). Additionally, Sotheby's auctions paralleled Christie's in that works by Black men artists, such as Basquiat and David Hammons, were more present than those of Black women artists, such as Lynette Yiadom-Boakye and Mutu (see p. 65).

The gendered trends revealed in my review line up neatly with developments in omnivore theory asserting that there are boundaries to upper-middle and upper-class omnivorousness. In particular, lower status groups, such as Black women, have been relatively less integrated into elite taste culture. So, while the cultural preferences of elites may have become more inclusive, they are not indiscriminate. From research on musical tastes to food preferences, sociologists who study omnivores find that inclusiveness does not mean total cultural openness. For example, in her survey research on musical tastes, Bethany Bryson finds that while education is associated with decreased musical exclusiveness, tolerant respondents are most likely to reject music associated with the least educated audiences. For instance, they are more likely to reject rap music than jazz music. Bryson describes the uneven configuration of cultural openness as a form of

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As at Christie's, Sotheby's auctions featured Black men's works more prominently than Black women's.

“patterned tolerance.”

While the incorporation of work by Black artists in the sales at Sotheby's and Christie's is unevenly spread across gender, it is still notable that the sales as a whole now incorporate more Black artists. What explains the increase over

time? One answer might lie in a shift in the efforts of art world professionals to legitimate Black artists. To help explain a historical shift from snobbish exclusion to omnivorous inclusion, Richard A. Peterson and Roger M. Kern point to developments in the art world. Tastemakers in the

first part of the 19th century advocated for a restrictive and universal standard of taste, a uniform aesthetic hierarchy that was being undermined by the second half of the 20th century, as cultural leaders advocated for an ever-more diverse range of artists and styles. Over the course of the late 20th and into the 21st century, the reputations of Black artists shifted with aesthetic entrepreneurs turning their attention—and legitimation—to their work. Through the efforts of curators and art historians in growing fields such as African American art and contemporary African art, the symbolic value of Black artists' work has increased. The uneven incorporation of Black women artists relative to Black men into this more diversified elite taste culture may be partly attributable to continued gender imbalances in the allocation of symbolic capital among art world professionals and Black artists.

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