

EXTRAVAGANZA

🕒 Tireless Omega collectors enjoyed long-overdue vindication at Antiquorum's 'Omegamania' theme sale in April - three times over in fact, as estimate upon estimate was blown out of the water, sending the sale total rocketing to a mighty SFr.6.5m. Omega, it seems, has finally arrived. *QP's* resident Omegamaniac **Ken Kessler** enjoyed all the fun of the fair beneath the big screen at Baselworld, where a live broadcast from Geneva's Hotel du Rhône enraptured watch fans for two days.

Maybe it was a foregone conclusion. Some of us, at least, had no doubt that Antiquorum's Omegamania auction in Geneva on 14th-15th April would be a smash hit. After all, hadn't Omega been waiting in the wings for far too long? By joining the ranks of watch houses honoured in the past by Antiquorum's single-brand auctions, Omega has reached critical mass for collectors. As Antiquorum's Founder and Chairman, Osvaldo Patrizzi, observed: "Omegamania has confirmed the arrival of Omega in the top echelon of collectors' brands. Omega's most collectable timepieces now join Patek Philippe and Rolex".

You didn't have to tell that to the legions of Omega fans, who, having fought the rear-guard for years, supporting the brand in the world of online blogs, were finally able to demonstrate emphatically the marque's value through their bids. For any cynics who considered, even for a moment, that a one-make auction devoted to Omega was forcing the issue, the results speak for themselves: the 300 lots commanded an eye-opening SFr.6,536,911 - more than three times the pre-sale estimate.

Whatever manoeuvring it took to secure the services of Antiquorum for a themed auction - an occasion that bestows instant credibility and places the subject in a select group alongside the likes of Breguet, Patek Philippe, Vacheron Constantin and Rolex - Omega must be overjoyed with the end result. Omegamania has been the

slickest and most impressive single-marque auction since Antiquorum's all-Breguet event held 16 years earlier to the day, and it generated as much chatter as the recent sale of the mouth-watering, world-class Mondani Rolex collection. Almost overnight, one vintage watch dealer suggested to me, vintage Omega values skyrocketed by as much as a third. And I'm not shedding one tear for those who sniffily overlooked Omegas in the past.

It was a dream event, with tension built up over the preceding year. Exactly 300 lots, a breathtaking catalogue of 608 pages (soon to be a collector's item in its own right, despite a massive print-run of 75,000), plenty of pre-auction publicity including TV spots on CNN, a two-month 'world tour' of the watches themselves and reams of online publicity would have been enough to ensure a high level of interest. But throw in live participation at Omega's stand at the Baselworld watch fair, supported by huge screens delivering live action to the crowds, lots including two super-rare Omega tourbillons from the 1940s, a Speedmaster from the Mir space station and a watch worn in a James Bond movie, and you have an extravaganza rather than an auction.

Oh, and one other world-first at Omegamania will forever raise the bar on single-make auctions (Rolex, take note): every lot was refurbished by Omega and was accompanied by a certificate of authenticity *and* a two-year guarantee. Just





about the only thing missing from proceedings was Swatch CEO Nicholas Hayek pole-dancing on the podium. But I'll bet he was dancing after the event.

Highlights

Antiquorum held the auction over two days in Geneva, broadcasting it simultaneously to Baselworld - in itself a first - while adding another by accepting bids via a satellite link for the first time ever at a public auction. In addition to audiences in both Geneva and Basel, 48,500 people followed the auction online, the latter accounting for one third of the sales. This writer observed the action in front of the Omega stand,

cheering along with the crowd as estimate after estimate was shattered.

Highlights, of which there were plenty, included, as expected, the highest price ever paid for any Omega watch at auction. A platinum Constellation Grand Luxe dating from 1953 went to the Omega Museum (a busy bidder, by all accounts) for SFr.413,700, holding fast against fierce competition from Italy and Japan. A brace of original Speedmasters were also sold for 30 times more than the current retail price. Slightly kinky was the sale of the ring watch once owned by the original 'Bond girl', Ursula Andress, who, readers will recall, is Swiss - which

may or may not have affected the bidding. The ring watch, designed by Andrew Grima in 1972, went to a bidder at Baselworld for SFr.261,750.

As far as showbiz, if not horological worth is concerned, Antiquorum saved the most exciting and/or controversial piece for last. Lot 300 was the Seamaster Planet Ocean worn by the silver-screen's new 007, sold in the same condition as it was after Daniel Craig finished his action scenes for the intense 'free running' opening sequence of *Casino Royale*. The watch was acquired by a clearly obsessive UK buyer who, wisely, would not disclose his name. He instantly joined

A Top seller at Omegamania, finally hammering at an unprecedented SFr.413,700 was lot 170, a platinum Constellation 'Grand Luxe' from 1958. Originally launched in 1953, two other examples of the Grand Luxe, in pink-gold and yellow-gold formed lots 171 and 172. **B** Worn by Daniel Craig during the filming of *Casino Royale* in 2005/2006, lot 300 came complete with caked-on mud, Craig's dried sweat and, curiously, a three-year guarantee. Even more curious is why anyone would spend SFr.250,250 for it. **C** Osvaldo Patrizzi, Founder and Chairman of Antiquorum auctioneers, poses with Omega President Stephen Urquhart after the 300th lot was sold - both understandably exuberant. **D** Tenth best seller of Omegamania and highest-fetching Speedmaster of the sale was lot 200, 'Broad Arrow', originally sold on 2nd July, 1959. Estimated at SFr.25,000-30,000 but hammering at a massive SFr.106,200, this piece is an example of 1957's ref. CK 2915-2 - the first-generation Speedmaster. In designing it, Omega sought to create a robust, accurate and easy-to-read chronograph. Waterproof to 60 metres, with a shock-resistant and anti-magnetic movement, the most brilliant feature was placing the timing scale on the bezel itself, making the dial more legible - an idea later copied by the majority of watch manufacturers. **E** Lot 109, the 'Gold Observatory Tourbillon', contains the sixth of 12 movements made in 1947 for observatory precision testing in Kew, Geneva and Neuchâtel. It scored 812 points at the 1950 Geneva Observatory trial and was the 10th highest-scoring watch of the 38 in the class. Seven of the 12 movements were overhauled, finely finished and cased-up in 1987, and this example fetched SFr.256,000 - fifth highest of the sale. **F** No. 4 of Omegamania's top 10 lots, Ursula Andress' 'ring watch', originally sold in 1972. In diamond, platinum, and tourmaline by Andrew Grima.





G The apple of the author's eye, lot 91 - an aviator's watch in Staybrite steel, originally sold in 1938. This model was recently the subject of Omega's first 'Museum' replica, ref. 5700.50.07.

H Lot 33, consigned by a *QP* reader no less! An extremely rare left-handed Omega from 1905, which sold for SFr.6,844 - over SFr.2,000 beyond its high estimate.

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the ranks of scary, well-heeled anoraks, alongside the recent purchaser of one £58,000 Superman costume. When the dust settled, the watch achieved the eye-watering price of SFr.250,250, or over £100,000 - what many would agree is a lot of money for a current-production watch worth a couple of grand, which happens to be caked in mud.

And the watch I wanted above all others? Lot 91, a 1938 aviator's watch and inspiration for the first model released in Omega's 'Museum' series. It was estimated at SFr.8,000-12,000; the hammer came down at SFr.30,680. Along with my dreams of ever owning one.

Told you so

Stephen Urquhart, President of Omega (who was also dancing a little jig with Hayek and Patrizzi, no doubt) was all smiles after the last lot was sold. “We are extremely happy at the outcome of the auction, which exceeded all our expectations. It has shown all watch fans the fantastic richness and scope of the brand and its heritage. Today's auction will remain as a

milestone in Omega's history.” However, it was another quote that summed up the long-term benefit to Omega, which must have had Omegamaniacs the world over shouting, “I told you so!” at humbled Rolephiles. French journalist Vincent Ferniot remarked: “Omega collectors like me always felt a little discredited by other watch brand collectors. We knew that the prices of our vintage Omega watches were underestimated. From now on we might even be envied.”

But while the question of Omega's validity at auction has finally been answered, we have to wonder whether the values achieved will have the persistence consistently demonstrated in the saleroom by vintage Patek and Rolex. *QP* will certainly be following the impact of Omegamania over the course of the forthcoming spring sales and beyond, to see how prices settle within the greater scheme of things.

But for now, this scribbler certainly isn't complaining: I own seven vintage Omegas, including a sought-after '53 military watch. It looks like my son will go to college after all. ◯