



Push the pedal to the metal

Exquisite and ancient works in steel, bronze and iron make a noise at BRAFA and a serene Constable landscape is a classic sleeper

METAL furniture might put one in mind of pubs, gardens and offices, but metals have been used for the best domestic pieces for as long as wood and stone. Some of the most interesting came from Tula, a city to the south of Moscow, where Peter the Great set up Russia's first armaments factory. It became Europe's greatest ironworking centre, and weapons remained, and remain, a principal product. Obviously, the demand for weapons fluctuates, and during peaceful intervals in the 18th century, the armourers turned their skills to making *samovars* and elaborately decorated steel furniture. This was often inlaid with copper and embellished with faceted steel studs, polished to resemble diamonds.

Catherine the Great was a patron, but her son, Paul I, who loathed her, dropped his support. On his assassination in 1801, furniture production resumed, but because of the Napoleonic Wars, only military production was allowed—except for small items such as scissors or fire-irons—from 1808 to 1824.

Fig 1: Tula steel sewing box with bird finial. \$8,750 (£5,782)



Fig 2: Graeco-Roman bronze table. With Phoenix Ancient Art

A particularly fine table, of about 1780–85, illustrating 'nearly all the techniques practiced by the Tula craftsmen', can be found on the website of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, but the most interesting example I can find on the recent market is a Tula steel sewing box sold at Sotheby's, New York, in 2013 for \$8,750 (£5,782, **Fig 1**). The bird-like finial is, in fact, a spring mechanism to hold thread, very much an armourer's device.

On my visit to BRAFA last month, I did not notice any Tula pieces, but I was excited to encounter two very much older examples of metal furniture. The first, with Phoenix Ancient Art of Geneva, was a Graeco-Roman table, the top measuring 32in by 20½in. It was in bronze, inlaid with silver and niello, and



Fig 3: Lombardic 6th- or 7th-century iron X-stool inlaid with copper. With De Backker

it dated from the beginning of the Christian era (Fig 2).

The Romans made stone tables and chairs and, presumably, used a great deal of wood that has not survived, but this bronze piece is an extraordinary rarity. It is the ancestor of so much later European furniture, with the

lion heads, scrolls and paw feet. One of the legs had been cracked and buckled slightly, but it is in wonderful condition for its great age, and everything about it justified the price of €1,750,000.

A few stands away at the Brussels fair was De Backker, a business largely specialising in medieval sculpture and works of art. Having just seen the table, my eye was naturally caught by another piece of metal furniture, this time in iron inlaid with copper. The 17in-high folding X-stool dated from the 6th or 7th century AD and was Lombardic, but undoubtedly a close relative of the Roman piece. Here, the price was €28,000—which seemed remarkably reasonable (**Fig 3**).

The Germanic Lombards wrestled for control of Italy with the Ostrogoths and Byzantines after the disappearance of the Western Roman Empire and, until the 11th-century Norman invasion, were powerful in the south as well as what is now thought of as Lombardy. The connection of Lombard to banking came about because the first Christian system of usury originated in northern Italy, before spreading across Europe to leave Lombard Streets in most capitals. It was, in fact, a pawn business and—forgive me if you have read this here before—the lumber room in old-fashioned houses derives from the Lombards' pledge stores.

In New York, the year began with Master paintings and drawings. There were exhibitions aplenty as well as a number of auctions that should put heart into the trade. The appeal of the apposite is such that I must quote Christopher Apostle, head of Sotheby's Old Master Paintings: 'With \$2.9 million

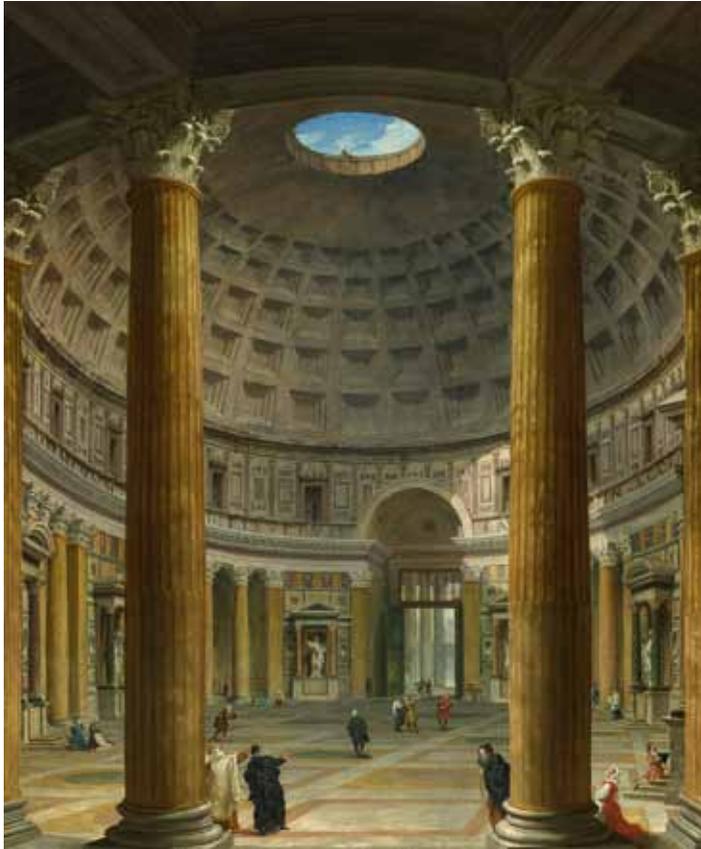


Fig 4: **The Pantheon in Rome by Panini. \$5,317,000 (£3,501,790)**

[\$1.9 million] for the earliest work in the sale, a small gold ground of the Crucifixion from circa 1285, \$5.2 million [£3.4 million] and \$2.7 million [£1.8 million] for rediscoveries by Constable and El Greco respectively, and record prices for Old Masters across the category.'

There was strong private bidding in this sale, successfully taking most of the top lots. The three most expensive paintings could, indeed, as Mr Apostle indicated, be placed in different categories, but they were linked by being very traditional English tastes. Marginally most expensive, at \$5,429,000 (£3,575,521) was the 18 $\frac{1}{2}$ in by 25 $\frac{1}{2}$ in *Dutch Harbour* in a *Calm with small vessels inshore and beached among fishermen* by the elder Willem Van de Velde (Fig 5). This was a *penschilderij*, or 'pen painting', the technique of drawing in ink onto a prepared panel, which Van de Velde preferred to full colour painting. Tellingly, he described

himself as a *Scheepsteickenaer*, a 'ship's draughtsman', rather than a painter.

Next, at \$5,317,000 (£3,501,790) was a perfect early Grand Tourist painting, Giovanni Paolo Panini's 46 $\frac{7}{8}$ in by 38 $\frac{3}{4}$ in *Rome, the Pantheon, a view of the interior towards the Piazza della Rotonda*, dated 1732. It is the first of a number of Pantheon interiors that he painted, all of them enlivened by convincing figures. Here a nice touch is the tiny man atop the dome, looking down through the oculus (Fig 4).

The \$5,205,000 (£3,429,260) paid for the 18in by 24in Constable oil sketch for the 1831 *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* has, no doubt, had scores of lawyers calculating their potential fees (Fig 6). In 2013, it was offered by Christie's from the estate of Viscountess Hambleden. It was catalogued as by a follower and estimated to £800, and the company was probably both gratified and a little uncomfortable when it sold for £3,500.

However, according to Anne Lyles, one of the serious experts 'let go' by Tate Britain in a moment



Fig 5 above: **Van de Velde's Dutch Harbour. \$5,429,000 (£3,575,521).**
Fig 6 below: **Salisbury sketch by Constable. \$5,205,000 (£3,429,260)**



of lunacy, it is undoubtedly by Constable. In Sotheby's catalogue, she wrote that 'the present work by Constable was heavily retouched with dark and opaque pigments, which probably dated to the late 19th or early 20th century, in a misguided attempt to "finish" the painting'. Luckily, the retouchings proved readily soluble in its recent cleaning.

Next week East does sometimes meet West

Pick of the week

Sotheby's New York also offered sculpture and took \$2,853,000 (£1,878,607) for a 25in-high terracotta of a *Bacchante with grapes carried by two Bacchantes and a Bacchant*, dated 1800, by Claude Michel, known as Clodion. It might be seen as a last burst of 18th-century joy before the descent of the heavy hand of Napoleonic neo-Classicism.

