

# May Matthews is hooked on auctions

May Matthews became hooked on auctions at the age of ten when she won a bidding battle for a Victorian Shove Ha'penny board for the grand sum of £12. Now her own sales include artworks and other valuable objects from Scotland and around the world changing hands for millions of pounds.

Recently appointed Managing Director of Bonhams Scotland, the art specialist has recently masterminded the auction house's move to a new Scottish headquarters and saleroom in Edinburgh.

The official opening, at the end of this month, will be marked with a "Best of Bonhams" exhibition drawing highlights from forthcoming sales, ranging from a 1906 oil painting by the French impressionist Pierre-Auguste Renoir valued at £200,000-300,000 to one of the late James Bond star Sir Roger Moore's classic dinner suits, estimated to make £1,000-1,500.

May's own fascination with auctions began on a childhood holiday in the Lake District, when her father took her to a farmers' market auction and let her pick something to bid on.

As the only child bidding in the room, she caused quite a stir and, after a hard-fought bidding war, successfully walked off with her prized Shove Ha'penny board. From that moment on, May

says she was hooked.

From joining Bonhams in 2003 as a part time member of viewing staff, progressing to her first full-time job as a receptionist, to being appointed Managing Director and Head of Scottish Art last year, May has done almost every task there is in an auction house.

She said: "I was in the right place at the right time. In reception you get asked every question imaginable and so I learned very quickly.

"I was offered a job as a trainee in the pictures department and it went from there to cataloguer, then specialist. Now whatever I am asking someone in my team to do, I've been there and I've done it myself.

"I've enjoyed working in every role, right up to Managing Director. Hands-on experience can only be of benefit."

May, whose mother's family are from Aberdeen, grew up in the fishing town of Shoreham-by-Sea on the south coast of England.

Her family were members of the Sompting Village Morris dancers, and May developed a love of history, art and culture as a child while dancing at castles and summer fetes.

She said: "I grew up with an interest in arts and culture and a love of history. When I was ten my family went on holiday to the Lake District.

"We were probably planning on walking but it was wet and miserable so we went to a local town and stumbled upon a farmer's auction.

"I loved the thrill of rummaging for treasure and when my dad said I could pick something to bid on I chose a Shove Ha'penny board.

"We had a holiday cottage next to a pub and to my knowledge my

Shove Ha'penny board is still hanging up in the pub. I even made a label, 'May Matthews Antiques, age ten'."

May, 41, studied Archaeology at Edinburgh University before joining Bonhams. In 20 years with the auction house she has been part of a team that has sold art and other objects for many millions of pounds.

Among the first artworks she sold as part of Bonhams' picture department was one of the earliest known depictions of a game of football, painted by the East Lothian artist, Alexander Carse (1770-1843), which made £266,250 at Bonhams' Scottish Sale in August 2006.

More recently, in 2021, she sold two stunning still life paintings by the Scottish colourist S.J. Peploe on behalf of Amnesty International for a combined £300,500.

She has also been in the room for the sales of an array of fascinating objects, some for world record sums.



### The Macallan Valerio Adami 1926

In 2018, Bonhams sold a rare bottle of The Macallan Valerio Adami 1926 60-year-old, described as “the Holy Grail of whisky” for a staggering £848,750, which was at the time the highest sum ever paid for a bottle of whisky at public auction.

In 2021, hundreds of treasures and curiosities from Dunrobin Castle near Golspie, went under the hammer at Bonhams in Edinburgh under instruction from the 25th Earl of Sutherland. The extraordinary attic sale from the “most magnificent building in the north of Scotland”, fetched nearly £750,000.



May said: "On auction day, I love to do telephone bidding. You get the intimacy of somebody deciding 'do I want to bid one more?' Do they want to go another £10,000 or whatever it might be?

"Acting on their behalf, putting your hand in the air, that rapport you have with the auctioneer, is an exciting, thrilling experience.

"Why does anyone work in auctions? It's a combination of the specialism area you are interested in and the drama – the saleroom is a theatre.

"You also have the vendors and when they have a good outcome you can see what it means to them and to their family. I feel honoured to be a part of that."



May Matthews at Bonhams – Scottish Art Sale, Bonhams Auction House, Edinburgh, 13th Oct 2022 © 2022 J.L. Preece

May wants to make auctions accessible to everyone, not just to those with the deepest pockets. The new headquarters and saleroom, a five-storey double-fronted townhouse in Melville Crescent, in the heart of Edinburgh's West End, includes a new exhibition space.

The debut show, "Best of Bonhams", will spotlight some of the most remarkable pieces from across the globe that will be offered by the international auction house. May hopes the exhibition will draw hundreds of people just to see the objects before they are sold.

Meanwhile, the first auction to be held in the new saleroom will be the Scottish and Celtic Sale on 14 September, featuring lots ranging from a Highlander's silver mounted dress set comprising a dirk, skean dhu and plaid brooch, belt buckle and sporran from 1911 (estimated to fetch £5,000-7,000) to a Jacobite wine glass engraved with rose and thistle blooms

(£3,000-4,000) dating back to around 1750 when it was used to honour Bonnie Prince Charlie, and a 19th century Secretary of State red leather dispatch box (£300-500).

May said: "This is an exceptionally exciting time for Bonhams Scotland. Our new saleroom is a step-up in our ambitions to expand the opportunities for Scottish clients to offer their art and collectables to the world.

"Combined with our new sales calendar, and a dynamic programme of exhibitions, we will be providing an unbeatable platform for Scotland."

She added: "I want to make sure there is always something on view for people to look at – highlights from our own sales or exhibiting highlights from the teams in London and further afield such as New York and Hong Kong.

"I can't wait to welcome people in."





Bonhams Edinburgh Managing Director May Matthews at the new premises on Melville Crescent PHOTO ©2023 The Edinburgh Reporter



