

art market

Armstrong's jewel recovered

■ Exhibitions and auctions suggest an artist on the up



Alex Capon
reports

"IT was shortly after the war that this artist of such varied talent painted several works which showed his greatest originality."

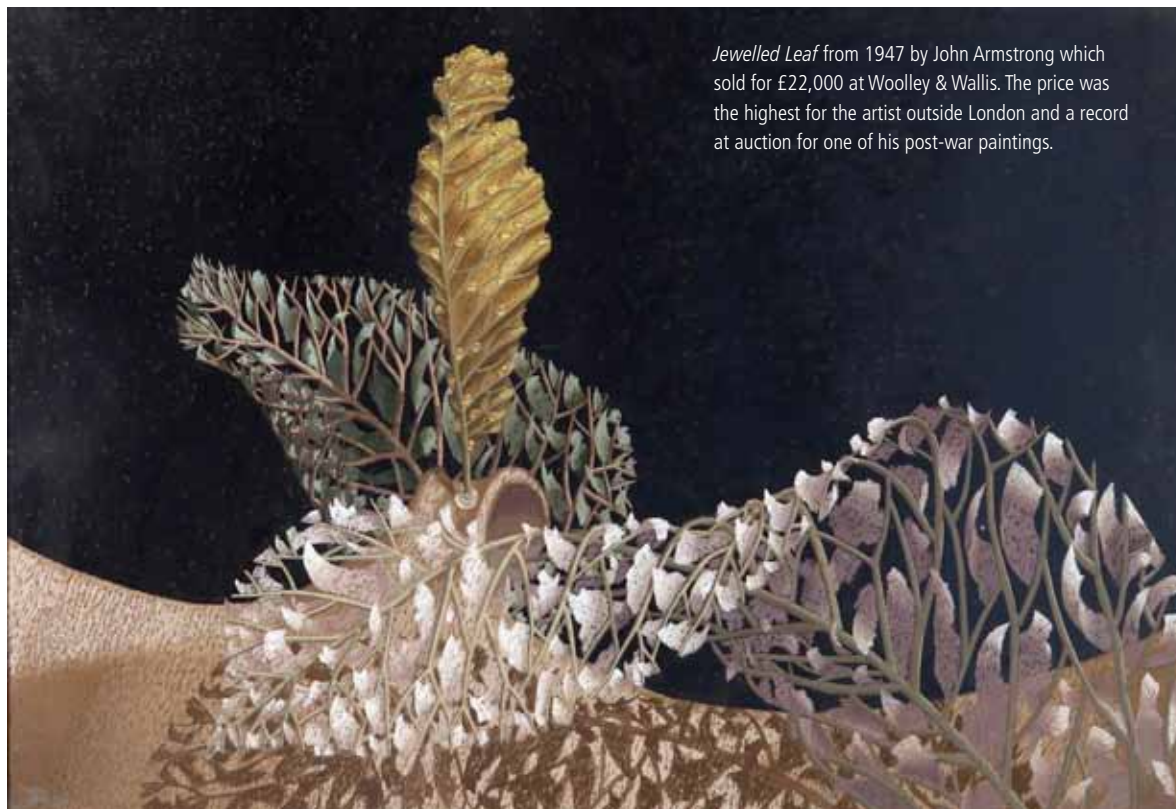
The above quote comes from John Rothenstein's second volume of *Modern English Painters* (1984) where he references five paintings by **John Armstrong (1893-1973)** dating from the mid to late 1940s.

Despite the sophistication of these "strange forms" with a "haunting aura", he notes the artist "has never received the recognition due for these highly original works".

Armstrong was already a young artist of some note when, in 1927, he held his first one-man show at the Leicester Galleries in London. But, although he continued to exhibit and sell through leading London dealers alongside the likes of Nash, Nicholson and even Matisse, he never achieved the same prominence as his contemporaries.

The market for Armstrong has ebbed and flowed over the years and his current prices certainly lag well behind many of these better-known names. But could things be changing?

Over the last decade, private buyers such as The Ingram Collection have become active in the market while exhibitions have added further recognition. *John Armstrong Paintings, An Enchanted Distance* was held by London dealers Piano Nobile at the end of last year, while Penlee House Gallery & Museum in Penzance are



Jewelled Leaf from 1947 by John Armstrong which sold for £22,000 at Woolley & Wallis. The price was the highest for the artist outside London and a record at auction for one of his post-war paintings.

now planning a retrospective for 2017.

The artist produced just under 1000 works in total (including studies and smaller works), of which perhaps a few hundred could be considered 'significant'.

Much of his 'prime period' as an artist however was taken up working as a film and theatre set designer, which means his more desirable works are comparatively scarce. While some of his contemporaries in the 1930s were producing 50 works a year, Armstrong was averaging about five.

Many of these are now owned by the children or grandchildren of the original collectors. Since they often don't wish to part with them, there has never been a core group to cement commercial levels.

The fact that his style and brushwork changed dramatically through his career

also has an effect on the market's dynamics. If you compare a work from the 1930s to another from the mid-1940s, you would not necessarily guess they are by the same artist. The fact that he is hard to place and absolutely rejected being categorised means he is less obviously collectable as other Modern British artists.

The highest prices for Armstrong have traditionally come for his late 1930s studies of ruined landscapes – evoking his mounting fears as the war approached. These prophetic works have traditionally appealed to buyers beyond specific Armstrong followers and examples have made above £25,000 at auction previously.

One fetched a record at Sotheby's last year, breaking the previous high which had stood for 23 years (see box above right).

More recently, a couple of pictures appeared at provincial sales at the end of last year and lifted the level of his 1940s works. One was *The Vision*, a dreamy figurative painting in tempera from 1944, that sold for £18,500 at Suffolk's Bishop & Miller in November – reported and pictured on these pages in *ATG* No 2223.

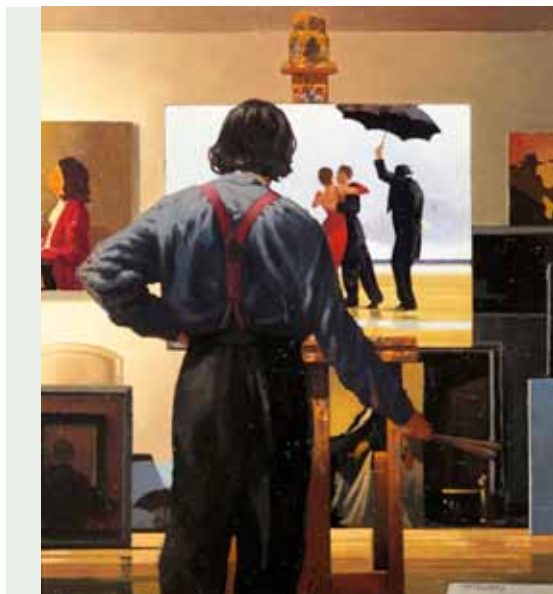
Just over a month later on December 9-10, **Woolley & Wallis' (22% buyer's premium)** topped this figure when they offered of *Jewelled Leaf* from 1947, a slightly smaller work in the same medium but a rather more surreal composition depicting wavy foliage in crisp detail.

The example was previously unrecorded and, while Rothenstein would never have seen or been aware of the picture, it clearly belongs to the same small group of "original" works to which he referred.

Measuring 17½in x 2ft 1in (44 x 65cm), it came from a private source and had a label for the Leger Galleries. It was painted when Armstrong was living in Lamorna in Cornwall and focusing on the natural environment.

"The period just after the war is a great date at the moment," said Woolley & Wallis' specialist Victor Fauvelle. "It's a premium date for an artist who's now more sought after so we had huge interest here."

Estimated at £2500-3500 at the auction on December 9-10, it bought trade and private bidding before it was knocked down at £22,000. The winning bid was placed on behalf of a private buyer. The sum was the highest price for the artist at a regional auction and a record at any auction for a post-war work.



VETTRIANO SINGING AGAIN

Instantly recognisable and with a popular following, **Jack Vettriano's (b.1951)** paintings gained huge prominence on the secondary market as speculative buying created spiralling prices before the financial crisis of 2008-09 took much of the wind out of the market's sails.

Since then, the Vettriano market has looked soft but a few slightly better sums have been achieved at auction over the last year, including another at Woolley & Wallis' latest picture sale.

Ties that Bind from 1995, pictured left, came from a corporate collection and was estimated at £20,000-30,000. The 2ft 8in x 2ft 4in (81 x 71cm) signed oil on canvas drew private interest and sold at £47,000, making the top price of the day.

Despite competition emerging here, Vettriano prices remain in the shadow of the mammoth £660,000 bid for his most famous painting, *The Singing Butler*, which sold at Sotheby's in April 2004 – a composition which appears in the background of this picture.

TOP AUCTION PRICES FOR JOHN ARMSTRONG

■ *Study for the Poster 'Can Spring Be Far Behind'*, 19 x 12½in (48 x 32cm), signed gouache from 1940 – £60,000 at Sotheby's, April 2014.

■ *Entry to the Circus*, 19 x 15in (48 x 38cm), tempera on board, signed with initials – £43,000 at Christie's, November 1991.

■ *The Rape of Helen*, 3ft 6in x 2ft 5in (1.07m x 74cm), oil on canvas from 1929, signed with initials – £28,000 at Sotheby's, June 2014.



Left: Jonathan Gibbs with John Armstrong's *The Embrace of Love*, a painting exhibited at the Lefevre Gallery in 1951.

JOHN ARMSTRONG: THE EXPERT'S VIEW

JONATHAN Gibbs is a keen follower of John Armstrong and co-wrote the artist's catalogue raisonné along with Andrew Lambirth, the art critic and author, and Annette Armstrong, the artist's third wife. In total, the book took 10 years to research and complete.

He told ATG that it was highly unusual for an unrecorded work of the date and quality of *Jewelled Leaf* to emerge at auction.

"When I saw this painting, I was very excited as no one was aware of its existence. Armstrong never kept records of what he painted or sold. The only records are the inventories of his dealers like the Lefevre and Leicester Galleries, contemporary exhibition reviews and information from the artist's family and private collectors.

"This was a beautiful example of what he was doing at the time. The forms of the twisting leaves and the way they cast shadows on each other was complex but mesmerising.

"The way he lit the picture was reminiscent of the kind of lighting he would have been exposed to as a designer for theatre and film sets working with Charles Laughton, Robert Donat and Alexander Korda," says Gibbs.

A former industry executive, Gibbs started his interest in Armstrong in 1998, having previously collected works by fellow modernist John Tunnard (1900-71).

"He's seriously underrated," says Gibbs, "but I'm lucky to own a few!

"There's now some momentum growing again. Following strong prices in the 1970s and 1980s, in recent decades only his prophetic paintings of ruins from the late 1930s were making real money – now demand and appreciation is again increasing for works spread more widely across his career."

After some notable private sales and auction results of late, including the record at Sotheby's in 2014, Gibbs believes Armstrong is now being seen as a solid investment.

"A few years ago, you couldn't be sure if works from the 1940s or '50s would hold their value. Now they're regarded as more commercial even though his prices still look pretty reasonable compared to some of his contemporaries."

Gibbs confirmed that he would be adding *Jewelled Leaf* to the catalogue raisonné.

He is also being helped by Christie's Archives to check through the records of the Leger Galleries (now owned by Christie's) in the hope they may shed light on when the painting was first exhibited.

The catalogue raisonné is *John Armstrong: The Complete Paintings* by Andrew Lambirth, Annette Armstrong and Jonathan Gibbs. ISBN: 978-0856676680



Salisbury quality paints a familiar refrain



Additional highlights from the December picture sale at Woolley & Wallis of Salisbury.

Top: *At Prayer* by Richard Karlovich Zommer – £42,000.

Above: *Portrait of the Calmady Children of Langdon Court, Devon*, by Sir Thomas Lawrence – £26,000

Below: a winter landscape by Andreas Schelfhout – £22,000



"THE better works did well," is a phrase you hear time and again when speaking to salerooms around the country.

The latest picture sale at **Woolley & Wallis** exemplified this trend, with some solid prices for the best works on offer but the lesser material struggling to get away at even modest levels.

This led to a strong premium-inclusive total of £890,000 but the selling rate was below average for one of these events at 65%.

The numbers were dragged down by almost half the 183 entries from the collection of the 2nd Baron Fairhaven failing to find buyers.

Among the top lots was *At Prayer* by **Richard Karlovich Zommer (1866-1939)**. The 2ft 8in x 4ft 8in (82cm x 1.43m) signed oil on canvas came from a descendant of Captain Henry Herbert Douglas-Withers, who had purchased a number of works directly from the artist in Tbilisi in 1915-16 and stored them in army map containers for transport home.

Its good size, range of colours, original condition and attractive estimate of £20,000-30,000 all stood in its favour, and it was eventually knocked down to a buyer from an ex-Soviet country at £42,000.

Elsewhere a **Sir Thomas Lawrence (1769-1830)** sketch exceeded a £10,000 - 20,000 estimate and took £26,000 from a private buyer.

The 2ft 6in x 2ft (75 x 62cm) signed pencil and coloured chalk drawing depicted the two Calmady children of Langdon Court, Devon.

It had been purchased by a relative of the vendor at an auction in 2001 for a sum around the low estimate but had since been confirmed as an original drawing for a finished painting in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

A fluid drawing and a desirable subject, in better condition it would surely have made more – it suffered from significant staining but was not deemed beyond restoration.

The Salisbury sale also achieved some decent sums for Dutch and Flemish pictures, led by an interior scene by **David Teniers (1610-90)** that drew interest from the trade and sold to a European buyer at £28,000 (estimate £10,000-15,000).

A stronger competition, though, came for a trademark winter landscape **Andreas Schelfhout (1787-1870)** estimated at £6000-8000. From a local private source, the 14 x 18½in (36 x 47cm) signed oil on panel was an attractive proposition being a depiction of skaters near a windmill and in good condition. It sold to a European buyer at £22,000.