

Fantastic beasts and where to buy them

Dodos and mermaids are as rare at auction as they are in real life

DODOS are probably the most famous creatures to become extinct since the dinosaurs, so it's surprising how many unanswered, many gustatory, perhaps unanswerable, questions are attached to them. What did dodos eat? Were they as fat and ungainly as we imagine, or did they only plump up against times when food was scarce—and why should it have been scarce for fruit-eaters in the tropics? How much was their extinction due to sailors clubbing them for food and how much to imported cats, rats, monkeys and pigs eating the single eggs that they laid? What did they taste like?

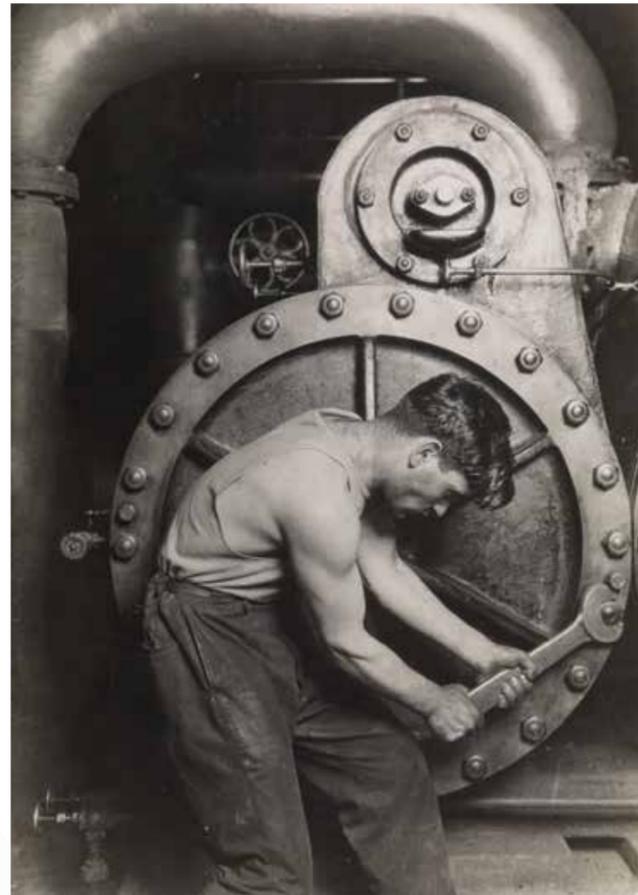
The dodo was first encountered by Dutch sailors in 1598, and apparently they named it either *Walghvogel*—from *walg* (disgusting)—or *duodaars* (knot-arse, from the tufty tail-feathers). Against all appearances, the dodo was of the pigeon family. The breast was said to be palatable and it has been suggested that it was best eaten with mangoes.

That most dodo bones that have been discovered came from the same little patch of marsh in a corner of Mauritius can be explained. It is because below the Mare aux Songes is a layer of coral sand that renders the swamp water less acid

than elsewhere. Why, though, in 1865, did a local schoolmaster decide to look just there for bones; and why call the place the Marsh of Dreams? Most bones in museums came from it, but, in about 1940, it was filled with hard core by the British army because it was malarial. Recently, it's been opened up again and many more ancient specimens have been found, together with other bones, some also from extinct species.

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Bones come up for auction very rarely, although the latest finds might change that. In 2016, a complete, but composite, skeleton sold for £280,000 (plus premium) at Summers Place in Sussex and at the now extinct Christie's South Kensington a bone fragment made nearly £7,000 in 2013. In February, another small, blackened bone came up in the inaugural 'Out of the Ordinary' sale at Sworders of Stansted Mountfitchet, where



it reached £4,849 (**Fig 1**). The vendor was the author and artist Errol Fuller, an authority on extinct birds. Most dodo bones are brownish and Mr Fuller explained that the black was caused by surrounding roots in the swamp. He also warned that 'all the models in museums are fakes, usually made with chicken feathers'.

That warning might equally apply to any mermaid one might find in a museum. These were traditionally made for Shinto shrines in Japan. In 1810, some canny Dutch merchants palmed

one off on an American, who sold his ship for \$6,000 to pay for it. It was brought to London and then shown by Barnum in New York. Thereafter, mermaids proliferated, usually made from wood or papier-mâché with assorted bones or perhaps by marrying a fish and a monkey, such as the 'Japanese monkey-fish' in the Wellcome Foundation or the 'Feejee mermaid' that made £5,989 at Sworders (**Fig 3**). Three years ago, a similar fabrication made much the same at Woolley & Wallis.

Posed, but not faked, at \$81,250 (£58,400) Lewis W. Hine's silver-print *Powerhouse Mechanic* of about 1921 (**Fig 2**) was the most expensive of a collection of his images sold by Swann's of Manhattan in February. Hine

Fig 1 left: Blackened dodo bone. £4,849. Fig 2 above: L. W. Hine's Powerhouse Mechanic (about 1921). £58,400



Fig 3 left: The 'Feejee mermaid'. £5,989. Fig 4 below: William Daniell's Off Bypoor, Malabar Coast, March 23rd, 1793. £15,500

(1874–1940), a documentary photographer, used his camera to record the lives of people in the steel-making districts of Carolina, New York and Pittsburgh. As photographer to the National Child Labor Committee, he had already captured scenes in factories, mills and workshops that were used to clamp down on exploitative practices. Such was the antipathy to him among factory and mill owners who employed children that he often had to work in disguise. Hine coined the term 'photo story' for assemblages of pictures. According to the auctioneer, these were important and scarce prints with Hine's hand stamps and handwritten notes; one was signed. A selection spanning his entire career is uncommon.

Also last month, Reeman Dansie of Colchester took £15,500 against an estimate of £600 for a fine 6¼in by 9½in William Daniell watercolour, *Off Bypoor, Malabar Coast, March 23rd, 1793* (**Fig 4**). This (helped by the picture's excellent condition) demonstrates that there is life in the watercolour market yet.

Next week Pugin and Tatham



Pick of the week

The current show at the Piano Nobile Gallery, 129, Portland Road, London W11 (until April 28) should be seen both by admirers of the Bloomsbury Group and those who are uncertain about them. 'From Omega to Charleston' concentrates on the two artists at the Group's centre, Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell. It's not always easy to take the Bloomsberries entirely seriously—they were rather too good at doing that for themselves, making an irresistibly comic contrast to their convoluted personal relationships. However, this show is a reminder of what serious artists and hard workers they could be, as well as how integrated they were with the flow of Modernist art.

The exhibition has attracted major loans of paintings and ceramics from Charleston and private collections, including the family of economist John Maynard Keynes, who was another central pillar of the group. There are also works for sale. Robert and Matthew Travers of Piano Nobile have brought off an important coup with the rediscovery of the set of 50 plates (**right**) decorated with portraits of famous women (plus Grant by Bell), a commission from Kenneth Clark that disappeared from sight nearly 30 years ago. The plates, half by Bell and half by Grant, are beautifully painted on

Wedgwood creamware blanks and it is likely that they will shortly find a most suitable home.

Among the paintings are Grant's *Lytton Strachey*, studies for the decorative scheme in Keynes's Cambridge rooms and impressive collages by both artists. The artefacts and works of art include textiles, ceramics and furniture and they show that the Grant-Bell working partnership could be considered an artistic descendant, not just of Roger Fry's Omega Workshops (of which Grant and Bell were co-directors), but even of Morris & Co. An excellent catalogue-book has been compiled by the art historian Richard Shone, himself a link with the last of the Bloomsberries.

