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Want to be an old masters dealer? You'll have to become an expert raconteur

Collectors are buying colourful lives as much as paintings — and sleuthing gallerists know how to feed those appetites



Etruscan-style vase from the factory of Biagio Giustiniani in Naples, circa 1820, modelled on pots uncovered from the ruins of Pompeii © Courtesy Justin Raccanello

Works on paper dealer Alexander Clayton-Payne offers a note of caution. “You must be selective in storytelling. With some pictures, there is more substance to build on.” For his latest catalogue, aimed at his millennial contemporaries, he has written at length about just four pictures, including a 1838 watercolour by John Absolon titled “A Student’s Lodgings”. In 1835 a fire had broken out in a property where Absolon had been living with his father, causing great destruction. For Clayton-Payne, hearing this anecdote enables a viewer to appreciate more acutely the subtle haze of smoke from the fire in the grate that gives this picture its particular quality. “The real value lies in the act of looking,” he says.

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