

Auctioneers' favourite items of 2025

Rare gems, paintings from Mainie Jellett and Roderic O'Conor, and collectibles linked with Irish literary greats are among the top picks for this year



Sylvia Thompson

AchillHorses

For Ian Whyte, chairman at Whyte's, his favourite painting of the year is Mainie Jellett's Achill Horses, which the Dublin auction house sold on May 26th.

"This was the largest of a series of paintings of horses, which Jellett created after she visited an exhibition of Chinese art in London in 1935. The combination of the Chinese influence and her developing cubism is unique in this painting, and the range of colours she uses makes it a masterpiece," he says.

Whyte acknowledges that The National Gallery exhibition Mainie Jellett and Eric Hone, The Art of Friendship, which ran this year from April to August, helped Whyte's to achieve a world record price of €210,000 (€261,660 including buyers premium and VAT) for this painting. The National Gallery exhibition also included two smaller Achill Horses paintings.

Oscar Wilde's desk

"One of the outstanding items handled by our firm in 2025 was when Oscar Wilde's desk went under the hammer in June," says George Fonsie McAlly of Kilkenny's Fonsie McAlly.

Fonsie McAlly says that the desk came to the Castlecomer auction rooms directly from a descendant of the Wilde family. "It is believed to be the very piece at which he worked during his most prolific creative period," he says.

"It is always something special to handle objects with such powerful cultural and literary associations, and this remarkable desk offered a rare and tangible link to one

of the most celebrated figures of the 19th century."

The William IV (c1830) oversized slope-top rosewood Davenport desk was attributed to Gillows cabinetmakers from Lancaster in England.

These popular desks were designed with a compartment for storage space under the hinged desktop, much like school desks of bygone eras. There are also drawers to the side and this particular desk also had closed-in storage space at the front. The desk owes its name to a Captain Davenport, who was the first to commission Gillows to design this style of desk.

The estimate on the piece was €6,000 - €8,000, with many Irish and international buyers interested. "The bidding was brisk with telephone bidders, internet bidding, and bidders in the room," says Fonsie McAlly. The final hammer price was €29,000 and the desk was sold to a private Irish collector.

Landscape painting

Identifying his most admired work of the year in 2025 is easy for Rory Guthrie of de-Veres, because the painting – Paysage aux Arbres by Roderic O'Conor (1860-1940) – is also his favourite painting that he ever sold.

"Lucky enough to first auction it in Ireland in 2022, we re-offered Paysage Aux Arbres, a major work by the artist, in our November auction. It's just a beautiful thing and it's rare something this good comes to the market," says Guthrie.

Art critic Jonathan Benington suggests the painting can be viewed as a key turning

point in O'Conor's career from impressionism to post-impressionism. Although not dated, it is believed to have been painted by O'Conor when he was in the artists' colony of Grez-sur-Loing in the Seine-et-Marne region of France. Benington writes that aged just 29, O'Conor was already inspired by the work of Van Gogh and Cezanne and no longer content with literal transcriptions of the scene in front of him.

"O'Conor would have enjoyed the tree-rich surrounds of Grez, Bourron-Marlotte and Montigny-sur-Loing, only to then experiment as he worked outdoors using a range of colours that heightened those he observed in nature," writes Benington.

The painting had a guide price of €200,000 - €300,000 and achieved a hammer price of €340,000. It had previously sold at a deVeres auction for €300,000 in June, 2022.

Kashmir sapphire

No surprise perhaps, as to what Claire-Laurie Mestrallat, director of jewellery at Adam's auctioneers, chose as her top sale of the year.

"My favourite lot this year is undoubtedly the Kashmir sapphire sold in May. It's a true privilege to have discovered, valued and have had this stone in the auction, due to its extreme rarity," says Mestrallat.

She adds that the Kashmir sapphire was also one of the best quality of Kashmir sapphires ever seen in her career – “so no wonder it fetched €660,000 including premium”.

The sapphire had first been given an estimate of €8,000-€12,000, until gemmological lab tests revealed its origins. Then, the estimate went to €150,000-€200,000.

“It’s also my favourite lot because it gave us all a real buzz, including the auctioneer on the rostrum, and placed the department on the international scene as it is in the top 10 price per carat achieved at auction worldwide these last 10 years.”

Kashmir sapphires are particularly valuable because they were excavated from a small mine in the Zanskar range of the Himalayan mountains in northwest India for only about six years in the 1880s. They are also prized for their unique blue colour and velvety appearance.

An Irish great

Conor Purcell, of Purcell Auctioneers in Birr, Co Offaly, chose Patrick Kavanagh's book *Tarry Flynn* as his favourite sale of the

year.

“We stumbled upon the book in the late Tommy Smith’s (of Grogan’s Bar, Dublin) house and it created quite a stir in the print media and online,” says Purcell.

The book was of interest because it was the very same one which was used in the now infamous 1952 court case involving Patrick Kavanagh and Brendan Behan.

During cross examination, Kavanagh denied that he and Behan were friends – upon which, this book was given in evidence, with attention drawn to an inscription which read: “For Brendan, poet and painter, on the day he decorated my flat, Sunday 12th, 1950.”

The evidence destroyed Kavanagh’s case, and he lost the libel action. The incident caused a rift between Kavanagh and Behan.

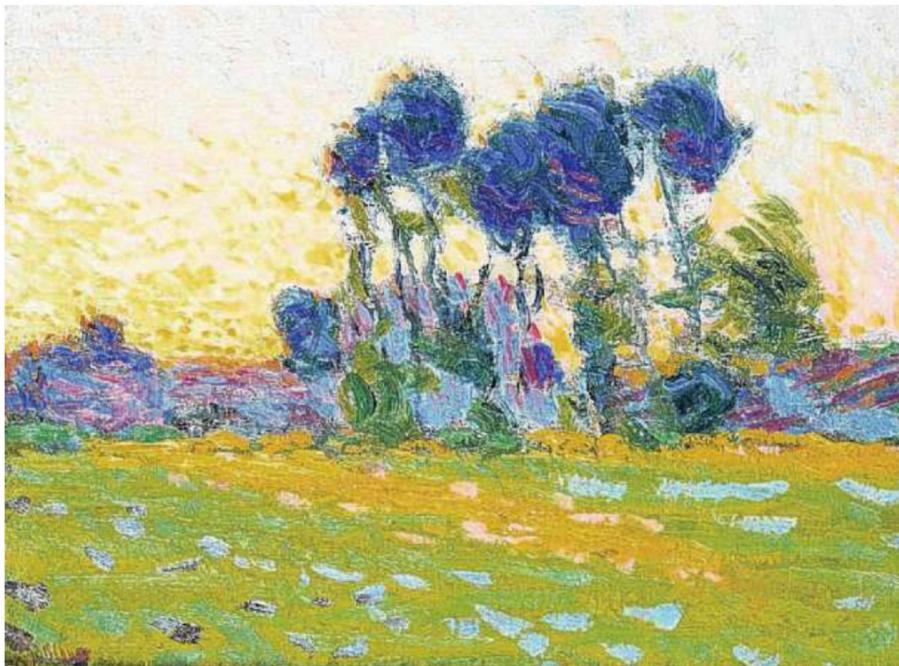
Purcell says that, on the day of the auction (September 3rd), the bidding began at the lower estimate of €3,000 and climbed through 54 bids shared among 22 individual bidders to reach €13,000 (€16,250 including fees etc). “It just goes to show that every single call is worth investigating, as you just never can tell what you may find,” says Purcell.

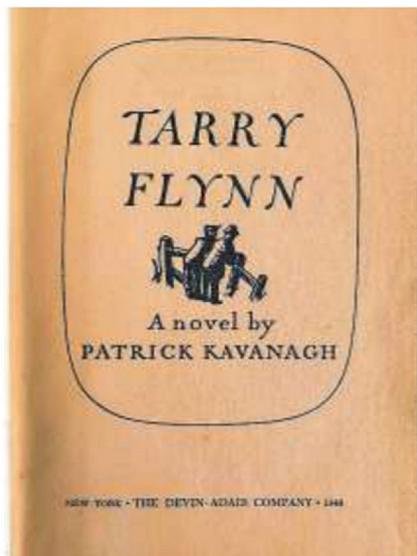
Guinness is good for you

Joe Mullen, from Mullens Auction House in Laurel Park, Bray, doesn’t have one favourite item this year – rather he has a favourite sale, the Railwayana collection of Lord O’Neill, from Shane’s Castle, Co Antrim.

“It’s always a pleasure to see a well-curated, lifetime collection come in, in whatever field of collecting that might have been,” says Mullen. He says that such collections give an insight into the sometimes niche and specialised area of a person’s interest, and also to their lives.

This sale was interesting because of the broad appeal many of these items had, with travel posters designed by Paul Henry and some wonderful paintings by Jack Hill. One lot that stood out was an enamelled Guinness bar advertisement that was in fantastic condition and really quite scarce. With an estimate of €300-€500, it ended up selling for €1,600.”





■ Clockwise from above: *Paysage aux Arbres* by Roderic O'Conor (sold for €340,000 in June); an enamelled Guinness bar advertisement sold for €1,600; Patrick Kavanagh's book *Tarry Flynn* made €13,000 at auction; Oscar Wilde's rosewood Davenport desk sold for €29,000; Mainie Jellett's *Achill Horses* (left) achieved €210,000 in May; and a Kashmir sapphire ring (below) was sold for €660,000