

Rare Tintin painting could break auction record

An original painting by Tintin creator Herge could set a new record for a comic book sale when it goes to auction in Paris yesterday. The online sale is widely expected to confirm the huge appetite for memorabilia of Tintin, whose adventures have entertained people of all ages since the 1930s. The previous world record for comic book art was set in 2014, when a double-page ink drawing that served as the inside cover for Tintin volumes published from 1937 to 1958 sold for 2.65 million euros (\$3.6 million at the time). The small painting being offered on Thursday, measuring 34 cm square (13 inches), features Tintin and his dog Snowy emerging from a porcelain jar in front of a menacing depiction of a Chinese dragon.

It was intended for the cover of "The Blue Lotus" from 1936 but was judged too expensive to reproduce by the publisher, which ultimately used a simplified version of the same scene, auction house Artcurial says. The volume, the fifth in the Tintin series, is considered a milestone in Herge's development of the character with its more dynamic and realistic storylines alongside his meticulous artwork. The auction house estimates it will sell for 2.2 to 2.8 million euros, despite clear fold marks. The sale had originally been set for November. In 2016, an original drawing from Tintin's "Explorers on the Moon" book sold for 1.55 million euros, a record for a single comic book page. Herge, a Belgian whose real

name was George Remi, sold some 230 million Tintin albums by the time of his death in 1983.

A gift?

According to the owners-heirs of the Tintin publisher Louis Casterman—the drawing on sale Thursday was given as a present by Herge to Casterman's son, who kept it folded up in a drawer. Other experts have cast doubt on this, saying the drawing might have been folded by Herge himself when he sent it by post to his publishers. "The theory that it was a gift to a child is outlandish," Benoit Peeters, an Herge expert who wrote a biography of the author, told French daily Le Monde in September.

"When Herge gave away sketches or drawings he always dedicated them, let alone for the son of his editor," Peeters said. "What's most likely is that Herge never asked for it back, so it was given to Casterman's son." Nick Rodwell, the British husband of Herge's second wife and rights holder Fanny Vlamynck, has said the work rightfully belongs in the Herge museum in Belgium. For Philippe Goddin, a former secretary general of the Herge Foundation (now called Studios Herge), Casterman's claim the painting was a gift is "highly suspect." "But the Castermans have done nothing wrong by putting the picture on sale. They believed the legend their father passed down," he told AFP. —AFP



An IA worker compares the cover of Herge's Tintin album *The Blue Lotus* (right) to the artist's original painting for the cover at the Brussels Artcurial gallery. —AFP

Virus again delays Japan 'Super Mario' theme park opening

The opening of the first ever "Super Mario" theme park has been delayed again as Japan battles a surge in coronavirus cases, Universal Studios Japan said yesterday.

Nintendo's long-awaited foray into amusement parks was originally set to open in July 2020 ahead of the Tokyo Olympics. But like the Games, its launch was delayed by the coronavirus pandemic, with a new date set for February 4. Featuring a real-life Bowser's Castle and an interactive "Mario Kart" ride, the attraction, part of the existing USJ park in the western city of Osaka, had been expected to draw huge crowds. After the government extended a virus state of emergency to Osaka this week to stem a surge in COVID-19 cases, the organizers decided to postpone the opening for the second time.

"We sincerely apologize for the trouble caused to guests... who were looking forward to the opening. The opening date will be decided and announced after the state of emergency is lifted," USJ said. While Japan's outbreak remains comparatively small, medics say hospitals are under heavy strain in the worst-affected areas. The emergency declaration, in place in 11 of the country's 47 prefectures, lasts until February 7. It asks restaurants and bars to close early, with residents urged to avoid unnecessary outings and working from home strongly encouraged. —AFP



In this handout illustration image released by Nature, somewhere in Southwestern North America, during the late Pleistocene, a pack of dire wolves (*Canis dirus*) are feeding on their bison kill, while a pair of grey wolves (*Canis lupus*) approach in the hopes of scavenging. —AFP

'Game of Thrones' dire wolves far apart from other canines

Prehistoric dire wolves made famous by the TV series "Game of Thrones" prowled the Earth for thousands of years before being wiped out at the end of the Ice Age. Known as *Canis dirus*—"fearsome dog"—they hunted down and feasted on large mammals, so when species such as giant bison went extinct dire wolves lacked prey, contributing to their decline. But a study published Wednesday in *Nature* points to another reason the top predators may have died out around 12,000 years ago after lording over the food chain for nearly a quarter of a millennium—their inability to breed with other wolf species. Anatomical similarities had led scientists to suggest that grey wolves and dire wolves could be close enough genetically to produce offspring, as did modern humans and Neanderthals. "Our genetic results show these two species of wolf are much more like distant cousins, like humans and chimpanzees," said co-lead author Kieren Mitchell from Australian Adelaide University. —AFP

Tom Hanks to host Biden inauguration TV show

Joe Biden has cast himself as a unifier for the nation, but there is someone else the incoming administration hopes can help start healing a divided United States next week: universally beloved actor Tom Hanks. The "Forrest Gump" star will host a special program broadcast simultaneously on all major US networks on the night of Biden's inauguration, American media reported. The 90-minute show entitled "Celebrating America" will feature musical performances from Jon Bon Jovi, Justin Timberlake and Demi Lovato.

"I'm SO honored to announce that I will be joining @JoeBiden & @KamalaHarris for their special event," Lovato wrote on Twitter. The broadcast—organized by the Presidential Inaugural Committee—will replace the usual festivities at the swearing-in ceremony, canceled this year because of the coronavirus pandemic. Aretha Franklin sang at Barack Obama's first inauguration in 2009, while Beyonce performed at his second four years later. Trump had to settle for less well-known artists in 2017 due to his unpopularity in the entertainment world. Country singer Toby Keith headlined the event. The Hanks-hosted prime-time special on Wednesday, January 20 will start at 8:30 pm Eastern Time and will be aired on ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN and MSNBC. It will pay tribute to "American heroes," including workers on the frontlines in the fight against COVID-19. —AFP



In this file photo actor Tom Hanks speaks onstage during the 25th Annual Screen Actors Guild Awards show at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles. —AFP