

Matviyenko Skips Sale of Her New Year's Art

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ST. PETERSBURG — Charity isn't what it used to be.

After raising 81.5 million rubles (\$2.7 million) for children's charity last year, a sixth auction of dignitaries' artwork on Saturday brought in a scant 31.2 million rubles, with the biggest bid going for a painting by St. Petersburg Governor Valentina Matviyenko — who skipped the event.

Some businessmen who attended the event at St. Petersburg's Grand Hotel Europe blamed Matviyenko's absence for the lackluster bidding.

But Matviyenko's deputy, Mikhail Oseyevsky, who paid 1.35 million rubles for two works, told the guests at the end of the auction that the governor did not attend because she was participating in talks with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and visiting FIFA president Sepp Blatter — a meeting that took place elsewhere in St. Petersburg.

Perhaps also dampening the bidders' enthusiasm, the auction lacked the big-name contributors like President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin from previous years.

In addition, the starting price of each lot was 50,000 rubles this year, whereas at previous auctions it was 20,000 rubles.

The auction, titled "Children's Alphabet," featured 29 pieces of art — one for each letter of the Cyrillic alphabet. The works were submitted by representatives of the government, the arts, show business and sports, and then touched up by professional artists for sale at the auction.

Saturday's biggest bids were both placed by Vladimir Podvalny, co-owner of the Velikoluksky meat factory and the Divo Island amusement park, who walked away with Matviyenko's "New Year's Eve" for 6 million rubles and Pskov Governor Andrei Turchak's "Blini" for 3 million rubles.

The artwork sold quickly, with other closing bids ranging from 400,000 to 800,000 rubles. Buyers included two high-ranking city officials. Yevgeny Yelin, chairman of the Commission for Economic Development, Industrial Policy and Trade, paid 450,000 rubles for businessman Igor Bukato's "Firebird," while Deputy Governor Oseyevsky paid 800,000 rubles for boxer Nikolai Valuyev's "Raccoon" and 350,000 rubles for actress Tatyana Kalganova's "Skirt."

At the last auction, the most intense bidding was for a photograph by Medvedev, "Tobolsk Kremlin," which ended up selling for a record 51 million rubles. In 2009, the focus was on a painting by Putin, "Pattern on a Frosted Window," which went for 37 million rubles.

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