

COMMENTS ON THE ART MARKET

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A Story From One of Our Readers

During the past few months, more and more stories have surfaced about Internet auction sites and the inherent problems with these forums. I truly believe that over the course of time, many more people are going to be adversely effected by these auctions; people are going to be taken and some will not find out until it is too late. There are so many questions a potential buyer needs answered before buying; many of which you may never get a truthful answer about: Is the work 'right' (authentic)? Does the seller actually have the work in question? Is the condition as reported? Is the description accurate? And most importantly, does the seller have 'good title' to the work? This last point will be the focus of our next newsletter. In my past newsletters I have included stories that we had some direct link to; in this newsletter I am going to relay as story from one of our readers.

A few weeks ago we received the following E-mail from an individual in California:

I read with a chuckle the accounting of your experiences with eBay and your Jacobsen "SS Bunker Hill".

We collect the work of W. Herbert Dunton, one of the six founders of the Taos Society of Artists. We try to keep tabs on eBay offerings not only by Dunton, but others of the group. What we have found is beyond belief. Knowing the hand and the signature of Dunton has made it possible to spot fraudulent paintings put on eBay. (Of course, even reputable galleries have been taken, and last year I spotted a bogus Dunton in the [name-withheld] Gallery in Santa Fe. It was quickly removed from the gallery and the auction).

I certainly don't claim any expertise in other Taos artists, but it didn't take any to spot fraudulent oil by Blumenschein. It was very easy, in fact, when the B, the E, the S, and the H were backward!!!! By referring other paintings to biographers and family members, I have been able to turn up any number of other frauds. In the circle of Taos followers, we have begun to realize that there is a full employment plan going in some Chinese gulag!

I have many times alerted eBay to these frauds. Their standard response has been that there is nothing that they can or should do because they only provide a venue; a meeting place for buyers and sellers. But they have a vested interest in the selling of fraudulent art, for they rake in a commission on each sale.

I have been able to track many of these frauds to New York State. It would seem that there is someone in upstate New York who may be working with someone in Florida to flog these fakes.

Anyway, as I said, I "read with interest" the article on your experiences with eBay. Welcome to the club.

As we speak with other collectors and dealers, the more stories we hear about. Now keep in mind that this 'collector' from California is a bit more knowledgeable than the average buyer; but what about the average buyer and what if they bought a 'fake' work? Will they ever find out about their mistake? Will they find out in time? If they do, will the seller still be around? These are important questions to think about before you decide to buy something in an online auction!

This month's segment in my continuing survey on what to look for when buying a work of art is:

Condition

While everyone would like to own only those works that are in perfect condition, often this is just not possible. Works created years/decades/centuries ago may have been bought and sold numerous times; and each time it reappears on the market it was more than likely cleaned or restored. If the individual handling the restoration was an expert, then there was little chance of any damage being caused during the restoration process; however this is usually not the case. Many times works are 'cleaned' by non-professionals and that is when problems begin to arise. In addition to the potential damage caused by a 'bad' conservator is the ever present 'accident' factor - a work of art may have been damaged when it fell off the wall, or while it was being moved, or when one of the kids threw something at it! As dealers, we have seen many unusual things in our history. To date, the most unique was a work that was cut in half to make a pair of paintings!

When considering a work of art it is important to know if it was restored and, if so, what was done? During a recent conversation with a client they mentioned that they would: *have to think long and hard before they bought a work of art that was re-lined* (a process in which a new canvas is affixed to the back of the old canvas). I explained to them that a re-lining is not necessarily a negative and they should not discount a work because of it. If the re-lining process was done for cosmetic, or for certain structural, reasons then there is nothing wrong with acquiring the work. Over the years the pigments artist's used begin to crack and often the only way to reduce the look of those cracks, cosmetically making the work pleasing to the eye, is to treat and re-line the painting (chemically treating the canvas and pigment so they relax – causing the cracks to go down – and then adhering the old canvas to a new one to stabilize the work). Then there are paintings whose tacking-edge (the unpainted part of the canvas used to hold the painting on its stretcher) has begun to tear and the painting is no longer securely affixed to the stretcher bars. In order to repair this, a conservator may have to do one of the following for structural reasons: a strip lining or a full re-lining.

Of course, some linings are done to repair major damages. If this is the case, then you need to know what type of damage occurred and where, on the canvas, they are located. Now, for my illustration I need you to imagine that you are looking at a painting of a sailing ship. With marine paintings it is important that the ship and its rigging are in excellent condition; if there are areas of restoration in the sky or water they will have little impact on its value. Collectors, and many museums, are often interested in the ship, and are not too concerned with the background area. In other words, if the central focus of a painting has been restored it will have a greater impact on the work's value than if the background areas have had restoration. This is also true with figurative works... as long as the figures are in good shape and if the balance of the painting has 'some' restoration, there is not much to worry about. Please note that I used the word 'some' - you do not want to buy a work of art where extensive background areas have been restored.

With all that said, it is important to understand that condition is a key factor when considering and pricing of a work - especially historical works. If you were lucky enough to find two, almost identical, paintings by an artist and one was in pristine (perfect) condition and the other had restoration, the one in better condition is going to be priced at a premium -- and it should be.

Howard L. Rehs

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Gallery Updates: The gallery has received a number of new works by Sally Swatland - they have all been posted to the site. If you are interested in seeing them, please visit the Online Inventory section of our site.

We have also added two works by Johann Berthelsen and have acquired new paintings by Cortes and Blanchard - some of which have been added to our site.

Virtual Exhibitions: This month we have added a small exhibition featuring the work of the British Victorian genre artist George Sheridan Knowles to our web site. The exhibit features a biography and color images of his work; the direct URL is:

[George Sheridan Knowles – Victorian Genre Artist](#)

Among the new 'sold' works that have been added to our exhibitions are: Louis Aston Knight's *Risle Valley, Normandy* and *La Vieux Lavoir, Normandy*; Edouard Cortès' *Rue de Lyon, Bastille, Porte St. Denis*, and *Place de la Madeleine*; and Julien Dupre's *Paturage*.

Next Month: I will be discussing a work's title (ownership) - is there a way to protect yourself?