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Art Dealer William “Willie” Postar’s Eclectic Estate Sells to Savvy Crowd

by Jeanne Schinto



Grogan & Company, Dedham, Massachusetts

Photos courtesy Grogan

“Way before there was an Internet awash in good, bad, and indifferent art information there was Willie—a curmudgeon, a street fighter, and a savant,” former Skinner paintings department head Colleen Fesko wrote in reply to an e-mailed request for a comment about William Postar (1924-2006). “His passing marks the end of an era of running paintings with a style and drive that won’t easily be replicated,” Fesko, who is now an independent appraiser, said of the late art dealer, whose 400-lot estate was sold at Grogan & Company in Dedham, Massachusetts, on October 26, 2014.

Postar had a “smart eye,” in the words of Michael B. Grogan, president and chief auctioneer of Grogan & Company. In a prepared statement, he described Postar as one of his earliest clients, starting back in the late 1980s. He was also someone from whom Grogan had “learned a great deal.” He had done this “by bird-dogging him,” i.e., watching him examine paintings at his sales, seeing what he bid on, and what he bought. Postar was, Grogan wrote, “the last of a breed of self-taught, pre-internet, highly confident painting-buyers who bought low with the aim to sell high. A Dickensian character, perhaps, but one with a warm heart and a twinkle in his eye.”

I met Postar only a few times at auctions in the last couple of years of his life, when he was characterizing himself as “semi-retired.” A dapper gentleman who often wore a black beret, he was a private dealer at that point, having closed his galleries, one of which had been on Charles Street at the foot of Boston’s Beacon Hill. He was, however, still the keeper of storage units full of pictures, he told me. I could see that he was also still buying art, particularly European works, which his fellow dealers said he knew well. I also remember seeing him buying American paintings. He bought a portrait by Lillian Mathilde Genth. The subject was a woman reading. The price, at Skinner on September 10, 2004, was a record-breaking \$82,250.

At the estate sale, there was another painting by Genth; its subject was Japanese children. Estimated at \$1500/2500, it hammered at the low. “A dealer like Willie doesn’t die with his best paintings,” a local dealer said. “He’s already sold them.” Nonetheless, this was a first-rate middle-market art sale, and a savvy group of bidders in the audience, on phones, and on the Internet spent \$820,000 (including buyers’ premiums) buying up about 90% of a huge range of works.

The top lot was an oil on canvas of the Tower of Babel. Cataloged as 17th-century European school, it was estimated at \$2000/4000 but opened at \$8000, causing Michael Grogan to quip, “Well, \$8000 right out of the gate. Do I hear \$80,000?” In the end, it brought \$28,125 from a bidder on the Internet.

“That’s typical, isn’t it?” Lucy P. Grogan commented on the day after the sale. The firm’s vice president and gallery director, she is also Michael and Nancy Grogan’s daughter. “Anyone who’s been to enough auctions knows the top lot is rarely the one that you think it’s going to be. Especially with such an eclectic collection as this, it’s fitting that the highlight was something that we really didn’t pay much attention to.”

Another of the top lots was a Boston Modernist’s work, *Butchered Animal* by Hyman Bloom. Huge at 70” x 40¼”, indeed, almost life size, the 1953 oil on canvas had a partial exhibition label from Boston’s Institute of Contemporary Art on its reverse side. At least to my mind, it also had institutional purchase written all over it. In the end, it sold to a private collector on the phone for \$19,200, although Lucy Grogan said the painting is being “loaned directly” to Danforth Art, Framingham, Massachusetts.

No one who went to this sale could fail to notice the large number of female nudes in the group—all kinds from many different periods and places and in many styles. Chosen from among them for the cover lot was *Bathsheba* by Robert Hale Ives Gammell, a 20th-century American painter well known for his mythological and Biblical scenes. The 1931 oil on canvas sold just above estimate at \$16,800.

Another noticeable mini collection within this collection was works by Louis Kronberg, a Boston native and Boston Museum School graduate who studied under Edmund C. Tarbell and Frank W. Benson as well as in Paris at the Académie Julien. Many of these works were ballet dancers, but others were Spanish women in tiaras and shawls as well as one notable reclining nude. Inscribed “model—Ginette Rinaud Paris, 1933,” the pastel on canvas of the nude sold to a bidder in the room for \$6600 (est. \$3000/5000).

The bidding pool was nearly as eclectic as the paintings. “It was a very international group,” said Lucy Grogan. “A couple of guys in the audience came from Madrid, but they were, as you may have noticed, buying American school paintings. There was a lot of crossover. A lot went to the trade, of course, but there were a lot of privates involved, too.”

One of those private collectors was a woman who bid Statue-of-Liberty style when she wanted something. She usually got it. Toward the very end of the sale, she once again used the aggressive bidding posture to win 20th-century Chinese-American Dong Kingman’s *The Washington Circus* for \$20,400. This time, though, after the hammer came down she stood up, bowed to applause, and then announced that the painting was “coming home.” She had grown up with the work, because it had once been in her parents’ collection. She had lost track of it for almost 20 years. Now she had reacquired it and was obviously thrilled.

There weren’t any other moments quite as dramatic, but the sale had a steady kind of old-fashioned energy that was a nostalgic pleasure to experience. As local private dealer, collector, and artist David Kasman said in an e-mail after the sale, “It was an unusual, throwback, relatively fun sale. There wasn’t anything too extraordinary there, but Willie’s eye, eclectic as it was, still made it feel curated in a sense, and so most of the pictures had something to offer, versus a typical mid-market art auction.”

For more information, contact the auction house at (617) 720-2020 or see the Web site (www.groganco.com).

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Robert Hale Ives Gammell (1893-1981), *Bathsheba*, 54½” x 44¼”, oil on canvas, signed and dated “1931,” \$16,800 (est. \$10,000/15,000).



Charles Grafton Dana (1843-1926), *Manchester Bay*, 20” x 30”, oil on canvas, signed and dated “1875,” \$10,200 (est. \$1000/1500) to a bidder on the phone. Schinto photo.



Cataloged as 17th-century European school, *The Tower of Babel* sold to an Internet bidder for \$28,125 (est. \$2000/4000). The 52¼” x 70½” oil on canvas was the sale’s top lot.



Cataloged as early 19th-century Irish school, *The Magic Lantern Show*, 21” x 29”, oil on canvas, sold for \$9000 (est. \$600/800) to a phone bidder. Schinto photo.

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Charles-François Daubigny (French, 1817-1878), given the English title *Bucolic Riverscape with a Rowboater*, 10” x 14¼”, oil on wood panel, \$11,875 (est. \$1000/2000) to an Internet bidder.



Grogan & Company appraisal consultant Bob Carroll is shown with *Butchered Animal* by Hyman Bloom (1913-2009). The 70” x 40¼” oil on canvas, 1953, with partial exhibition label from Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, sold for \$19,200 (est. \$2000/4000) to a private bidder on the phone. For more information about the artist and his contemporaries, see *Boston Modern: Figurative Expressionism as Alternative Modernism* (2005) by Judith Bookbinder. Schinto photo.



Cataloged as painted by a follower of George Inness and given the title *Rural Landscape with Moonrise*, this 14” x 18” oil on canvas sold for \$9600 (est. \$500/1000) to the room bidder who also bought the painting from her childhood (see below). The 19th-century work has a partial signature “H. F. [illegible].”



Dong Moy Chu Kingman (1911-2000), *The Washington Circus*, 48” x 72”, oil on masonite, \$20,400 (est. \$3000/5000). This is the painting whose buyer announced that it had once been in her parents’ collection, was lost, and was now found.



Karl Knaths (1891-1971), *Pipe and Bits*, inscribed and dated “Pipe... 1955... Provincetown,” 30¼” x 24¼”, oil on canvas, \$13,200 (est. \$3000/5000) to private collectors in the room.



Cataloged as circa 1900 American school, the woman in Classical dress standing beneath an apple tree is a 36½” x 25¼” oil on canvas. It sold for \$12,500 (est. \$800/1200) to an Internet bidder.

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