

## Art for Sale at the Bruce Museum

by Jeanne Schinto

Looking at paintings in art museums, we often joke, "Where's the price tag?" For doesn't it seem unnatural these days to see artworks without dollar signs? Last fall and winter, at the Bruce Museum of Arts and Science in Greenwich, Connecticut, some paintings on display were for sale—not by the museum but by dealers. The museum made no bones about the show's commercial intents. Its title was "By Arrangement: Still Life Paintings from the Art Market," and the press release issued by the museum stated, "While one frequently hears of the declining supply of great art, this sampling again proves that there still are outstanding museum-quality pictures available for those keen enough to pursue them."

By our reckoning, it's one thing if a museum has an antiques show as a fundraiser and holds it in a wing for a weekend. It's another if the line between culture and commerce gets blurred. We began to wonder how this exhibit's mercantile got squared with the museum's stated mission to promote "the understanding and appreciation of Art and Science to enrich the lives of all people." We wondered too about the logistics. Did the dealers pay to participate, as do the antiques dealers who sell at, say, the Peabody Essex Museum's annual antiques show in Salem, Massachusetts? How were the Bruce show's dealers chosen? If any of their paintings did sell, how were the sales handled? Did the museum collect the money? And whose idea was this type of exhibit, anyway? Finally, will it be repeated?

Peter C. Sutton, the Bruce's executive director and chief executive officer, said in a phone interview after the show ended its eight-week run on January 17 that it was his idea. "It was something I came up with on the spur of the moment," he said. "Just a modest thing." And not his own invention. In fact, he called it a "throwback" to the way museums used to do some of their exhibits. "One forgets that in the thirties and forties, it was quite common to gather shows from the trade." By way of example, he mentioned that in Hartford at the Wadsworth Atheneum, where he was director for four years in the 1990's, one of his predecessors, the legendary Everett "Chick" Austin (1900-1957), used to do his Surrealist shows "entirely from the trade."

From 1912 through 1926, a little research revealed, the Bruce itself had shows where paintings could be bought—not directly from the museum back then either but from the artists who had painted them. Those exhibits were organized by the Greenwich Society of Artists.

The members were not Sunday painters. Since the 1890's, a number of artists living in Greenwich, many of them destined to become our best-loved American Impressionists, had formed a colony. It was founded in the waterfront village of Cos Cob (part of the town of Greenwich). John Henry Twachtman (1853-1902), Elmer Livingston MacRae (1875-1953), and Leonard Ochtman (1854-1934), among others, had been attracted to the region's natural beauty as well as its easy train access to Manhattan. Although Twachtman died before the society was founded, the others offered their works for sale at the museum in its very earliest years. So did society members Edward Clark Potter (1857-1923), Charles A. Fiske (1836-1915), and Robert Emmett Owen (1878-1957).

Guest exhibitors included this impressive list of limners: Childe Hassam (1859-1935), Charles C. Curran (1861-1942), Frederick Carl Frieseke (1874-1939), Robert Henri (1865-1929), Edward Redfield (1869-1965), and J. Alden Weir (1852-1919). Represented were works by sculptors Gutzon Borglum (1867-1941), Daniel Chester French (1850-1931), Harriet Frishmuth (1880-1980), and Bessie Potter Vonnoh (1872-1955).

Proximity to Manhattan—28 miles from midtown—has provided Greenwich with the key to its real-estate success. Originally a 17th-century farming community, then a Victorian summer resort, it became at the turn of the 20th century one of the first bedroom communities for the boardroom denizens of New York City. That proximity likewise made Peter Sutton's job easy when he was choosing dealers for his show. As he described it, "I just went down to the galleries and did a tour" that took "all of a couple of days."

The dealer-selection process was easy for another reason, according to Sutton. Besides having been "in the museum world a long time," he has also been head of old master paintings at Christie's. "So I know something about which dealers have good things."

Appropriately, Sutton was looking for artworks of museum quality. Fourteen New York City dealers made the grade. French & Co. offered an oil on panel by Giuseppe Arcimboldo (1527-1593), *A Still Life of Fruit*, which is also a *Reversible Anthropomorphic Portrait of a Man*, a style made familiar by numerous prints and posters. One that Hirschl & Adler chose for Greenwich was *Le Chapeau Rouge (The Red Hat)* by Paul Gauguin (1848-1903). Berry-Hill's two choices were by Americans: *To this Favor—A Thought from Shakespeare*, a trompe l'oeil by William Michael Harnett (1848-1892) and *Lady Apples in an Overturned Basket* by William J. McCloskey (1859-1941). Spanierman sent three American works: *Dish of Apples and Quinces* by David Johnson (1827-1908), *Fresh Peanuts* by Victor Dubreuil (1880-1910), and *Lilies, France* by Ellen Day Hale (1855-1940).

Only two dealers not based in Manhattan were participants, John Mitchell Fine Paintings of London, England and The Greenwich Gallery, a local shop. And no, dealers didn't have to pay to exhibit, but they were required to "self-insure" their merchandise.

To be sure, dealer monetary gain was not Sutton's motive, ulterior or otherwise, for mounting a show gathered from the trade. He wanted to help art buyers, not art sellers. He said, "I like to encourage collectors to collect." But he wasn't simply aiming to help collectors altruistically. "We hope that the collectors will think of us fondly when they decide to dispose of their collections. We hope it rebounds to our benefit in terms of bequests." Museums have always depended upon gifts, he continued, but must do so now more than ever since public institutions, even those as well-heeled as Greenwich's Bruce, are priced out of the art market.

Willie Sutton robbed banks because that's where the money was. Peter Sutton said he brought dealers to Greenwich because that's where collectors can be found. The town, according to Sutton, has "probably" more collectors per capita than any other of its size (60,000) in the country. Other ZIP codes may be comparably affluent, but none has the same concentration of art-minded people, he claimed. "You can practically go door to door and find amazing things." It's easy to believe. The Bruce's exhibit lineup for 2005 features a whole series of shows from the private collections of Greenwich residents, including John L. Loeb Jr. (19th-century Danish paintings), Reba and Dave Williams (prints), and Norman and Suzanne Hascoe (old masters).

Sutton will have to wait for gifts that may arrive as a result of this exhibit. While doing so he may wonder, as we do, if his logic is sound. Why would collectors think any more fondly of the Bruce in their bequests, just because they bought something there? Aren't there better ways to develop donor largesse?

As for the dealers' returns, they would have been more immediate. Was it a successful venture for them? "I do know that some paintings sold, but I don't know how many," Sutton said. The museum did not keep track, nor did it arbitrate between buyer and seller. Potential buyers were instructed to contact dealers directly. "We can't get in a situation where we get involved in the sale of these things," he said. "We have to keep at arm's length from any financial transactions."

We did not conduct an extensive poll but learned from a few phone calls that the art didn't fly off the Bruce Museum's walls. It may not be further proof, but director Sutton was noncommittal about a repeat show.

It's certainly not a good thing that our instinctive reaction at art museums is to wonder where the price tags are. Then again, maybe it's not possible to divorce art appreciation from the marketplace anymore. We are resolved at least in this—not to be surprised if we hear of another museum mounting an exhibit sale. A chance to test our mettle may not come soon. As Peter Sutton mentioned, "It's hard to get corporate funding for that sort of thing."

For more information about current and upcoming shows at the Bruce, contact the museum at (203) 869-0376 or see the Web site ([www.brucemuseum.org](http://www.brucemuseum.org)).