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Changes Afoot for Sotheby's Boston Office and for Its Former Director

by Jeanne Schinto

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One day in mid-January a sign maker put up new signage on the 19th-century carriage house at 67½ Chestnut Street at the foot of Beacon Hill where Sotheby’s regional Boston office had been located for the last 15 years. The familiar “Sotheby’s” plaque is down now, and the new signage that went up says “Cottingham Fine Art.” The auction house has closed up shop in this city, and that office’s former director, William S. “Bill” Cottingham, who worked for Sotheby’s for 30 years in both Boston and in New York City, has taken over the lease for his newly formed business.



William S. “Bill” Cottingham. Litwin Media photo.



Cottingham Fine Art, 67½ Chestnut Street, Boston. Schinto photo.

Cottingham described the new venture to *M.A.D.* as one designed to “give honest and independent counsel to people who want to sell items or want to buy them.” He said he will be “helping people get through the labyrinth of decisions that need to be made,” especially when downsizing. “Ninety-nine percent of the things one sees are moderately priced,” he observed. “One percent are valuable assets. That’s where the real market is.” Unlike his former employer, however, which assiduously shuns the middle market, he will help his clients with everything—i.e., “the one hundred percent, giving them guidance about where to sell what and how to negotiate the best deal.”

Having seen what he calls “the architecture of deals” from the inside, Cottingham said, “I know how and where to push for the client’s benefit. What I can bring to the table is a very sophisticated understanding on how best to construct a deal that is uniquely suited to a particular seller’s advantage.”

It isn’t a clean break for Sotheby’s and Cottingham, whose other role at the auction house was executive vice president. At an interview lunch, he proffered two business cards. One says “Cottingham Fine Art” printed in a shade of purple similar to the one used on the new signage. The other is a Sotheby’s issue that says “Senior International Fine Arts Consultant”—in other words, he will, as before, be on the lookout for items to send Sotheby’s way.

Cottingham doesn’t see that there will be any conflict between his dual roles. “In either case, I’m working for the client, giving them objective counsel,” he said. If Sotheby’s is the right place to send someone with something to sell, he’ll send the client there. “I’m totally transparent, and I’m ‘old school.’ I want to interact with the client the way it used to be done, in a romantic sort of way”—meaning that there will be ample time and care expended. “I think there’s still room in this modern world for that to happen.”

At one point, Cottingham was head of all Sotheby’s regional offices in the United States, of which there are currently just under a dozen. The Boston regional office was the first one established, circa 1978, when Cottingham was still in college at McGill University in Montreal, the city where he was born. According to Cottingham, the Boston location has always been one of the most successful for Sotheby’s, “because New England has traditionally been a great repository of wonderful things.” Now, of course, there are fewer and fewer treasures to be found in those attics—or any attics—and Sotheby’s, like the entire antiques-marketing world, has had to make significant adjustments.

The Boston office was not always in that picturesque carriage house. Initially it was established in the Back Bay neighborhood, first on Arlington Street, then on Clarendon Street, then on Newbury Street. It was Cottingham who found the Beacon Hill space all those years ago. Its owner—who is now Cottingham’s landlord—is Christopher Lydon, the well-known National Public Radio personality. Lydon also owns the building next door, and that is where he lives. Cottingham said that Lydon plays the piano in the afternoon, and the music comes wafting over to the carriage house. “It’s right out of the nineteenth century,” Cottingham remarked. “And every one of my Sotheby’s colleagues who has come here, to a person, has said, ‘Oh my God!’”

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For many years, those colleagues came with frequency, to give free lectures on their various specialties to an audience that enjoyed a wine and cheese reception afterward. Wendell Garrett, for example, would come once a year. Lately, however, the lectures have been curtailed. Now that Cottingham Fine Art has taken over the space, Cottingham said he’d like to have lectures again. He also imagines symposia and exhibitions.

After Cottingham graduated with a degree in art history in 1979, he went to work for Waddington’s in Toronto and then ran the firm’s gallery in New York. While at Waddington’s, he specialized in what he had studied most closely in college: modern works on paper. In 1985 he was offered a management position by Sotheby’s. “I lost my specialty when I went to work for Sotheby’s but gained a real breadth of knowledge,” he said.

Among the best pieces Cottingham landed for Sotheby’s was one he found in his home city of Montreal. It happened within his first two years at the auction house. That find was Gustav Klimt’s 1913 portrait of Eugenia Primavesi, the wife of a banker and glass manufacturer in Olmutz, Moravia, now Olomouc, Czech Republic. The painting was listed by scholars as having been lost since World War II, but it was still owned by the subject’s daughter, Măda Primavesi (1903-2000). (She was given her mother’s nickname as her first name.) Măda, who immigrated to Canada in 1949, remembered watching her mother’s portrait being painted by Klimt in Vienna. She was ten years old. Her own portrait was painted by the artist at about the same time. The family sold her portrait in the 1930s; it now hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The mother’s portrait went to Sotheby’s, where it sold in New York on May 11, 1987, for \$3.85 million (including buyer’s premium).

The price was a new record at auction for a painting by the artist. Back then, Japanese were buying as frenetically as the Chinese are today. The painting went to Tokyo. The new auction record for a Klimt is \$87.9 million, which was paid by an unidentified buyer for the 1912 portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer II, when it was offered at Christie’s in New York on November 8, 2006.

Working for a corporation is “pretty encompassing,” Cottingham said, choosing his words with care to explain why he has taken this path for the latter end of his career instead of staying on with Sotheby’s in a different capacity—an option that had been offered. “I think change is good, and I think in life you have to step out of your comfort zone a bit. I wanted to do it for myself and for my clients. I feel inspired. I’m ready for another ten or twenty years of good, hard work.”

Cottingham added that, with this change, he is also hoping for a better “life-work balance, professionally and personally.” He is, for example, looking forward to spending more time in Colorado, where he has had a residence for a number of years and where his life partner, Tina Patterson, is based. He also wants to travel more, and already has, with Patterson, whose company, Authentic Asia (www.authenticasia.net), designs individual travel and luxury private tours to places like Bhutan, Nepal, Tibet, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, and Myanmar.

Additionally, Patterson organizes travel for museum groups. For example, she organized a trip to Vietnam for a group from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Both she and Cottingham traveled with that group. Specialized art trips are in the works to art fairs, such as the Venice Biennale.

European travel fits into Cottingham’s plan, too, because he also wants to spend more time there, where he has a third residence, in London. Indeed, his Cottingham Fine Art business card lists three place names: “London. Boston. Boulder.” He said he’s considering hiring someone to run a London office. As it stands now, his is a one-person operation.

Along with the place names, Cottingham’s family crest is on the Cottingham Fine Art business card. Beneath the crest is his family’s motto. The Latin phrase says *Mens cujusque is est quisque*—i.e., “As the mind of each, so is the man.” The motto, which was also the motto of Samuel Pepys and his family, comes from a longer quotation from Cicero, which translates as, “The mind of each person is that individual, not that physical figure which can be pointed out with the finger.” Asked to give his interpretation of those words, Cottingham said, “I take them to mean that the mind is the driver of all, and I believe that entirely.”

For more information, phone (617) 366-6615 or see the website (www.cottinghamfineart.com).

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