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Edward Gorey Glory

by Antioch Jensen*



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He was tall and lanky with a bushy white beard and multiple cats. He wore earrings and big finger rings. An enveloping coat of raccoon or coyote, lynx or mink, fisher, beaver, or otter was his outer garb in winter, at least until the mid-1980's when he had a change of heart about wearing animal fur. A genuine eccentric genius of our time, he was Edward Gorey (1925-2000), writer, illustrator, playwright, and creator of sets and costumes. Best known to the general public as designer of the animated credits for public television's *Mystery!* series, he wrote and illustrated more than 100 books of his own and illustrated some 60 written by others, including T.S. Eliot, Charles Dickens, Virginia Woolf, and Samuel Beckett.

Considering how prolific he was, it's no surprise that Gorey material comes onto the secondary market with frequency. On October 14, 2010, however, New York City's Swann Galleries sold one of the best collections offered by anyone in recent memory. The result was several new auction price records claimed for Gorey by Swann.

The collection of nearly 50 pieces belonged to a woman who started collecting Gorey as a teenager in the 1960's. "You could see how involved she was from the beginning," said Swann's 20th-century literature expert, Christine von der Linn. "Some of her 'want lists' were in with the books and some of the original sales slips. And because she was a serious collector of Gorey before he became really popular, she was able to secure some of the genuine rarities."

Three of those items were written and illustrated by Gorey: *The Beastly Baby*, *The Sopping Thursday*, and a signed limited edition of *Amphigorey*. "She had gorgeous copies of each of these titles," von der Linn said. "And offering them all in the same sale brought a great deal of interest." A fourth rarity was one of only 26 lettered copies of a rare limited edition of Beckett's *All Strange Away*, illustrated by Gorey and signed by both men.

I spoke about Gorey and Beckett to Andreas Brown, Gorey's longtime champion, archivist, and, after Gorey's death, executor of his estate. "Gorey admired Beckett immensely," he said. "The occasionally gloomy but always existential Beckett, the absurdist writer tiptoeing to the edge of nonsense literature, appealed to Gorey greatly. He admitted Beckett was one of his idols, and Beckett was very pleased with Gorey's drawings."

The lines of Gorey's crosshatched pen-and-ink images are almost balletic. It makes sense that he was perhaps George Balanchine's greatest fan. And yet his characters regularly have their mishaps. His hapless old maids fall face first onto the railroad tracks, albeit with aplomb. Usually a bit dotty, Gorey people often meet quick and terrible fates, like mystery-novel victims. No one mourns. And no one escapes. The *Gashlycrumb Tinies* by Gorey is an abecedarian composition recounting in rhyme the deaths of 26 children. "E is for Ernest who choked on a peach/ F is for Fanny sucked dry by a leech...."

There is a British feel to the work, but Gorey visited England only once, Brown said, and went directly to Scotland's Outer Hebrides and nowhere else. The barren landscape, with its lone tree and thick-coated sheep, suited him. "He never saw London, and that astonishes people, since his work is so well informed about all things English. That's because he read literally every English novel of the second half of the nineteenth and the first twenty years of the twentieth centuries. He's very tuned in to the class society, the snobbery, the repression. He gets all of that down. It's very much like Monty Python. It's out of the Dickens tradition."

When strange things happen in Gorey books, the characters try not to notice. "It's inappropriate," said Brown. "In *The Doubtful Guest* they're all very upright, stuffy, very 'country-gentry,' and even though this strange entity has entered the house, it would be in poor taste to ask him to leave."

Gorey's wordplay is akin to Vladimir Nabokov's. He loved to anagramize his name. The introductory note to *The Awdrey-Gore Legacy* was penned by E.G. Deadworry. The name Awdrey-Gore itself works out to Edward Gorey. So do Grey Redwood (a cribbage addict), Dedge Yarrow (a collector of ticket stubs), and Waredo Ryrge (a "half-Irish, half-Japanese soldier of fortune").

Some people liken Gorey to the cartoonist Charles Addams, whose works inspired the television shows, movies, and musical. Brown begs to differ. "Addams is trying to entertain. He isn't making commentaries about the existence of God or nihilistic existentialism, whereas Gorey is tiptoeing all around the edges of these things. He's talking about much more complicated matters."

The literary critic Edmund Wilson spotted Gorey's work early on and favorably reviewed his first books in the December 26, 1959, issue of *The New Yorker*. "He has been working quite perversely to please himself," Wilson wrote, "and has created a whole little personal world, equally amusing and sombre, nostalgic at the same time as claustrophobic, at the same time poetic and poisoned." Wilson concluded that he got from Gorey's books "the same sort of pleasure that I get from Aubrey Beardsley and Max Beerbohm, and I find that I like to return to them."

And yet, if not for Brown, we might not know Gorey. From 1967 through 2007, Brown owned the Gotham Book Mart of New York City, and almost at the point that ownership began, the bookstore was Gorey Central. Brown published 15 Gorey titles under the Gotham Book Mart imprint and regularly exhibited Gorey's art in the bookstore's gallery. It was Brown who started getting Gorey reviews and publicity and arranged for him to illustrate Beckett's work, among others'. "Once I'm convinced something is really good, I want to be sure the whole world knows about it," he said. "I became convinced that Gorey was much more important in reality than publicly."

Like Brown, von der Linn emphasized Gorey's complexity. "It goes beyond the Victoriana, the macabre, and the absurd," she said. "He was very much involved in such things as Japanese literature and philosophy. It runs very deep. *The Beastly Baby*, when it was published in 1962 by Gorey's own Fantod Press, received immediate criticism as being horribly dark, but there are two things going on there. Number one, it's a tale of birds coming and taking babies away with them. But number two, it's a stepping-off point for exploring themes of neglect and abuse."

She added, "It's nice to see Gorey is still so popular and still collected by people of all ages. That's not common. In this business I see a lot of artists and illustrators who have their peak and then fade. I like that Gorey bridges generations."

Born in Chicago, Gorey went to Harvard, then spent many years in Manhattan before moving to Cape Cod for the last decade and a half of his life. The house where he lived, in Yarmouth Port, is now open to the public. Dedicated to celebrating and preserving the life and works of Gorey, the house also honors Gorey's passion and concern for animals, raising awareness about local and national animal-welfare issues.

The house displays one of Gorey's old fur coats. The others were being sold at the rate of one per year at the house's annual fundraising event. With 14 remaining, the board of trustees decided to sell them en masse at Bloomsbury in New York City. The sale took place on December 9, 2010, not long before that branch of the auction house shut its doors.

There wasn't much presale publicity, and the auction was sparsely attended. Still, the coats brought a total of \$55,632 (including buyers' premiums), with many of them going to a single private collector.

Proceeds benefited both the Edward Gorey House and the Edward Gorey Charitable Trust. In a prepared statement, house director/curator Frederick "Rick" Jones said, "The Edward Gorey House recognizes the sensitive issues surrounding the wearing of fur. Edward had a change of heart in the mid-1980's about the wearing of fur and placed the coats in storage, never to be worn by him again. In accordance with his wishes, the Edward Gorey Charitable Trust awards grants annually to major animal welfare groups, including the Animal Rescue League of Boston, Bat Conservation International, the Xerces Society, and a number of Cape Cod organizations that share Edward's love of all animals."

An artist like Gorey isn't guaranteed academic interest, but the museum world has lately taken notice. *Elegant Enigmas: The Art of Edward Gorey* opened at the Brandywine River Museum in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, in March 2009. It has since traveled to the McNay Art Museum in San Antonio, Texas, and the Orlando Museum of Art in Florida. It is currently at the Boston Athenaeum through June 4. Lee Wierenga, assistant curator at Brandywine and organizer of the exhibition, said other venues may follow.

For more information about the Swann sale, phone (212) 254-4710 or visit (www.swanngalleries.com). For more information about the Bloomsbury sale, phone (212) 719-1000 or visit (www.bloomsburyauctions.com).

*Antioch Jensen is an anagram for the name of a regular contributor to *M.A.D.*

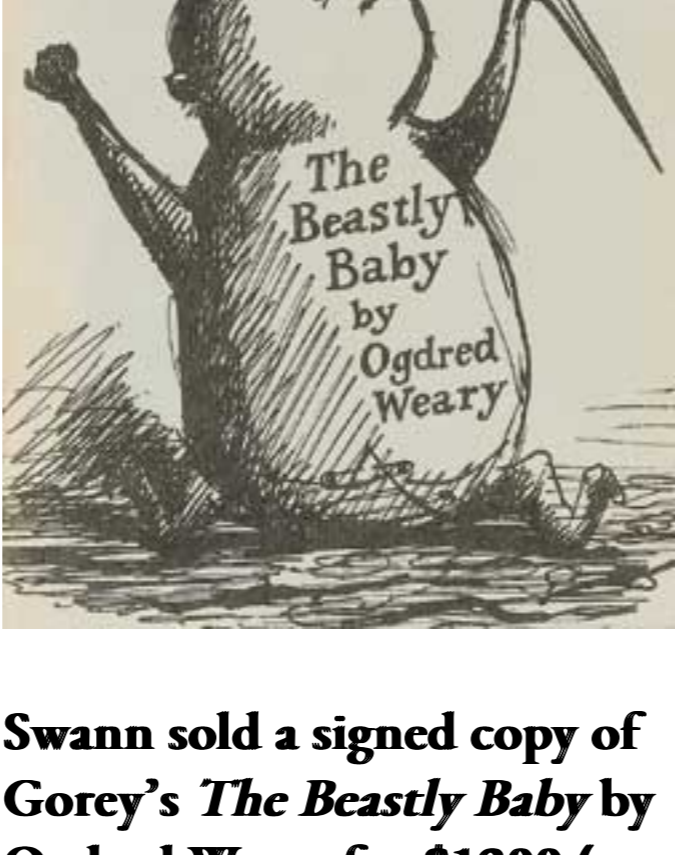
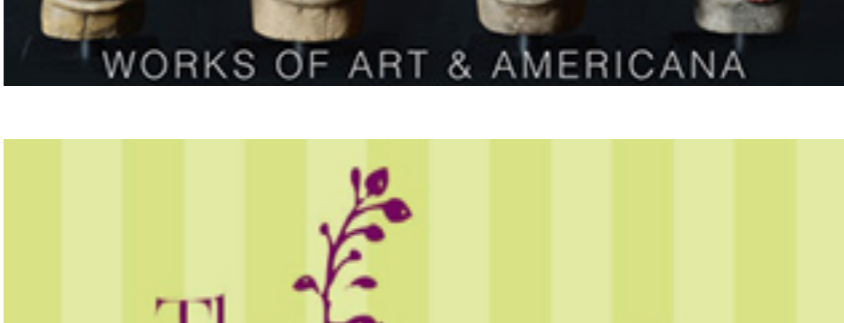
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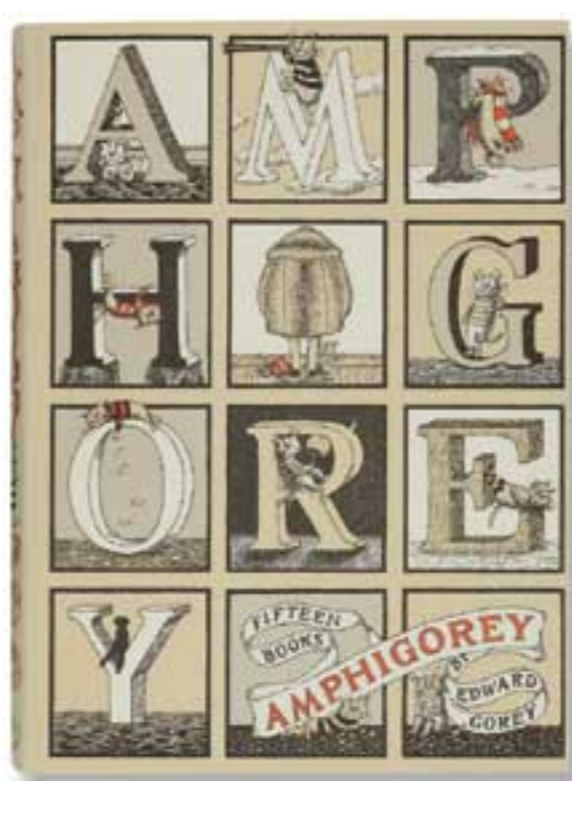
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Swann sold a signed copy of Gorey's *The Beastly Baby* by Ogred Weary for \$1200 (est. \$400/600). Published in 1962, it is one of 500 unnumbered copies of the first book bearing Gorey's own Fantod Press imprint. Ogred Weary is an anagram for Edward Gorey. According to Swann, the price was another record.



A first limited edition of Gorey's *The Sopping Thursday*, one of 26 lettered copies with an original Gorey drawing, sold at Swann to a dealer for \$9600 (est. \$1200/1800). The price is a record, according to the auction house. The book was published by the Gotham Book Mart in 1970. This copy, lettered "C," is signed and inscribed to scifi/ fantasy book dealer and collector Lloyd Currey and dated December 31, 1970.



A first limited edition of Gorey's *Amphigorey*, published in 1972, sold at Swann to a collector for \$9600 (est. \$2000/3000). The auction house said it was another record. Numbered 34 of 50 copies, it was signed by Gorey and came with the original drawing included in each limited edition.



Gorey's lynx below-the-knee coat with extra-large collar and brown-silk lining was the top lot of the Gorey fur coats sale at Bloomsbury, fetching \$7320 (est. \$800/1200). Photo courtesy Edward Gorey House.