

# After Almost 20 Years in the Suburbs, Grogan & Company Moves to Boston

by Jeanne Schinto

An auction house that has been based in Boston's southwestern suburbs for almost two decades is moving into the city. Grogan & Company has bought a piece of real estate at the foot of Beacon Hill and is transferring its operation there. On June 11 the auction house, which has rented space in Dedham, Massachusetts, since 1996, closed a deal on a large street-level storefront at 20 Charles Street. Its first auction in the new location, just a block from Boston Common, is scheduled for December 7.

The seller of the property is Jeff Diamond, whose French antiques and decorative arts business, A Room with a View, previously occupied the location. When Diamond retired from the retail end of his business last spring and consigned his inventory to Grogan, he put the space on the market.

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(He still operates a restoration company in Brookline, Massachusetts, called Restorers Without Borders.) When I spoke by phone in late August to Michael B. Grogan, the auction house's president and chief auctioneer, I asked if it was accurate to say that Diamond's career change had inadvertently inspired his firm's step into the future.

"I would say that we are a very reactive business and not so proactive in planning ahead," he replied. "The opportunity came and was just as obvious as the day is long. I had looked at properties in Boston in the past but not with a broker and not aggressively."

On the phone with Grogan and me was his 27-year-old daughter, Lucy, who in the spring of 2013 joined the company that is owned by her parents. About the nature of the decision to leave Dedham, she had something to add. "I would also say, though, that I have been fantasizing about a move to Boston for the company even before I joined it," she revealed. "It has been in our minds. It's just that now this opportunity presented itself and we saw that we could do it."

A graduate of Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, Lucy majored in art history, then spent several years working in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, as a fine art consultant for Trailside Galleries and as auction coordinator for Jackson Hole Art Auction. When she came back east, her initial role at Grogan was heading up its fine art and jewelry departments. Her new title is gallery director. She is also now a licensed auctioneer. In addition, she is a company vice president, as is her mother, Nancy.

The staff otherwise consists of long-

time Grogan appraisal consultant for Americana, Hercules Pappachristos; Robert Carroll, who joined Grogan & Company in 2012 as an appraisal consultant specializing in American pottery, collectibles, and ephemera; and a new hire, Georgina C. Winthrop, a 2014 Harvard graduate who majored in art history and the classics. "She's local Boston through and through, and lives right around the corner from our new space," said Michael. Her title is auction coordinator.

Charles Street formerly was Boston's antiques row. "It really was the cornerstone of the business when Israel Sack was there, along with Hymie Grossman and that whole generation," whose businesses were founded in the early 20th century, Michael said. "There were so many antiques shops on that stretch, even in my recent memory." Polly Latham Asian Antiques is one business that has lately relocated, to Boston's South End, but some other big names remain. Just a few blocks away from 20 Charles Street is Sotheby's Boston office at 67 1/2 Chestnut Street. About three doors down from that small, converted carriage house is Stephen Score Inc., at 73 Chestnut Street. Both father and daughter asserted that Grogan & Company would be "part of the revival of the historic antiques business in that part of town."

However, buying the Charles Street property was only the first step to bringing an auction gallery to the exclusive neighborhood, which retains its old brickwork sidewalks, wrought-iron fencing, black-painted wood shutters, and window flower-boxes, and is still lit by flickering gas lamps. Following the purchase was "a lengthy, procedural, bureaucratic process," said Michael. It involved meeting with the Beacon Hill Civic Association and receiving its blessing, then going before the City of Boston Zoning Board of Appeal, which in time granted a variance. It took patience. "When you run a small business, like I do, you're not accustomed to it. You like to make a decision and move on. This just took its time going through all the different stages, as we knocked on this door and then that one."

Asked if there would continue to be any Grogan & Company presence in Dedham, Michael said: "It remains to be seen. We do need warehousing. On Charles Street we have twenty-seven hundred square feet. We've been operating out of close to ten thousand square feet for the past nearly twenty years. We have a lease on the Dedham location for fourteen or fifteen more months. And as that winds down, we'll be able to better assess our needs. Ideally, we'll keep a little one-thousand-square-foot space in Dedham that I can work out of, so that when I come home with a full station wagon I won't



Nancy, Lucy, and Michael Grogan.

have to go into Boston to unload it."

The Charles Street property is on the first floor of a handsome high-rise structure eight stories high, built in 1920. Known as the Lincolnshire, it was converted from rental apartments to luxury one- and two-bedroom condominiums in 2007. For Grogan there is 35 feet of storefront at the sidewalk level. The commercial space next door, with the same address, is occupied by the Upper Crust Pizzeria. Next door to the pizza parlor, at 26 Charles Street, is a well-regarded restaurant and wine bar, Bin 26 Enoteca. "And we're going to have corporate accounts at each of them," Michael quipped.

It would seem logical that, given its smaller quarters, the auction house would now decide to emphasize selling smaller pieces or specialize in jewelry or rugs or paintings only. The Charles Street venue would never, for example, have been able to accommodate Grogan & Company's sale of the massive Elli Buk science-and-technology collection that took place over a period of days in April 2013. (See "Auction of the Contents of the World," *M.A.D.*, August 2013, p. 23-C.) But the Grogans asserted that they are not going to change their format.

"Our vision, our mission—to offer highly curated, well-vetted sales across all collecting genres—is still going to remain paramount in terms of what we do," said Lucy. "We're going to continue to hold our general sales that offer everything and also continue to work toward raising the bar and keep all of our auctions of that collectible quality that I think our buyers expect of us, anyway."

"We're sticking to our model," Michael concurred. "I'm old-fashioned. I think an auction should be an auction of everything. We're always amazed that even New York jewelry dealers will come up and bid on a rug or a piece of decorative arts. And clients who come for the decorative arts love the jewelry. So it's not a fantasy. You get great crossover buying at a general sale. It really happens. And we're committed to sticking

with the formula, while we may have a little less furniture and get rid of the lower third, dollar-wise."

Grogan & Company's arrival in Boston means that there will now be two auction houses holding sales in the city. The other, of course, is Skinner Inc. on Park Plaza in Back Bay, which is a ten-minute walk from Beacon Hill across Boston Common. (Christie's Boston office, at 118 Newbury Street in Back Bay, is in turn a ten-minute walk from Skinner, and, like Sotheby's Boston office, has no gallery.) But those with long memories will recall that 20 Charles Street won't be Grogan & Company's first Boston address. When Michael founded the company in 1987, after a decade at Sotheby's in New York City, he rented space on Commonwealth Avenue for a number of years.

"I moved the business from the city to Dedham so that I could raise my family," said Michael, who has three grown children in all. "It made perfect sense. Our house is a quarter of a mile from the gallery. The hours in this business can be crazy, and when I was just a five-minute walk away from home, it allowed me to spend more time being a father."

Now the time seemed right for a move back to the city. "Our core constituents are in the Boston, Brookline, Cambridge area, and on Beacon Hill, so it makes sense to get in closer proximity to them," he said.

Hearing the news of the company's move to urban quarters, Grogan clientele, no matter where they live or work, have inevitably asked about parking, said Lucy. "People gasp and ask what they're going to do, but it's surprisingly easy. People can park under the Boston Common [in the 350-car underground Boston Common Garage]. We really couldn't be closer to it. You literally pop out of the little gazebo [the pedestrian access], and you're there."

For more information, contact the auction house at (781) 461-9500 or see the Web site ([www.groganco.com](http://www.groganco.com)).

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