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Royka Sells Artist Bernard Corey's Estate

by Jeanne Schinto



Royka's Auctioneers & Appraisers, Essex, Massachusetts

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"I grew up in the area where he lived, so it was more than a sale for me," said auctioneer Paul A. Royka, after offering 750 works from the estate of plein-air artist Bernard F. Corey (1914-2000) on March 29 at Woodman's function room in Essex, Massachusetts.

A native of South Grafton, Massachusetts, a rural community near Worcester, Corey was known and loved for his New England landscapes, rendered in oils and watercolors over a prolific lifetime. An award-winning member of the American Watercolor Society, Allied Artists of America, Guild of Boston Artists, Academic Artists Society, Rockport Art Association, North Shore Arts Association, Salmagundi Club, and American Artists Professional League, Corey was also a founding member of the Blackstone Valley Art Association.

"A lot of what he did was local," said dealer Donna Kmetz of Douglas, Massachusetts, who handles his work and attended the sale. "The Blackstone Valley includes the towns around Grafton—Millbury, Uxbridge, Sutton. It's a lot of rolling farmland with real dairy farms that were quite active until fairly recently." Many places Corey painted have since been developed. "First we lose the cows, then the barns, then the fields—those beautiful, rolling vistas," said Kmetz with a sigh.

To the suggestion that Corey painted "lost" New England, Kmetz agreed. "I see him in parallel with Joseph Greenwood, a Worcester native who was a plein-air artist a hundred years before Corey." Like Corey, Greenwood (1857-1927) was prolific and self-taught. "What Greenwood painted is now industrial and urban. That's why his work is so treasured in the Worcester area."

As one can surmise from the varied artists' leagues to which Corey belonged, he went beyond his Worcester environs to paint, often traveling to Maine and Vermont as well as to Cape Ann on Boston's North Shore. In fact, in the early 1960's, he lived for a time in Rockport, according to his painting companion of almost 22 years, Michael Graves of Millbury, Massachusetts. This was after Corey made the decision to make art his full-time occupation. For the previous 25 years he had worked as a house painter and wallpaper hanger while making art on the side. When he returned to South Grafton, he established himself as a professional.

Of course, it was more than a career. "Bernard lived to paint," said Kmetz, who became a close friend of the artist. "That was his number-one priority." More than that, she said, he found it necessary to paint nature and to paint it directly from the source as opposed to working in the studio or from photographs.

Weather never stopped Corey, according to Kmetz. "He went out in any season. He could create beautiful pieces from the dreariest landscape. Most artists wouldn't even think to paint those scenes."

Corey's plein-air partiality is the reason why most works in the auction were in small format, although he did paint larger works, and some of the best of those were on exhibit during a Corey retrospective at the Rockport Art Association in the fall of 2000, just months after the artist's death. His love of being outdoors was also the reason why so many of the paintings at the sale were unfinished. "He produced constantly, although it doesn't mean he was finishing everything," said Kmetz. "He preferred to go out and paint something new."

Graves said he thought more than half the paintings at the auction wouldn't have been "allowed" by Corey to leave his studio. "He was very fussy. They needed to be finished. He would have wanted to look them over and make a few more judgments."

Bidders perceived the unfinished quality of many works, and that was reflected in the prices achieved overall. Top prices (including buyers' premiums) were \$2950, \$2478, and \$1652, with most in the low to mid-three figures. The lowest price achieved was \$236, since reserves were in place and opening bids were required to be at least \$200.

On the approximately 650 lots that sold, the gross was about \$300,000, said Royka. That makes the average price approximately \$461 and on target, since every lot was estimated the same (\$400/600).

Meanwhile, auction records on Artfact (www.artfact.com) show Corey artworks regularly have brought \$1000 to \$3000 over the last decade or so, with the top price for a Corey recorded there as \$6910 (est. \$500/700). It was a 10" x 14" oil on canvasboard, *Farm and Fields in Late Winter*, which sold on July 16, 1998, at a Skinner "Studio Sale" in Bolton, Massachusetts.

In private sales over the years, prices have been even higher, with a few of Corey's larger, best works selling for \$10,000 to \$16,000, said Kmetz, who has handled some of those transactions.

Except for his time in Rockport, Corey lived all his life in the house in South Grafton, built by his grandfather. He never married. "He did have a lady friend," said Graves, "but if you called him up at the last minute and asked if he wanted to go painting, all of a sudden the lady friend got the phone call [saying he'd have to postpone their date]. His whole life was art."

Besides Graves, Corey painted with many other artist-friends. The list, a pantheon, includes Emile Gruppe, Aldro Hibbard, Paul Strisik, Don Stone, Tom Nicholas, T.M. Nicholas, Marty Ahearn, W. Lester Stevens, Stow Wengenroth, Robert Duffy, and T.A. Charron.

Graves, born in 1952, said Corey was "like a second father" to him. Recalling how they first became painting buddies, he said, "In 1978 I was president of the Blackstone Valley Art Association, and we needed a judge for a juried show. Corey agreed to do it. I later asked him if I could go painting with him sometime. He called the following weekend. It was in the middle of winter. We started painting almost every weekend from then on." Later, Graves took a night job, working 3 to 11 p.m. "So I could paint with him during the day, every day." He held that job for 17 years.

"Before we went out for the day, he liked to get coffee and a doughnut, and that's when we would discuss art," said Graves, who was able to become a full-time artist 13 years ago. "But once you got out on location, he didn't want to talk. When you started painting, everything was totally quiet for three or four hours. He didn't want to be bothered while he worked."

He wouldn't pick the obvious view to paint, Graves said. "The guys in Rockport would come down, and Bernard would drive past twenty great farms and then stop in the middle of an empty field, and he'd end up making something great out of it." He laughed. "He was a little sneaky. I think he was sometimes looking to see what people could make out of something [as unpromising as] that."

Graves said Corey taught him "a tremendous amount," but his help wasn't for people who would "bug" him. "If you just kept your mouth shut, you had a much better chance of hearing some words of wisdom."

On some occasions, however, Corey delivered unsolicited critiques. "There were times when we went out with people who wanted to be done after only two or three hours," said Graves. Corey would walk over to them and give them the full weight of his experience. "Then he'd walk back to me and say, 'Well, that gave us a couple more hours.'"

By all accounts, Corey's house was filled with his unfinished paintings. He was well known for allowing people to come in and pick out ones that he would promise to complete for them. There were many boxes with people's names on them, said Graves. "A year before he died, we counted up promised works that people were waiting for." There were 110.

The prices of paintings bought directly from Corey out of the South Grafton house were \$200 to \$250, according to several sources. True, he sold low, but the business logic was solid, said Graves. That price point gave him a steady income minus the bother of framing, negotiating, schlepping the work to galleries, and so forth. By not charging more, he conserved his energy for what really mattered to him—painting.

Obviously, he sold to a group of dealers that he trusted. Besides Kmetz, in Massachusetts they included Oggie Dalton of Greywalls Gallery in Wellesley Hills; Page Waterman Gallery in Wellesley; Pierce Galleries in Nantucket and Hingham; and Bonnie Crane/The Crane Collection in Manchester; as well as Wiscasset Bay Gallery in Maine, and the Wallace Gallery in East Hampton, New York.

Certain private collectors were also allowed to come choose, including John Gale of Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Gale arrived at the Royka sale's preview at 8:30 a.m. The doors didn't open officially until 10, but it took awhile for the crew to notice the quiet mild-mannered Gale going through the boxes. There had been two previous previews, at Tower Hill Botanic Garden in Boylston, Massachusetts, and at the Guild of Boston Artists downtown on Newbury Street. But many people, including Gale, said the sale had come upon them without much prior notice.

Royka himself hadn't been given much time to prepare. He was called in to organize the sale just "a month and a half or two months" before it took place. Postcards and e-mails went out to his lists, but his main strategy was to advertise "heavily" on the Internet, he said.

Asked how many lots were sold on line, Royka said about 20%. But more important in his view was the number of on-line bids overall. By his calculation, 90% of the lots sold in the room had underbidders on line.

Prior to the sale, some people expressed concern that the Corey market would be flooded by so much material being offered at once. Later, they seemed assuaged. "The next several months will tell," said Kmetz, "but I think a lot of things got sold to people who aren't in a big hurry to sell them again. And this is good."

Royka said that, by his reckoning, about half of the lots went to retail buyers and the other half to dealers, most of whom "have no intention of putting them back on the market" soon.

Besides collectors and dealers, the approximately 100 people who attended the auction included Corey's framer (Paul Carter Goodnow of Lincoln, Rhode Island) and the person who was Corey's newspaper delivery boy 40 years ago. It felt like a final tribute to the artist, many people observed.

Many complimented Royka on a smoothly run sale as well as on his good-humored delivery and stamina. The sale started at noon, and when it ended, seven and a half hours later, Royka had called every lot. "I'm not going to be able to talk for a week—my wife will love it," he said partway through.

"He did a great job with the quantity he had to deal with," said Kmetz. "He organized it in the best way possible and gave each piece fair due and still kept it moving."

Some people did complain about the images on the Internet and onscreen on the day of the sale. The colors were much more saturated than in Corey's paintings. "The bright reds and oranges were colors he would never have used," said Kmetz.


Seeing the colors accurately was especially important because he didn't date anything, and his palette changed over time. In the beginning it was fairly dark, in "the Andrew Wyeth" style, said Graves. Gradually it lightened and became more impressionistic, after he came to appreciate Willard Metcalf (1858-1925) and the Old Lyme school of painters in Connecticut, said Kmetz. Perhaps, too, the lightness came from the realization that he had managed to live a purposeful, independent artist's life on his own terms.

In those later years, Corey did a lot of paintings from his car, said Graves. "He invented an easel that could be attached to the dashboard. It saved him from having to get out in the rain, sleet, or snow. I was doing most of the driving by then. I'd ask him where he wanted to go. He'd say it really didn't matter where. It was always 'a design problem,' whether it was a panorama or a simple little tree."

For more information, contact Royka's at (978) 660-5678 or see the Web site (www.roykas.com).

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