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The Estate of the Reverend Peter J. Gomes, Unrepentant Collector

by Jeanne Schinto

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The Annual Delaware Antiques Show

Grogan & Company, Dedham, Massachusetts

by Jeanne Schinto

The Reverend Professor Peter J. Gomes. A complete profile of the man, "God and Harvard" by Robert S. Boynton, appeared in *The New Yorker* on November 11, 1996. It coincided with publication of Gomes's best-seller *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart* (1996). In that profile it's revealed that Gomes applied to Winterthur's program in connoisseurship, but was waylaid by a Bates professor of religion who suggested that he first spend a year at Harvard Divinity School. The antiques world's loss was the spiritual world's gain. To hear Gomes for yourself, visit The Memorial Church Web site (www.memorialchurch.harvard.edu), where many of his sermons are archived. Photo by Melissa Mahoney Photography.

"It's a different crowd than we're used to seeing," Michael B. Grogan observed toward the end of the Saturday morning preview, before he began the spring sale at his Dedham, Massachusetts, gallery on the weekend of March 24 and 25. "Lots of new faces."

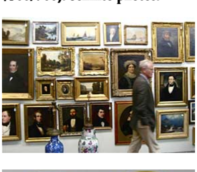
To auction veterans, it was obvious that this wasn't an ordinary audience. For one thing, there were way too many people for the middling quality of the items and currently unfashionable period and style—British and American Victorian, edging into Edwardian—that they represented. What is more, many of those people were very well dressed, with a number of the men wearing jackets and bow ties with their horn-rimmed glasses. (True, Grogan wears a bow tie and horn rims, but he's usually the only one in the salesroom in that attire.) Then, once the auction began, another anomaly became obvious; everyone was so attentive, even Grogan remarked on it.

A 12½" tall silver chalice, monogrammed "PJG," dated "25 December 2002," and inscribed "The Good Life," sold to Cynthia W. Rossano for $3068 (est. $800/1200). Retailed by Shreve & Company, San Francisco, it will be presented by Rossano and her family to Bates College when the chapel is renamed The Peter J. Gomes Memorial Chapel in October.

Just a few lots into the sale, as he prepared to sell a figured mahogany pier table, he told the assemblage: "You know, Peter's influence is terrific. I've never heard a quieter crowd. Everyone's paying attention, just like at one of his sermons. I take no credit."

"Peter" was Peter John Gomes (1942-2011), who from 1974 until his death was Plummer Professor of Christian Morals and Pusey Minister in The Memorial Church at Harvard University, "the" church for the Harvard community. Beyond titles, however, he was unclassifiable, said many parishioners, former students, colleagues, friends, and associates who came to the auction to celebrate his life as much as to participate in the sale.

Gomes hung his paintings salon style in his residences, and Grogan hung them the same way at the preview. Just behind the man is the one shown in the detail photo. *Portrait of a Boy with Hat*, a 27" x 22" (sight size) 19th-century American school oil on canvas, sold for $767 (est. $500/700). Schinto photos.



"Afro-Saxon" and "black Yankee" were two of his self-descriptions, the duality derived from his mother's birth into an aristocratic African-American family on Boston's Beacon Hill and his father's immigrant path to this country from the Cape Verde Islands. Another way he once famously referred to himself was as "a Christian who happens as well to be gay."

The top lots of the various-owners session of the weekend sale were two pairs of 19th-century Russian porcelain plates from a military service. Made by the Imperial Porcelain Manufactory of St. Petersburg during the reign of Nicholas I, 1825-55, all were dated, signed by the artist, and inscribed. The two in the top row, 9¼" diameter and dated 1828 and 1832, sold as one lot for $79,650 (est. $5000/7000). The two on the bottom row, 9 3/8" diameter and dated 1839 and 1843, sold together for $76,700 (est. $5000/7000). Both pairs went to Moscow, according Michael Grogan, who said underbidders were calling from Italy, Germany, and Belgium, as well as New York City, Washington, D.C., and Florida.

Gomes made his first public statement about his sexual preference, using just those words, as part of a speech he gave to a few hundred students who gathered on the steps of The Memorial Church one day in November 1991. They were there to protest after a conservative undergraduate magazine proclaimed that the Bible, among other authorities, had deemed "gay life" to be "immoral" and "pitiable," and a gay student had found the word "FAGGOT" scrawled on his dormitory door.

Gomes's friend Raffi Berberian of Charlestown, Massachusetts, said that Gomes always maintained that his electrifying coming-out was as unplanned as the celebrity that followed it was unexpected and unwanted. Although he had been mulling over the idea of a sermon on the subject of sex for some time, Gomes chose that moment because it seemed the right one, Berberian said. He meant that it was the right time politically, but to Gomes, it must have also seemed right dramatically. For as anyone who heard Gomes preach or lecture even once knows, this richly baritone-voiced master of eloquent speech understood the effectiveness of good theatrics.

A 12" x 9" oil on panel portrait study of a gentleman by Alexandre-Jean Dubois Drahonet (1791-1834), signed and dated 1833, fetched $2006 (est. $500/700).

A Baptist minister who graduated from Harvard Divinity School in 1968, he was included in the premier issue of *Talk* magazine as part of its feature article "The Best Talkers in America: Fifty Big Mouths We Hope Will Never Shut Up." Widely regarded as one of the most distinguished Christian sermonizers in the history of the English-speaking pulpit, he participated in the presidential inaugurations of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush. A longtime Republican ("Of course I'm a Republican. Didn't Lincoln free the slaves?"), he did, however, switch parties to vote for his friend Deval Patrick when he ran for governor of Massachusetts in 2006—and never switched back.

Gomes's Harvard College chair, bearing a plaque that read "Peter John Gomes/ 1993/ 25 Years of Service," sold for $3068 (est. $200/300) to a local woman in the room. Schinto photo.

"He was a contrarian," Berberian recalled. "In fact, he would say that about himself. And I think he thought of Jesus Christ as a contrarian too."

Even as an unapologetic, unrepentant collector, Gomes could not be categorized. An academic, he did not approach collecting academically. Rather, to judge from his essay "An Unruly Passion for Things," published in *Every Room Tells a Story: Tales from the Pages of Nest Magazine* (2001), edited by Joseph Holtzman, he collected for the sheer love of color and form, and for philosophical reasons. "Not only do we bring other people's things into our world and make them, however temporarily, our own," he wrote, "but we are also possessed by that which we possess and seek. Thus does the past live, recreated by our hands. Collecting is the ultimate redistribution of wealth and beauty."

Gomes's Classical Revival carved mahogany four-poster bed from Oceanside sold for $2242 (est. $1000/1500).

Those who chanced to hear him deliver an address at the Winter Antiques Show in 2010 will recall that he spoke on the same subject, elaborating on the idea of collecting as a way of stewarding beautiful objects for future generations. The lecture also gave him the opportunity to exercise his bountiful wit. For example, when asked whether there were eras or styles of antiques he preferred less than others, he replied, "I personally don't care much for what is called 'primitive art.' I don't mind waiting until they have perfected it."

The late Federal carved mahogany bowfront sideboard, 78" wide, sold to applause in the room for $2360 (est. $1500/2500). It had been at Sparks House. Schinto photo.

Born in Boston and raised in Plymouth, Gomes recalled to a reporter some years ago that he made his first purchase as a collector in an antiques shop in his hometown as a teenager in 1957. It was a small painting of a flower in a vase for which he paid $10 on installment. When he died, it was still in his possession, displayed on the wall of a guest room at Sparks House, Gomes's official, Harvard-owned residence on the university campus.

The 24" tall pair of blue and white Chinese vases sold on the phone for $2950 (est. $800/1200). The 22" tall George III inlaid mahogany bracket clock sold in the room for $2124 (est. $1000/1500). Cataloged as a 19th-century or earlier copy of a 17th-century portrait, a 23" x 18" oil on canvas Portrait of Beatrice Cenci after Guidi Reni/Elisabetta Sirani realized $2006 (est. $800/1200). All came from Oceanside, Gomes's home in Plymouth, Massachusetts. Schinto photo.

Built in 1838 in the late Greek Revival style, the yellow-and-white clapboard manse is a formal place where in 1974, Gomes, who loved to entertain, inaugurated a weekly tea for anyone who wanted to drop by at 5 p.m. It's a tradition that continues, although nobody is designated "pourer" anymore, as they were in Gomes's time. Gomes's early 19th-century five-piece silver tea service was offered at the sale, selling to a local antiques dealer for a mid-estimate $3245 (including buyer's premium).

This 21¼" x 18" painted wood icon came from a local picker. Cataloged as either Greek or Russian and estimated at $1000/1500, it sold for $11,800.

Sparks House was jam-packed with Gomes's collections. That alone would have been daunting for Gomes's executor, Daniel Sanks, and Grogan and his staff to handle, but Gomes had a second Massachusetts residence, in Plymouth, equally full. Named Oceanside, the three-story "cottage" had been built on the waterfront in 1898. Having previously lived for many years in Plymouth in a circa 1799 house with his widowed mother, Orissa (1901-1982), Gomes bought Oceanside in 2005, fully expecting to spend many more years preaching, teaching, writing, lecturing, entertaining, and of course collecting. The sale, whose proceeds went to Bates College in Lewiston, Maine, where Gomes was an undergraduate (class of '65), dispersed in 550 lots the contents of both homes.

I suspected and Grogan confirmed that although he has had larger sales by lot, he has never needed as much of his gallery space for previews as he did this time. The estate included countless framed prints, dozens of Classical busts, scores of anonymous ancestral portraits and pastoral landscapes, table lamps, floor lamps, multiple chandeliers, an enormous number of mirrors, many carpets, vases, tall clocks and mantel clocks, sofas, armchairs, other upholstered seating, side tables, sideboards, card tables, books and bookcases, desks, corner cabinets, fireplace equipment, candelabra and candlesticks, porcelains, bronzes, urns, and on and on. In short, it was a complete antithesis of the mid-century modern sensibility.

To help the friends of Gomes who wanted to bid on specific items that they remembered being in one house or the other, Grogan organized the catalog into sections for each residence. Those in turn were divided into "Master Bedroom," "Dining Room," "Kitchen," and such. In fact, Grogan said people did come in asking questions such as, "Where's the vase that used to be on his dining-room table in the house in Plymouth?"

I began my own previewing by trying to get a measure of the man by analyzing his possessions. Why all the British royal family stuff, for example? Almost immediately, however, I was caught up short by some typed pages that accompanied a 10" tall plaster bust of a young African-American man, made by Eunice Jameson Fox Phister (1912-1996). The pages were the eulogy that Gomes delivered at Phister's memorial service. The first line said, "After we are gone, people will try to find out something about us by the things that we have accumulated and left behind."

Whoa, providence! It was Gomes speaking to me from the grave (he's buried in Plymouth). I read on, only to discover that what he found most telling among Phister's possessions was not an object per se. It was a framed excerpt of a poem by Wordsworth.

Gomes, however, didn't leave me to flail. For it seemed providential, too, that Berberian and I chose seats next to each other when the sale began. Otherwise, in the crowd, I doubt we would have met. Many people were talking to the general press about Gomes the preacher, teacher, and spiritual advisor. Berberian, whose tastes are similar to Gomes's, was able to help me understand Gomes the collector.

When they met in 1979, Berberian said he immediately found him "to represent the best of old New England." Today's prevalent taste for stark, spare design perplexed Gomes, he said. "For him—and for me—it evoked barrenness and deprivation. Peter and I were convinced that music, architecture, and art had reached their apogee in the late Victorian and Edwardian periods."

A real-estate developer, Berberian elaborated: "My company builds fancy condominiums, and people put these hideously barren, sterile pieces of furniture in them, and I think, 'Oh, I don't want to be there!' This sale was a good contrast to that. This auction told people, 'There's another way to live.'" In the kind of home that Berberian has created and that Gomes created, "when you put a newspaper down, it doesn't destroy the look of the room!"

Berberian, however, isn't happy when people describe the style as Victorian. "It's not," he maintained. "It's the romantic style. It's tassels, candlelight, swags, silver, and things that glisten."

Of the many mirrors in the sale, for example, Berberian said, "Yes, Peter had scads of mirrors. People think it's vanity, but it was not for vanity. It was for hospitality. Mirrors reflect candlelight. That was 'atmosphere' he was creating. A mirror in a dining room is essential. The style is so misunderstood."

Likewise, the amount of lighting has an explanation, he told me. "[Gomes] did not believe in recessed ceiling or track lighting. A romantic atmosphere is created, in addition to candlelight, by illumination from sources scattered about."

The marble busts provided atmosphere too, said Berberian—"an atmosphere of history." A history major at Bates, Gomes loved history, declared his friend. He also loved Shakespeare, the classics, and "clergy of past generations," and all of these have their representatives in the busts.

As for the royal family collection, the Anglophilic Gomes "had a personal relationship with royal family members," said Berberian. Others confirmed it, and Gomes's book *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus* (2007) begins with a recollection of socializing at Royal Lodge, the Windsor residence of the Queen Mother. (Note: he isn't merely name-dropping. His conversation with the Queen Mum has to do with the main point of the book.)

Berberian said he really hadn't intended to buy anything at the sale, but he did go home with six framed prints of royalty and clergy of the 19th and 20th centuries for $531 (est. $600/800). "I bought that lot because it's my memento of Peter. They were so Peter," he said. The subjects are almsmen, prebendaries, a duke, a prince, a bishop, and a couple of lords. The royals are polychrome lithographs; the various clergymen are black-and-white engravings by John Pine after drawings by Joseph Highmore.

Berberian also bought a pair of Louis XVI-style bergères for $885 (est. $300/500) and Gomes's Regency-style two-pedestal banded mahogany dining table for $1298 (est. $1200/1500). The prints, the chairs, and table had been in Oceanside. "What am I going to do with a third dining room table?" Berberian laughed.

Seated a couple of rows in front of Berberian and me was Christopher M. Laconi of Cambridge, Massachusetts. Conspicuous for buying nearly two dozen lots, the consultant for IBM's strategy group told me that he planned to donate some pieces to Harvard's Signet Society. An undergraduate and faculty association for arts and letters, some of whose former members include T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost, Norman Mailer, George Plimpton, George Santayana, Wallace Stevens, and John Updike, the Signet Society has a board of trustees over which Gomes presided through the 1980's and early '90's. A current board member, Laconi said its annual dinner is having a big tribute to Gomes this year.

While studying at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and Harvard Business School, Laconi attended Gomes's teas at Sparks House on Wednesdays. They met earlier, however, when Laconi was at Bates (class of '05) and an elected student representative to the Bates College board of trustees. Gomes was serving on its board at the same time. Something else they had in common was public-speaking ability. While at Bates, Laconi became a debate team star. Asked to describe why Gomes was such an effective speaker, Laconi said, "He had the unusual ability to put the audience at ease, whether it was one person in a private conversation or a thousand people filling an auditorium or a church. He did it by means of a combination of wry humor, conveyed familiarity, and speaking up to his audience, making the audience feel valued, intrigued, and very much a part of what he was thinking about a given topic."

Among the items Laconi bought were a Queen Anne mahogany side chair ($118), a Classical figured mahogany pier table with mirrored back ($1062), a mahogany and brass hall stand ($472), a 19th-century oil on canvas landscape with water view ($295), a four-note wood xylophone lotted with a top-hat box ($177), several portraits and landscapes, and a stone bust on a pedestal ($354). All came from Sparks House.

From the Oceanside part of the collection, he also bought a Regency-style mahogany inlaid two-drawer sofa table ($236); a pair of Baroque-style carved walnut side chairs lotted with a Jacobean-style carved caned-back side chair ($354); a George III-style inlaid mahogany bookcase cabinet ($472); more portraits; and more of everything. Asked whether he shared Gomes's *horror vacui* approach to decorating, Laconi answered, "He had the taste and the means. He exceeded me in both, but I aspire to it."

Berberian and Laconi are familiar with the antiques and auction world, but many at the sale had never been to a public auction. All told, Grogan said, he had 23% new registered bidders, and though he didn't break it down, a good guess is that many of the new bidders were there on Saturday rather than Sunday, when Grogan offered 485 lots from sources other than the Gomes estate.

One auction newcomer was Jim Nuzzo of Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, for whom Gomes was "a dear friend, counselor, and all-around inspiration over the years." Nuzzo, who attended Harvard Medical School and then Harvard Law School, often ran into Gomes on campus. During his law school years, Nuzzo said, "Every time I'd see him, he'd say, 'Good morning, your honor.' And I'd say, 'Good morning, reverend, how are you?' And he'd say, 'I flourish, I flourish.' I never met a man who so grabbed life with both hands."

Gomes officiated at the wedding of Nuzzo and his wife, Bryann, and the baptisms of their three children. "When he'd come to visit, he'd look down over his round glasses, wag his finger, and say, 'Boys and girl, I hope you're being very good. I married your parents and baptized all of you, and when I meet my Maker, He's going to ask about how you're doing, and I do not intend to go to hell because of you!"

Nuzzo imitated Gomes's intonations and voice tenor for comic effect, but he wasn't feeling jovial when he first got to the auction. "I thought, 'This is like going to a funeral home.' There was a wake atmosphere about it. At the memorial service it was sad, but it was also a celebration. At the auction there was a Dickensian quality to it. A person's life was going on the auction block. He had spent so much of his time collecting it all; now it was all being dispersed. At first I was upset, but then I realized half the people in the room were not [antiques trade] professionals. It's like little pieces of Peter's life went to the people who loved him."

One piece that Nuzzo did get was from Oceanside—an English mahogany tall-case clock by William Packer of Buckingham for which he paid $2655 (est. $2000/2500). Nuzzo warmed to "the old idea of a grandfather's clock that gets passed down in the family. Peter didn't have a family, so we all were his family, and now we have things of Peter's that we will pass down. This will be Peter's clock, and the fact that the money we paid is going to Bates is also quite wonderful."

More than money is going to Bates. The college will also get Gomes's silver chalice. Monogrammed "PJG," dated "25 December 2002," and inscribed "The Good Life," it was given to him by his friend and editor, Cynthia W. Rossano of Wellesley, Massachusetts. In an e-mail, Rossano wrote: "I gave it to Peter on Christmas following the successful publication by HarperOne of our book, *The Good Life: Truths That Last in Times of Need* [2002], for the express purpose of his putting it into The Memorial Church at Harvard. He never put it into the church but rather kept it in Plymouth, where it has stayed for ten years. Immediately when I saw that it had been placed in the auction, I determined to bid it back, so that my family could present it to Bates College when the chapel is renamed 'The Peter J. Gomes [Memorial] Chapel' next October." Indeed, she did exactly that with a winning bid of $3068 (est. $800/1200) to cheers and a round of applause.

The Sunday session was business as usual. A small audience of 60 people at its peak competed against many phones, absentee bids, and the Internet for property from various estates and collections. And unlike those attending on Saturday, the Sunday auction-goers decidedly did not snap their catalog pages in unison, making a sound like that of everybody turning the pages of a hymnal at church!

Still, there were some moments of drama on Sunday that got the crowd's attention. One came when 15 phone bidders vied for two pairs of early 19th-century Russian porcelain plates from a military service made during the reign of Nicholas I, 1825-55, each pair estimated at $5000/7000. Consigned by a local source, they went to the same Muscovite for $79,650 and $76,700.

The two-day auction as a whole totaled over $1.2 million, with the Gomes portion of the sale representing $345,315, according to Grogan. Of the Gomes estate, Grogan said, "I thought it was quite something. I became sort of the repository for everybody's emotions. I definitely understand the people who came in and rolled their eyes and said, 'What a horrible ending to a great life!' but you and I understand that it's just 'stuff,' and he understood that too. Peter knew he was just the temporary custodian of it, and the selling of it had to be done, so why not do it with three hundred of your friends in the audience? You can't beat that. I would love that to happen when I'm dead and gone."

"That said," he continued, "I thought it went beautifully. It was in his 'hometown,' if you will, done by a local man-yours truly-who knew him and had done his appraisal. And I think the prices were stronger than I might have imagined in this market. I think that the provenance definitely added to the fun of it, but I also think that luster added to the results."

For more information, contact Grogan & Company at (781) 461-9500; Web site (www.groganco.com).

This tuxedo tail coat by Raffinati, part of a "black-tie" memorabilia lot that included a black silk bow tie and Gomes's top hat by Satchell & Sons, London, sold for $236 (est. $50/100) to a phone bidder. Schinto photo.

Another lot of Gomes memorabilia included one of his signature homburg hats, a selection of four bow ties, and his Harvard College tie (shown). The lot sold on the phone for $472 (est. $50/75). Schinto photo.

This 56" tall 12-light metal and crystal chandelier had hung in the dining room at Oceanside, Gomes's home in Plymouth. It sold to applause for $7080 (est. $2000/4000). Schinto photo.

***Girl with Kitten* by Emile Munier (1840-1895), a 24¾" x 20" oil on canvas, sold on the phone to the antiques trade for $70,800 (est. $20,000/40,000)—the top painting lot in the sale's various-owners session. Schinto photo.**

Schintó photo.

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