

It Pays to be Positive: One Art Shopper's Valuable Discovery

Written by Lisa Marie Barnes

What's it like to feel from the beginning that you've picked a winner? When determining value, be it of a hot shot athletic recruit, or an exceptional painting up for bid, a buyer needs to feel the purchase will be a "stand-out," a "find," the kind of commodity that outshines its competitors. How amazing is it then, that in the art world. When a painting might be so hidden that its very discovery is an example of assurance. Because of the buyer's confident first impression, further inquiry is made, deepening his flirtation with a diamond in the rough. In the eyes of the beholder, any object may be thought beautiful and distinctive, but circumstances may obscure this stature over time. What those who shop at thrift shops, auctions, garage sales, and off-beat discount stores know is that obscurity presents fun challenges. So when a notable 19th century still life becomes the discovery of an amateur Goodwill art shopper, there's confirmation that good things do happen to good people. In fact, the impulse to pick a winner emerges from knowing how to discern when something beautiful and obscure is so appealing, that it is more valuable than the \$17.00 he paid.

Imagine, a rack of blotchy canvasses leaning together, their colors and designs so random that one is reminded of frenzied Filene's basement shoppers, their angular elbows jabbing as they dig and dig through piles of bandanas in search of a silk scarf. Such intensity may have fueled David Wood's search while shopping at Goodwill, a retail store that specializes in cheap, practical, and eclectic items, as well as left-over junk, all acquired through donations. Mr. Wood, a Phoenix resident, left Goodwill with a still

life oil painting, its subject a vase of abundant flowers. Did he predict that in his hands was a winner, a rare find? He must have been pretty confident that more was there than immediately met the eye, but his impulse was to just be happy with something striking, and keep it to himself. Luckily, David Wood decided he needed a real appraisal, so he contacted me at my business Rare Art Appraisals and Auctions is located in Phoenix, Arizona. Even sight unseen, Ms. Barnes assured Mr. Wood that her fees would be determined by an hourly rate of \$175, rather than by the painting's assumed Fair Market Value price value. My words were a harbinger of hope that set things in motion. Of course, were it not for Mr. Wood's curiosity, faith, and predilection, he would not have the opportunity to directly benefit, nor would the still life be afforded its legacy, its proper admiration, and rightful destiny. From Mr. Wood's description of the found painting that yes, he was definitely on to something.

A painting like David Wood's Goodwill discovery epitomizes why being able to pick a winner is like a domino effect. The good starts with an epiphany, the light bulb that blinks, "It's a winner!" From that moment on, good things start to bring the right people together. David Wood did indeed bring the canvas to my office, and we carefully removed it from its crumbling frame. I noted the artist's signature, "Severin Roesen," and the date, "1849." I then did a search on Artprice.com to look up current comparables. Severin Roesen was a successful still life specialist in the mid 1800's, his lush paintings of grandiose flowers situated upon mantels and within vases were renowned for their size and precise shading. Was Mr. Wood's find really what it appeared to be? Wood's purchase had started out unusually obscure; the painting was nobody's winner. Yet I had one of those AHA moments! After investigating Severin Roesen's comparable works

and the painting's condition, I became even more certain that Wood's discovery was a masterpiece. I decided to consult Judith O'Toole, a curator at the Westmoreland Museum of American Art, in Greensburg, Pennsylvania, whose knowledge of Roesen's collected works could certainly authenticate my claim.

Judith O'Toole's opinion was a painting of this caliber was indeed real! Not unlike an Olympic athlete who in the moments before the shotgun, braces for the race that would justify years of sweat and training. Ms. O'Toole confirmed my predictions; they would be as elated as a Nike agent ready to pitch an endorsement deal with a gold medalist. O'Toole herself was so ecstatic about this painting's possibilities that she convinced a museum benefactor to front its shipping costs-- and from there things moved quickly. This was big time. Her bet concerning the painting's identity simply perpetuated the message that good things truly happen to good people. However, I and Mr. Wood held onto their seats until after curator O'Toole had secured the opinion of Karl Gabosh restorer/conservator. After inspecting the painting, Gabosh likewise marveled at the painting's historical relevance, despite admitted weaknesses in its condition.

In fact, "Still Life with Flowers" was one of Roesen's notable pieces that had exhibited at the American Art Union Exhibition in 1850, an exhibition which was also Roesen's last public showing. Mr. Gabosh believed that restoring "Still Life with Flowers" to its 1849 original condition would be challenging and expensive; in fact, he was skeptical that the year's labor needed to complete the restoration process would even be worth the expenditure. Not only did Gabosh hope to bring back the painting's original grandeur, he also wanted to resurrect "Still Life with Flowers" among its peers, likely completing Roesen's oeuvre. Ultimately,

he intended to find a home for it within a revered collection of American Art, but he would first need to own it. It is important to note that amongst the most significant collectors & collections is that of The White House, which is displayed in the State Diplomatic Reception room and was purchased by Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis.

Because any restoration efforts might prove futile, Mr. Gabosh encouraged Mr. Wood to sell it at the outset, so that the larger expenses of repairing its excessive dryness, its cracking, its loss of paint, and the diminished vitality to its color might proceed, at an estimated cost of \$25,000. Bringing the painting back to its original form would be painstaking, and it would be pricy, but these were risks that Karl Gabosh felt compelled to take.

I saw the irony in how this Roesen “Still Life with Flowers” fell into the hands of David Wood, it seemed this fateful event was a catalyst for countless good things. David Wood had remained positive about his first impressions, and this assurance sparked the intrigue that would bring his diamond in the rough its acclaim. I appraised “Still Life with Flowers,” by Severin Roesen, to have a Fair Market Value of \$300,000. Perhaps that’s the beauty of seeking an expert art appraisal, or maybe it’s just a story that all bargain shoppers can optimistically believe. Clearly, good things can still happen to good people, and sometimes the treasure can be found in the most inconspicuous of places.

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