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Appraising antiques in the computer world: Part 1

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Did you ever stop to think, as I have, about what of all the new technologies today will most radically change our lives? The 15th century saw the invention mechanical press to the West. Photography may have been the biggest changer of society in the 1800s. And don't forget the early 20th century breakthrough of the gas powered engines driving cars and airplanes. Telephones came into general use in the early 1900s, although when it comes to actual change, those ubiquitous cell phones seem to far out rank land lines. More recently the use of personal computers has created enormous change, a greatly enhanced change when considering what came with those computers: the Internet and those internet search engines which affect our lives at great speed.

Although these make our research tasks efficient and easy, we need to guard our exuberance about the marvels of this new technology and to avoid substituting experience and good judgment for a couple of hits on Google.

Regardless of what we appraise we are practitioners of esotery, the same thing search engines thrive on. Several years ago were I to appraise a work of art, I'd reply on old auction records. Thumbing through old auction catalogs hoping to find comparative examples of the item being appraised. If that didn't work I'd resort to other alternatives like consulting the acquisitions and deacquisitions of museums, interviewing dealers, or, finally, a combination of guesswork and comparative analysis. This was a lot of work.

But this is 2007. Go on line and type in the artist's name and some other key words, like "artist" or "oil painting" and get instant results. Take the name "Van Gough". Through my art service on line within 3 seconds I have 38 examples of his work listed before me, sorted any way I want showing, in many cases, a photo and exactly what the work sold for at auction. Google "Van Gough" and get "about 2,440,000 hits in .1 seconds", although most hits will not relate to actual sale records or prices.

Doing research on a famous artist is easy, but using search engines when the name or fact has been (almost) lost in obscurity is another benefit. Even scraps of information can help in making accurate monetary evaluations; still the resultant accurate appraisal would have been impossible without an appraiser's experience and knowledge.

Since the Internet began numerous art services have sprung up to help appraise artists and antiques records. Raw data is compiled from past auctions, resale estimates, condition reports, and even photographs with actual selling prices are copied in each record. These were combined with a search engine and offered to anyone who will pay the annual fee. Anyone with the password can type in the name of their favorite artist or a short description of their antiques and if data is available quickly see a list of sale records of things in the search parameters.

Besides being an appraiser I am also an antique dealer. In the dead of winter when things are slow

and its cold outside I like to stay indoors, but on this weekend I'm up at 5:30AM driving to Connecticut for an auction to buy inventory. I arrived about 2 hours before the sale. While previewing the items in the sale, I came upon a pastel winter landscape signed "A. C. Goodwin". I judged from my experience with fine arts that this was a well done landscape, but knew nothing about the artist. I did not have my laptop, so using a search engine to guide me in knowing how to bid was not possible. The auctioneer could not help or inform me about the pastel, so when it came up for sale I relied on my intuition, spending over \$1,000.00.

Part two will run in the October 12th, 2007 edition of the New England Real Estate Journal.

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