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Appraising antiques in the computer world: Part 2

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Part two is continued from the September 14th, 2007 edition of the New England Real Estate Journal.

When I got home that evening I went to www.artfact.com, my subscriber search engine, and typed in the name A. C. Goodwin. After a few seconds a listings of Arthur Clifton Goodwin's oils and pastels came up. His prices were very inconsistent, from less than \$1,000 to over \$50,000. Although I judge he was a master with pastels, his oil paintings typically brought higher prices. Since the art market of today seemed to like his work, I was encouraged that the speculative choice I had made, but what if I had seen this artist's prices previous to the bidding? Would the inconsistency in pricing confused me making me afraid to bid aggressively. Now, after owning the painting for some months and selling it to one of our best customers, I feel I used good judgment by buying this pastel but that could have gone the other way if I had used the confusing artifact data to influence me.

As a counter to this story, during the August heat wave last year, someone whom I did not know called saying he wanted to sell a painting by Francis Silva. This was an artist I knew, so I made an appointment to see this man who lived a three hour drive from my home. Before going, I looked up Frank Silva's price history confirming that his work brought strong prices up to over one million dollars. I was going to be rich!

I got to the house and saw the painting, and it was an immediate disappointment. It might have been authentic even though it was just signed on the back of the board. It was a small oil with a square rigged ship sailing up the Hudson into the sunset. The research I did indicated that Silva was best when painting seascapes in the New York area with rich sunset colors soaking into all the other elements of the painting, and this painting sort of had these elements; even though I admit the painting was just not very good. Maybe Silva felt the same way and that's why he never finished it.

But I was "psyched-up". The summer's heat, the momentum of having seen those search engine high prices, all that driving, the reluctance I had for leaving the painting and going home empty handed and my own greed all caused made for my perfect storm of a mistake. I bought the painting, although after a few months of denial I came realized that I had, at best, a poor example of Silva's art. I lost all my enthusiasm for selling it. It's now leaning on its side in the back of my office and I suffer as I walk by it every day. Never buy a bad painting by a good artist, even if the search engines tell you so.

These stories tell more than just how dealers pay too much or too little for works of art, they tell us about appraising. The Internet, with all its great speed and efficiency, only helps to make accurate appraisals when data is combined with elements of appraiser experience. The Internet search engine is an important part of the matrix of tools we use to earn our appraisal fees, which is a decision making process where real life experiences are essential for a consistent and accurate

outcome.

The search engines are candidates for great change in the 21st century, but, despite their lightning speed and marvelous accuracy, they will never replace that wonderful wisdom and diligence that are uniquely human.

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