

AUTHENTICATION IN ART

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Possible Jackson Pollock work for sale by Greenwich Auction

By Robert Marchant

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Photo: Bob Luckey Jr. / Hearst Connecticut Media

GREENWICH — Is it or isn't it?

Art buyers will decide on Sunday whether a painting attributed to the famed abstract expressionist Jackson Pollock could be the real thing or an excellent reproduction. An online auction of a painting attributed to Pollock, but not authenticated, is being organized by Greenwich Auction & Connecticut Antique Center. David Johnson, owner of the auction house, calls it one of the most intriguing cases he has come across in 13 years in the business.

The work has a number of features that point toward authenticity, such as the paint used, style and the "canvas" is wallboard, which Pollock was known to collect from construction contractors. But a lot of fake Jackson Pollocks have been on the market, so many that art scholars won't even venture a public opinion on most cases.

"We'll tell everything we know about it," said Johnson, a resident of Old Greenwich who runs the business in Stamford. "Then it's what the market believes."

The auctioneer said the painting represents an investment possibility that could pay off big if the piece is authenticated. "There's risk and reward," he said.

This much is known: A woman from the Norwalk-Westport area bought the painting on the cheap at a warehouse sale in Norwalk.

"It's been in this lady's possession since the 1970s," Johnson said. The owner (whom he would not identify) is now looking to sell. The public estimate for the piece is \$40,000 to \$60,000.

More information on the auction, and registration, is available at GreenwichAuction.net. Online bidding begins at 11 a.m. Sunday.

Johnson and art scholars have been studying the painting for a year. Pollock, an alcoholic painter whose frenetic, improvisatory canvases rocketed him to art-world fame before his death in a car wreck on Long Island in 1956, had some Connecticut relatives.

"There were stories he would offer pilots a painting to fly to Connecticut," from eastern Long Island, Johnson said.

Using wallboard, commonly called Sheetrock, was not unusual for Pollock, especially in the days before he earned a significant income for his work. "He would use whatever was left in the shop," Johnson said. "He was poor and struggling."

The number “48” is written on the back of the piece, evidently dating it to 1948, typical of Pollock’s system of monitoring his yearly output. A one-inch chip in the wallboard allowed analysts to look at the content of the painting surface, and its gypsum content appears to match the kind used in wallboard in 1948. The “J” written on the back matches other known Pollock inscriptions, though a “P” that appears is less certain. The name “Dunlop” was written on the back as well. Johnson said the painter had some cousins named Dunlop, and there were art collectors in southern Connecticut with that name.

The painting bears the Pollock hallmarks. It is done with Dovecote paint, the kind Pollock was known to use. The distinctive “drip” style that Pollock made famous, dripping paint in swirls on the canvas, is apparent.

“It’s layered on like he would have done. ... It’s hard to get that depth. The blue is in his pallet of choice. The red, not so much,” Johnson said.

The auctioneer has conferred with one scholar who believed it was authentic, but would not do so publicly. “You can get sued very easily,” Johnson said.

A leading art scholar on Pollock at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio, Ellen Landau, declined comment on the Greenwich Auction piece by email. Artnet News, a trade magazine covering the field of fine art and auctions, recently reported that a number of paintings said to be by Jackson Pollock have been turning up in recent years, and “high-profile forgery scams have fooled wealthy and seasoned collectors.”

Johnson said it would take about five years, and \$120,000, for the work to be properly authenticated. Since authenticated Pollock works have been selling for \$10 million, there is a potential for a large return on investment. There is the possibility of a near total loss on the piece.

In any event, the auctioneer said, “It’s a good story to hang on your wall.”