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An Eagle-Eyed Man Bought a \$25 Painting at a Garage Sale. Turns Out It Was Worth 380 Times That—and Was Stolen in 1991

The painting, by Jon Corbino, was stolen from a Florida performing arts center.

Sarah Cascone, March 4, 2019



Jon

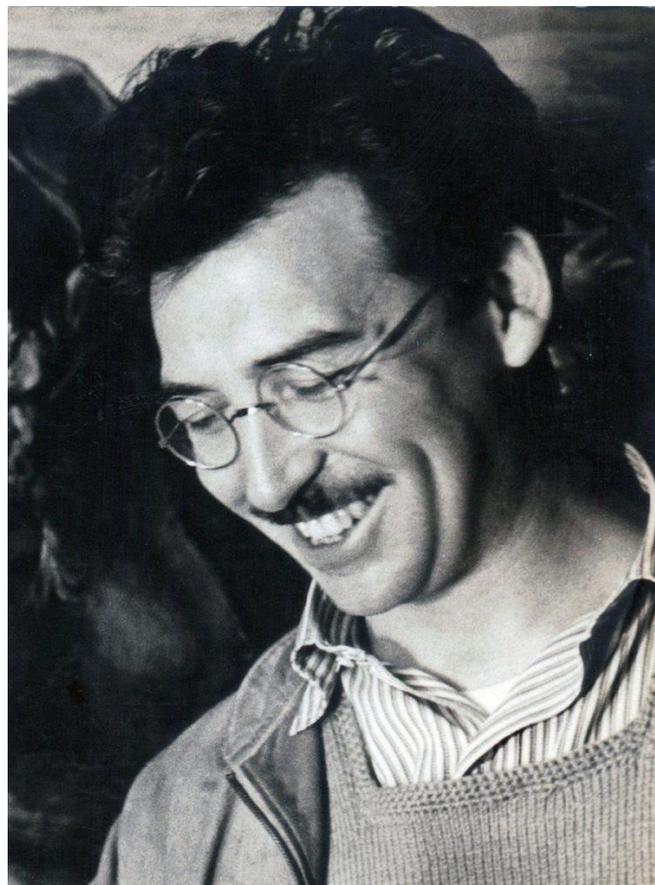
Corbino, *Palette*, which was stolen from the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall in 1991. Photo courtesy the Lee Corbino Galleries.

An intrepid garage sale treasure hunter struck gold with the \$25 purchase of a rare painting by Italian-American artist Jon Corbino (1905–1964). But he soon discovered that the artwork was stolen property, taken from Sarasota’s Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall in a 1991 art heist.

As soon as he saw *Palette* leaning against the wall at a local estate sale, 59-year-old landscape architect Eric Bowyer knew it was a diamond in the rough. He visits 20 to 30 garage sales every weekend and has made more than his fair share of discoveries, once paying just \$4 for a piece Salvador Dalí made for a movie set.

His good eye has served him well over the years, but, as in this case, “you have to be ready for a letdown if it’s stolen,” Bowyer admitted to the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*. Fortunately, there’s a certain satisfaction in returning long-lost treasures, he said, so “it’s easy to be benevolent.”

After the work caught his eye, Bowyer found Corbino’s signature on the painting. The 1960s-era object is one of 10 pieces Corbino completed on an artist’s palette; this one is inscribed “To Eva Lee,” Corbino’s New York gallerist. The artist has work in the collections of institutions including New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, DC, and the Art Institute of Chicago.



Jon Corbino. Photo courtesy the Lee Corbino Galleries.

Once Bowyer realized the work was stolen, he promptly returned it to the Fine Arts Society of Sarasota. That was in 2017. The painting's recovery is only being revealed now, on the occasion of the organization's 50th anniversary. It will soon return to public view.

Palette originally hung in the lobby of Van Wezel, and was stolen between Friday, November 29, and Sunday, December 1, 1991, a busy weekend featuring performances by the Gatlin Brothers, George Burns, and the Sarasota Chorale Society. The thief eluded patrolling security guards and avoided tripping any alarms.



The Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall. Photo courtesy of the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall. The homeowner's son at the estate sale told Bowyer that a man had left some paintings there for safekeeping, and had never returned to reclaim them. It seems unlikely that the heist will ever be solved, as the police report for the theft was destroyed in a flood.

Valued at an estimated at \$9,500 at the time of the theft, *Palette* was the most expensive piece on display at the concert hall. According to the [artnet Price Database](#), Corbino's record at auction is \$47,000, set at Skinner in 2004 for the canvas *Harvest Festival*.