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Art found in Vinton storage unit linked to controversial collection

- By Mike Allen mike.allen@roanoke.com, Sep 22, 2018



Tarina Keenan and Roger Overstreet purchased the contents of a storage unit in Vinton and discovered 26 paintings allegedly from the "J. Brennerman collection," which art experts have said contains fakes. The paintings they are holding are signed "Jackson Pollock." American painter Pollock was a major figure in the abstract expressionist movement. His works sell for millions of dollars at auction.

- STEPHANIE KLEIN-DAVIS | The Roanoke Times



Three of the many postcards in the possession of Roanoke businessman Billy Harbour that he says were written by James Brennerman. The bottom two come from Brennerman's early life in Germany, Harbour said.

- [MIKE ALLEN | The Roanoke Times](#)

A Vinton couple planning to open a thrift store purchased the contents of an abandoned storage unit last month for \$45, not knowing what items they were going to find inside.

After the unit at Winter's Mini Storage in Vinton was opened, Roger Overstreet and girlfriend Tarina Keenan made an astonishing discovery. A stack of 26 paintings lay against a wall. One painting bore the signature "de Kooning." The other 25 were signed "Jackson Pollock." Long inventory numbers were handwritten on the back of each painting, along with the words "J. Brennerman collection."

Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning were major figures in the 20th-century abstract expressionist movement, and their paintings have sold for hundreds of millions of dollars at auction. Yet Overstreet and Keenan quickly discovered reasons to doubt they had found a treasure trove.

A Google search on "Brennerman collection" calls up news stories with headlines such as "Bizarre Pollock forgery scam targets unwary collectors in the U.S." The stories are based on an article published online in 2017 by the International Foundation for Art Research, a New York-based nonprofit that has had a hand in cracking high-profile art fraud cases. Titled "The Mysterious James Brennerman: Did He Exist and Where Did All His Fakes Come From?," the article is meant to warn the public about an "apparent and audacious scam" involving "bogus Pollocks."

No one has been charged with any crimes related to the "Brennerman Collection." The article, which does not accuse any specific person of wrongdoing, states that all four "Brennerman Collection" paintings personally examined by foundation staff were sold to other people by a Roanoke strip club owner, who is not named.

Billy Harbour, former owner of what's now called the Gold and Silver Gentleman's Club on Franklin Road Southwest — known in previous decades as Juicie's Exotic Cabaret; Girls, Girls, Girls; and Hooters of Virginia — said he is the owner of the "Brennerman Collection" referred to in the foundation's article. Stacks of hundreds of framed paintings with "J. Brennerman collection" handwritten on the back fill rooms in his Roanoke home. He claims they could be worth billions.

If the paintings could be proved authentic, they might indeed be worth that much. In addition to hundreds of works signed "Jackson Pollock," and at least one more signed "de Kooning," the collection in Harbour's house includes paintings bearing signatures of other major 19th- and 20th-century masters, such as impressionist Claude Monet and "Vincent" — as in Vincent Van Gogh. They do not duplicate existing paintings but are executed in styles that appear similar. "We feel like we have the art find of the century," Harbour said.

He's loath to part with any of them, he said, but "the few I've sold I've practically just given away."

He called the discovery of "Brennerman collection" paintings in a Vinton storage unit a mystery. He said it puzzled him why someone would abandon such a potentially valuable find.

Trevor Winter-Pierce, operations manager with Winter's Mini Storage, said the sale of the unit's contents was handled through a procedure used when the owner is deceased. He declined to release the owner's name, citing company policy.

Overstreet and Keenan, the Vinton couple, are dubious that the paintings have value. "If it was worth more it would never be in that storage unit," said Keenan, who intends to open her thrift store in October in Blue Ridge. "I don't want to sell them as real if they're not real."

'A tad screwy'

Art foundation executive director Sharon Flescher declined to confirm the identity of the strip club owner the organization interviewed.

However, Harbour said he spoke several times on the phone with foundation research director Lisa Duffy-Zeballos and also provided the foundation with documents meant to prove the legitimacy of the "Brennerman Collection" Pollock paintings. Much to his chagrin, the foundation reached the opposite conclusion. "They're a total sourpuss," he said.

The biggest obstacle to overcome when it comes to claiming that the "Brennerman Collection" Pollocks are real comes from the forensic test results. According to the article, tests on the four "Brennerman Collection" paintings submitted to the foundation by three different owners in 2013 and 2014 showed they were created with a kind of acrylic paint that wasn't available until the 1980s. Pollock died in 1956.

In addition, Flescher and Duffy-Zeballos wrote in the article, "no acrylic paint of any kind has been identified in any accepted painting by Jackson Pollock."

Harbour repeatedly said that he believes the Pollocks in his collection are real. Asked about the foundation's results, he said it's possible that some of the paintings in the "Brennerman Collection" are fakes. "Any great collection, there are pieces that are correct, there are pieces that are not correct," he said. "I think Brennerman might have some pluses and some minuses."

Harbour amassed his art collection over 25 years, the bulk of it coming from a Roanoke antique collector who died in 2000, he said. Harbour has also accumulated hundreds of postcards, letters, handwritten notes and photographs that he said prove without a doubt that James Brennerman — an eccentric Chicago millionaire purported to be the original owner of all these works — was a real person.

In an interview over soft drinks at a fast-food restaurant, Harbour produced several dozen of these photos, notes and letters, including a copy of the portrait

of James Brennerman that appears in the foundation's article. He also brought a small painting of a pastoral scene signed "Vincent," saying he didn't know for certain if it was really a Van Gogh.

The Brennerman story is complex. Harbour provided a document, which cites no sources, that states James Brennerman and his wealthy father, Gephart, immigrated to the United States from Germany in the late 1930s. About 10 years later, the family purchased an estate in Chicago that they named Buffalo Park. After his father's death, the reclusive Brennerman amassed an enormous art collection. When Brennerman died in 1974, the collection became the property of the family's servants, Bert and Ethel Ramsey, the document states.

According to Harbour, a Roanoke antique collector acquired most of the paintings from the Ramseys just before they died.

Establishing that Brennerman existed is important because in the art world, when someone claims to have found a previously unknown work by a famous artist, art experts look to establish the work's history of ownership, or provenance.

For 20 years, the Authentication Research Service run by the International Foundation for Art Research has been examining newly discovered paintings attributed to Jackson Pollock to determine whether they are fake or possibly genuine. "He's one of the artists we receive the most inquiries about," Flescher said.

With help from a New York assistant attorney general, a group of art scholars created the foundation in the 1960s. Part of the 50-year-old nonprofit's mission involves keeping art forgeries out of circulation. "We were set up to be an independent, scholarly body that could research works of art whose authorship was in question or whose authorship was at that point unknown, without any vested interest in the outcome," Flescher said.

The foundation's article on the "Brennerman Collection" contains an in-depth and deeply skeptical analysis of letters, notes and photos that researchers reviewed, demonstrating, among other things, that photographs purportedly

depicting the exterior of Brennerman's mansion in Illinois, known as Buffalo Park, are actually pictures of palaces in Germany and Italy.

Harbour, who gave the images to the foundation, said he thinks the supposedly eccentric Brennerman might have simply mislabeled the photographs. "Brennerman obviously was a tad screwy," he said.

The article's authors were unimpressed. "In light of the obviously false documentation provided with the paintings, the inevitable question remained — what evidence was there that the collector James Brennerman ever existed?" Flescher and Duffy-Zeballos wrote. "We could find none. His name doesn't appear in government immigration records, in Social Security records, or in any other government archives we researched."

Nor could they find evidence of the existence of the Ramseys, they wrote.

Harbour dismissed the foundation's findings. "IFAR said there is no James Brennerman," he said. "B----- is my answer to that."

Although he allowed that "every now and then I have some doubts," Harbour said the sheer volume of handwritten correspondence in his possession shows that Brennerman had to be real.

"Who in the hell would make all this stuff up?" he said. "It just makes no sense."

Skeptics and believers

The foundation article describes the telltale signs of a "Brennerman Collection" painting in great detail, as does the life history of Brennerman provided by Harbour.

The backs of the frames are covered in brown paper, bearing handwritten inscriptions identifying the work as part of the "J. Brennerman collection" in "Buffalo Park, Ill." The inscriptions contain notes about the paintings, and long inventory numbers that incorporate an estimate of each painting's value.

The paintings found in Winter's Mini Storage have those traits. For instance, one work, signed "Jackson Pollock," appears to have been made using the drip painting method Pollock was famous for. The painting has an inscription in what appears to be ballpoint pen on the torn backing that reads, "J. Brennerman collection. Buffalo Park, Ill. Wonderful Pollock oil on panel dated 1946. This work is a large drip period painting executed in vibrant colors, according to my man on Long Island. I'll easel this one for the large study." The inventory number on the back suggests a worth of \$300 million.

Overstreet, 59, once a candidate for Vinton Town Council, said he suspected from the get-go that the paintings were not legitimate but wasn't sure because he doesn't know much about art. In addition to conducting an internet search, which immediately led to news items based on the foundation's article, he reached out to artists and art dealers in the Roanoke Valley, including Dorsey Taylor, co-owner of LinDor Arts gallery in downtown Roanoke.

Taylor, based on Overstreet's description, recognized that the paintings were from the "Brennerman Collection" and told Overstreet they were fake. His opinion did not change after viewing the paintings in person.

Taylor said he first saw "Brennerman Collection" paintings about eight years ago, when Harbour brought them to Taylor's gallery and asked Taylor if he would consider selling them. Taylor said he came to the conclusion that the paintings were not authentic and returned them to Harbour.

His reasoning, Taylor said, was that if the paintings were in fact worth millions, and had really belonged to a rich collector, they wouldn't have been mounted in such obviously cheap frames.

The same was true of the paintings found by Keenan and Overstreet, he said. Turning the "de Kooning" this way and that to look it over, Taylor pointed out that the custom mat holding the painting showed signs of having acidic chemicals in its makeup that would damage the art.

Taylor said he believes that the Brennerman paintings have no value. Occasionally, over the years, people have come into his gallery with a

“Brennerman Collection” painting in their possession, asking for an appraisal, and he has had to inform them that in his estimate the art is worthless, he said.

Overstreet said he was glad the paintings still had the telltale signs of belonging to the so-called “Brennerman Collection.”

“Anybody could have gotten hold of these and just cut the paper off,” he said.

In defending the Brennerman collection, Harbour suggested that even a forged painting could prove to be of value. “Sometimes forgeries of the era are more valuable,” he said, “if you can figure out who the forger was.”

The “Brennerman Collection” has another defender — sort of — in George Larko Jr., a business associate of Harbour’s. An artist and California native who came to Roanoke in 2010, Larko owns two “Brennerman Collection” Pollock paintings. He said he paid Harbour \$5,500 for them. Larko described the payment as an upfront investment.

Unlike Harbour, Larko brought no documents or art with him to an interview in a bookstore cafe.

The foundation article does not name any of the owners of the paintings the staff examined. Larko said he is referred to in the article as the anonymous owner of two paintings reviewed by the foundation in 2014. Foundation executive director Flescher declined to comment as to whether her staff communicated with Larko.

Larko said that based on the consistency of the signatures, he believes that the “Brennerman Collection” Jackson Pollock paintings are genuine — although in a later phone conversation, he described his certainty as “50/50.”

In contrast to Harbour’s statements, Larko suggested that James Brennerman might indeed be fictitious, postulating that he could have been an invention of the Ramseys.

The hundreds of paintings in Harbour’s house are just a small portion of the collection, Larko said. He believes the size of the cache means it could contain a

mixture of the fake and the genuine. "I suspect whoever put this thing together had actually gotten hold of some real stuff," he said.

At the bookstore, he was adamant that the Pollocks from the "Brennerman Collection" are likely real, despite the foundation's findings. "Nothing's been proven one way or the other," he said.

He described the evaluation prepared for him by the foundation as poorly researched and inaccurate. For example, he said that Pollock could have created acrylic paintings, because acrylics were available during Pollock's lifetime and the artist would use any kind of paint he had at hand.

He expressed anger that the foundation took a year to evaluate his painting. He said the staff misled him about how long it would take, calling the process a "scam."

"Our material speaks for itself. We stand by our research," Flescher said. "We made it public. People are always able to go somewhere else and get other research."

Larko said he doesn't have the money to pursue further research. He said he was frustrated with both the foundation and Harbour.

"Nobody's done anything right," he said.

'It's beauty'

Fake or not, the handwriting attributed to James Brennerman is consistently recognizable, in the images reproduced in the foundation article, on the backs of the paintings Overstreet and Keenan found, on the backs of the paintings in Harbour's house and SUV, and on all the notes, letters and postcards Harbour brought to the restaurant interview.

A peculiar feature of the notes, letters, postcards and photographs Harbour shared is that all Brennerman's script, whatever the date or location, was written in pencil. "They didn't have pens a lot back then," Harbour said.

The postcards and the envelopes containing the letters appear to have stamps and postmarks that match the time period and state or country of origin. A pair of postcards purportedly sent by Brennerman while he still lived in Germany feature Nazi insignia and German language postmarks.

Having spent many years with these paintings and documents, Harbour speaks of Brennerman as if the man were a beloved relative, doting over photographs in which Brennerman supposedly appears, pointing out the big ears he had as both child and adult.

"I learned through all of this a tremendous appreciation for art," he said. "It's like looking into eternity."

Harbour placed a striking figurine of a horse on the restaurant table. A note in the handwriting attributed to Brennerman labeled the figurine a "Sumerian horse." Harbour said the figurine contained the ashes of a warrior in Genghis Khan's army. Sumer, located in what's now Iraq, existed from about 4,500 B.C. to 2,000 B.C. Genghis Khan ruled the Mongol Empire in the 13th century.

Harbour said that collecting art dovetails with his longtime business interests — specifically, the strip club business. "It's beauty," he said. "A beautiful woman, what's more beautiful than that?"

Harbour's business career began as an impressive success story. In the 1970s, he built an \$11 million real estate empire based mostly on Franklin Road properties. Yet in 1982, still in his 30s, he filed for bankruptcy. In 1987, after an FBI investigation of a store he owned, he pleaded guilty to bankruptcy fraud. A federal judge sentenced him to three years of probation and 400 hours of community service.

He launched his strip club at 3121 Franklin Road in 1993, and multiple legal tangles came after, including a lawsuit forcing a name change and indictments charging the club with obscenity and unlawful exposure. Most recently, in 2014, three of the club's dancers sued, alleging they were owed unpaid back wages. Harbour said he no longer owns the strip club, only the building.

Harbour described his dream for the "Brennerman Collection": He wants to use all those paintings to found a museum. "If I could be part of maybe even a museum being created in Roanoke, Virginia, that would really give me a thrill," he said.