

Mallory Love

Austin Auction Gallery Internship

2014

Introduction

This semester Austin Auction Gallery took me on as an intern. During the time I have worked for Austin Auction, I had many responsibilities that have enriched my work experience. My interest in fine art, antiques, and artifacts helped in my decision to choose this internship. The auction house is an incredible place in which I was immersed in all of the above. I researched items, cataloged fine art, photographed historical documents, packed up collectors' homes, and worked the auctions themselves. It was through all of these duties that I developed an interest in the idea of collecting and sought to inquire further into the nature of collecting as a cultural practice. This report is meant to explain Austin Auction Gallery, my job duties at the auction house, and collecting as a cultural practice.

History, Staff, and Warehouse

Austin Auction Gallery was founded in 1983 by Ross Featherston. After the gallery was founded, Ross quickly turned it into a family business that included his wife and children. The

Featherston family has worked together since then to turn the gallery into one of the most prominent antique and fine art auction houses in the area.

Austin Auction Gallery holds auctions of many different types: estate sales, for federal and state institutions, business liquidations, and foreclosures. They have held around 2,500 auctions since the time of their establishment. Having done such a large number of auctions, the company is well versed in current market conditions for fine art, antiques, and china.

Austin Auctions is housed in a 25,000 square foot warehouse, in which they store an extensive amount of antiques, fine art, furniture, jewelry, china, crystal, and various other items waiting to be cataloged and auctioned off. Some of the most valuable of these objects, such as precious metals, high appraised jewelry, firearms, and other weapons are stored in two vaults the size of train cars located at the far end of the warehouse that is filled with a labyrinth of furniture, art, and other large items.

The only thing keeping the warehouse from being a completely ideal place to store this immense collection of valuables is the fact that it is not temperature controlled—an idea not lost on the employees of the gallery.

The Austin Auction Gallery is run by a small team of employees. It is mostly a family run and operated company with a few additions. Ross Featherston is the President and Lead Auctioneer. Ross is quite knowledgeable when it comes to fine art, antiques, firearms, and documents. He assists with the cataloging of those things if and when other employees need assistance. The Vice-President and Chief Financial Officer is one of the only employees that work from her own office, so we do not work together often. She works extensively with the catalogs and preparing them for publication. When customers request condition reports for

certain items, she relays these requests to the warehouse employees for us to write the report and take any necessary photos to support our results. Another person I worked closely with was an auctioneer, as well as holding the job title of head of marketing and product acquisition. People go to this individual when they have items they hope to sell at auction. The Warehouse Manager and Logistic Supervisor works at the front of the warehouse. He needs to know where every lot is, if it has been cataloged, how to set it up for auction, and if anything is missing. He directs the team that works to unload shipments, moves around the items, and the general upkeep of everything Austin Auction Gallery. The Catalog Department Head, Auctioneer, and Appraiser is my internship coordinator. I work directly underneath her. She assesses the worth of an item and how groupings of lots should be grouped, directs the catalog department on the research and appraisal factors of cataloging, and also accounts for the inventory sheets and shipment planning. The Lead Photographer works directly next to me. All of the large antiques, framed art or photographs, and furniture go to him after the decorative arts associates have cataloged and tagged them. He then photographs and edits these pieces before sending them to the back of the auction house to await placement in the next auction gallery.

Decorative Arts Associates

The decorative arts associates, with whom I worked the most, have a number of responsibilities. I work closely with them learning what they do on a day-to-day basis. Our specific duties vary and are among many. The Decorative Arts Associate's pack houses, assemble lots to be sold, research objects for cataloging, photograph objects and edit for use in

the catalogs, number and tag objects for placement in the auction, create condition reports, and work all throughout the auction registering customers and handling phone bids.

The work involves many stages that allowed me to handle some truly amazing artifacts and research their origins. Our everyday duty of cataloging and photographing goes as follows.

Each item or lot of items we combine (because of similarities) needs to be looked over, researched, cleaned, photographed, edited, and then submitted for cataloging. For example, we have a group (referred to as a "lot") of 15 crystal goblets we know nothing about. We must examine each goblet, running our fingers over the edges looking for flakes, cracks, or chips. We cannot auction any broken items. After this we must look for any signatures, acid marks, or labels to be able to research the item to find out its origin, date, artist, pattern, use, and value.

This exact lot still retained some of the original labels on the feet of a few goblets. This gives me the heading for the beginning of the catalog process: (set of 15) German US Zone Cut to Clear Colored Goblets. I then research how much this particular brand and type of crystal has been selling for recently, what the pattern cut into the crystal is called, if there is any history behind the item, etc.

After doing this, I begin to write my research into the AuctionFlex system. AuctionFlex is the system auction houses use to organize and appraise information about items for use in the catalog. This is how a lot looks after being entered into AuctionFlex:

(15) German US Zone Cut to Clear Colored Goblets

*German cut to clear multi-colored crystal goblets, Amerikan Cut
Crystal Corp., US Zone, comprising: (8) light blue, (4) red, (1) blue, (1) green,*

(1) yellow, all designed with a fan, hob star, and cross hatch panel motif, each with notched stems, some with original label attached, 6.75"h, 3.25"diam, 8lbs, starting price \$150.00.

Examination of Objects

When I am required to research, whether it be artifacts, china, stones, glass, etc. I first start by examining the item. Research may seem like a daunting task, which can be true, but with the help of the internet, research is much easier than it used to be.

We Google acid marks, labels, signatures or other markings we can observe. After the initial search I go through hundreds of images to see if we find anything of a similar nature. For example, if I am working with a frosted glass cigar ashtray, I immediately examine the entire item, I look over the edges and the base checking for any marks, and I find that there is a 'Lalique France' inscription on the base. This information enables me to look up Lalique online to find the name of the certain pattern in which the ashtray was made and what time frame it was made in.

We also utilize EBay, Live Auctioneers, and other bidding websites for similar lots or items. Some items take longer to research and catalog than others. These items present a challenge, but one usually ends up learning much more about something they had known nothing about beforehand.

As one example, I was required to catalog a sculpted jade piece. It was of a figure dressed in robes and holding some sort of scepter. That is at times the only information you can begin searching with. The sculpture had no signature of the maker or date. I researched jade female figure in robes on Live Auctioneers and came up with several different pages worth of jade female

figures that had been auctioned off in the past. I interpreted the figure to be of Guan Yin, the goddess of compassion in Chinese culture. I also concluded that the scepter she held was a ruyi. According to our Chinese artifact appraiser, this is a common image to be placed in artwork of Chinese heritage.

At this point, I begin to examine the piece, looking for imperfections, chips, or cracks, in order to ultimately set a value on it. I then measure the item and weigh it. Usually this would be followed with some research to assess the price of the object. But with this particular consigner a reserve had been set at \$1,500.00. When a reserve is set I cannot assess the object for any less than what was given. I set the start bid at \$1,500.00 and the projected selling price for \$2,000.00-\$4,000.00.

If a particular item stumps us, we do have an appraiser that we send the items to. She is a very valuable connection to have. We send her anything from purses to jade artifacts. It costs a small fee to send items out, but an auction house must be completely aware of authenticity and value of every item we auction. An auction house can never auction pieces that they know are counterfeit.

Preparing Items for Auction

After cataloging I clean each piece and take it over to the area for photographing. I need a group shot, one with each color goblet, a close up of design, a shot of the original label, and the underside of the item. I then put them into Photoshop and cut out the item from the background for a clean shot. The only altering of the actual item in the photo is to get the colors of said item

as close to reality as possible. For example, some jade looks a bit more yellow in photographs than they are in real life. We must remove this yellow tinge to get it back to its original clarity.

They would like for each of us to have around 15-20 lots cataloged a day. Some pieces are much more difficult to research and edit than others. All in all, as a Decorative Arts Associate you come to this job and work with something new each day.

Auctions

Auctions vary depending on the certain items up for bid and their relation to each other. They are usually based on cohesion; for example, a mid-century modern furniture auction. The first auction I worked was different. The lots varied anywhere from civil war artifacts to designer boots. More of the lots were: antique figurines, taxidermy items, wooden furniture from Asia, Europe, or America, and plenty of jewelry.

One task at the auction was to work the desk in the front facing the lobby. This is the time when the customers come and register for their number. They have to fill out a form with their name, number, address, email address, and then provide a signature, after they have read the rules and procedures for the auction. We then take their driver's license number and date of birth. All of these things are necessary to be able to make sure all customers pay at the end of the auction if they have purchased something. For example, if they write a check that bounces, we have everything we need to be able to find this person. After this, we hand them the number that

coincides with the ticket we put into the computer so that their receipt will come up at the end of the auction when we search for their name and receipt.

Auctions are a busy affair. People consistently flow in and out during the auction to view the objects and register. There is no cut off time for registration. Along with working the registration desk I had the duty of picking the bid paper up from the podium where the auctioneer stood. Every ten lots my job was to retrieve the bid sheet that the auctioneer's assistant wrote the winning bids and bidders on and what lot number it was. I then must bring the sheet to the catalog department head in the office. This is when she reviews the sheet a second time and loads it into the computer system, Auction Flex.

Phone bidding is another duty everyone working for the auction must do. People that are not able to attend the auction fill out a phone bid form requesting one of us call them a few lots before the specific one they are interested in bidding on. It is then a very fast paced task, due to relaying the information about the bids between the auctioneer and the phone bidder. You have to be a skilled communicator and persuasive because the bidder may be slow or indecisive. If the bidder is one of those two things they will not win the lot. This is important because not only are they bidding against the entire crowd attending the auction, but also thousands of live bidders online.

The internet is now the main source for bidding. Many auction galleries work purely online now. Austin Auction's uses both sources, live and online, to procure more interest. During the auction one worker must sit and watch the online activity the entire event. Every time a bid is placed they have to say the price into a microphone so the auctioneer can update the crowd. It

seems like a task of small importance, but it is one of the most important jobs. It is easy to get behind if the person is not fully paying attention.

Towards the end of the auction people begin to check out. People come and get their receipts, the workers update the system if the customer had a tax write off card (they would have this if they worked for a business that sold the lots they purchased at the auction) and get the payment as quickly and efficiently as possible. After payment has been received the customers can pick up small objects immediately and large things like furniture and art after the auction has officially concluded.

Auctions conclude and there are still many things to do. Some of these tasks are: answering phone calls, counting the register, and providing people with instructions on where to pick up their items. Closing out customers orders and noting unpaid orders are quite important. Once all of these tasks are completed the auction house is closed.

Collecting Art and Culture

Working for an auction house, one has the opportunity to peer through a window into people's personal lives. People open up their homes to the auction house employees to go and pack up their collections and belongings for different reasons: estate sales, owners passing away, or perhaps purely a lack of room. One meets an assortment of collectors going to many different locations to assess a collection and pack the items up for transport to the gallery. I would sometimes ask the collector about the purpose of the collection; but often they could not tell me.

As a cultural practice, collecting can be viewed as an interpretation of the self, by the collector. This definition seemed to suit what I had been experiencing at the auction house. By entering these people's homes and handling their belongings, you are heading into a very intimate part of a person's self. Collecting has come to be how one may define their entire being. James Clifford referenced C.B. Macpherson's analysis of this. Macpherson defined this idea of surrounding oneself with objects and property as 'possessive individualism' (Clifford 1988).

By collecting, a person feels as though they are creating themselves. Their identity is dependent on the things they have around them. The process of collecting provides one with memories, of experiences of obtaining the object, and of knowledge about the thing that has been collected. (Bal 1994 and Benjamin 1969)

Perhaps the individual feels without this exercise of possession they would have no identity, nothing to define them. Clifford describes this idea about collecting in this passage (Clifford 1988):

In these small rituals we observe the channeling's of obsession, an exercise in how to make the world one's own, to gather things around oneself tastefully, appropriately. The inclusions in all collections reflect wider cultural rules of rational taxonomy, of gender, of aesthetics. An excessive, sometimes even rapacious need to *have* is transformed into rule-governed, meaningful desire. Thus the self that must possess but cannot have it all learns to select, order, classify in hierarchies to make good collections.

In relation to personal collections, auction houses, museums, and art galleries all tend to do the same thing. These items are displayed and are shown for specific purposes. Collections shown in galleries or museums are in a sense misrepresented because the item being displayed has been removed from its original historical context. In her study of language and collecting, Susan Stewart (1984) states that, "Collections, most notably museums - create the illusion of adequate representation of a world by first cutting objects out of specific contexts (whether cultural, historical, or intersubjective) and making them 'stand for' abstract wholes" (Stewart 1984).

For example, the auction house acquired a pair of monumental Chinese bone veneered pillars, 20th c., each in the form of an elephant tusk; they had polychrome accents on a heavy relief carved ground with dragons amid cloud scrolls. These came from a Chinese consigner the auction house works with frequently. Showing the object by itself in a completely unrelated environment to the objects history of production and appropriation strips the object of its original context. Stewart claims that in modern western museums and auction houses the illusion of adequate representation suggests now a relation between things and no longer a social relation. Clifford refers to the same notion, "The collector discovers, acquires, salvages objects. The objective world is given, not produced, and thus historical relations of power in the work of acquisition are occulted" (Clifford 1988).

It is because of this blurred representation of items that collectors are pushed to obtain them. In a way, they see buying or collecting these objects as a way to create a culture for themselves and give these objects back context through defining the collector themselves.

Conclusion

When I began working at Austin Auction Gallery I had yet to examine the connection between a collector and the identity ones collection seemingly creates. Walter Benjamin writes about collecting in these interesting terms in, "Unpacking My Library" (1969) and the importance of the relationship between a collector and their collection.

Collecting can be someone's passion. For these people the auction house is a Mecca of new things that are waiting to be added to their collections. It is a chaotic, jumble of collections acquired from many different avenues and housed under one roof. Benjamin refers to his own passion of collecting books as somewhat of a disorder. "For what else is this collection, but a disorder to which habit has accommodated itself to such an extent that it can appear as order?" (Benjamin 1969)

The auction house is just like this; a place where so many collector's habits have accommodated themselves into one giant ordered collection. So in conclusion, Austin Auctions is really largely about the cultural practice of creation of identity through collecting. They present the collector with the means to collect and the collector then reciprocates by keeping the auction business alive. When an individual imagines themselves, this is their identity. They are imagining themselves through their collections. When an individual imagines their group, that is what we call culture. In a roundabout way, the process of imagination involved in both of these things are mostly the same.

References

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