

Going, going . . . sold for \$20,000

Sponsoring an art auction on a college campus

by Gary B. Thompson

If an administrator casually asks you as library director if you are willing to coordinate an art auction for your college or university, be prepared for lots of work.

Six months after I assumed the duties of library director at Siena College, I was asked to coordinate an auction of some of the art work that had been acquired by the college over the years. Of course I said yes, but I must admit I did not know what I was getting into.

Here's why I was asked. Siena College had started the process of schematic design of a new library. The building committee visited Skidmore College's new library and was enamored by the contemporary art works that

adorned the building. Subsequently I suggested that Siena's new library should have contemporary art works to enhance the interior aesthetics.

How would we raise the funds for this purpose? The answer was that if we sold off some of the art works the college owned but could not display properly, then those funds could

be used to underwrite the costs of the contemporary art for the new building.

To sell or not to sell

On to the trial and tribulations of a library director's coordination of an art auction. It took one full year to execute this plan. First, there was the issue of what would be sold and what

would be kept. We had some valuable pieces. Being new to the community, I did not know whom to call upon for help.

I knew enough from previous experiences with politically sensitive issues to form a committee (the when-in-doubt-form-a-committee principle of library

management).

Fortunately, people around me told me who to put on the committee, including a retired local art institute curator, representatives from the new library building committee, art department faculty, and the college curator of fine arts. I asked the collection development librarian with 24 years of experience at the college to serve as chair.



Some of the many items on display for the auction at Siena College.

About the author

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One of the paintings at the Sienna College auction was assessed for \$10,000 but sold for \$60,000.

After some stumbling over the jurisdiction of this committee over paintings hung around the campus and over which paintings were important for the college to retain, the committee put together a recommendation of the paintings to be sold and the trustees accepted it.

Key lesson here: The committee created an overriding principle that the proceeds must go for the purchase of new art and then they created a statement of the purpose of art works in the new library, which convinced people that we were thoughtful and deliberate about our task.

Scheduling the auction

Initially the auction was to be held in December 1997, six months after we started planning. However, we soon ran into logistical problems when we started considering where to hold the auction. The only space large enough was the gym. Siena had a new basketball coach and we hoped that he would improve the team record (which he did incidentally). So we could not do anything to detract from team practices.

We decided upon the spring, but we ran into conflicts with spring weekend, graduation, alumni weekend, and other campus events. We could not “find any room at the inn.” We decided to hold the auction in a tent on May 30. We worried about people leaving town during Memorial Day weekend, but we said, “We got to have the auction sometime, so let’s just go ahead.” This date worked out very well for us. *Lesson:* No date is perfect, but do cover the campus bases so there are no major conflicts with other events.

One fundraiser at a time

Another issue was presented to us by the trustees, who approved our plan for the auction with the understanding that it would be connected

with some kind of fundraising event. Our development office did not really want it to be connected to any major fundraising event because it would be confusing. They suggested that we might ask the Creative Arts Committee to help. This is a group of Siena alumni and friends who seek to raise money to support the arts on the campus. They agreed to hold a party before the auction with the funds to go to the Creative Arts Fund. This was a good solution, but it took a tremendous amount of time to coordinate and it only raised a small amount of money. *Lesson:*

Avoid having another event with the auction if you can.

Contracting with the auctioneer

Lesson: Know what you are doing before you start contracting with the auctioneer. This is a lesson I wish I had followed because I was not prepared, and, as a result, there was miscommunication and some difficulties. A good book to read is *Complete Guide to Buying and Selling at Auction*.¹ You must understand consignments, reserves (minimum acceptable price), opening bids, left mail bids, phone bids, the buyer’s premium, auctioneer’s commission, sales tax, etc. The biggest issue to resolve early is whether the auction will have reserves for all items, for some items, or for no items.

There are pluses and minuses to each approach. Be clear with the auctioneer what they are paying for and what you are paying for; that includes refreshments, facilities, finances, bonding, security, telephones, housing, advertising, printing, and publicity. Settle the issue of the kind of flyers and catalogs you will be using early. Ask to see samples. Settle the issues about refreshments. Will there be a formal party sponsored by the auctioneer or the college? Will there be concessionaires? What kind of food and beverages will be served? These are not unimportant issues.

Planning for the event

Lessons: Hold frequent meetings with all parties involved to coordinate the event. Communicate between meetings with checklists of who will do what. These two actions really saved our event from having any major snafus. Of course these are the things that librarians always do better than anyone else. Others will accuse you of overplanning and worrying too much.

Ignore those people because it really pays off. It is the attention to the smallest details that can make the biggest impact.

Arranging for publicity

The auctioneer will help you immensely with their mailing lists, which go to the art dealers and buyers. You will want to make your alumni aware of the auction because this is a group with a special interest in the auction. You want to invite the trustees, donors, and friends of the college.

Your public relations officer will be most helpful in doing the press releases, coordinating the visits of the newspapers and the radio and television stations, and in rehearsing with you and other college officials how to answer reporters' questions (the auctioneer will cover the specialty publications) such as: "Why are you selling off your art collection? Are you in financial difficulty?"

Possible answer: "We are retaining those art works we most treasure." "We are selling pieces we do not have adequate space to display." "The purpose of the auction is to raise monies to buy new art works to develop and diversify our art collection, so that we have study pieces in our collection representing different genres, periods, countries, and artists." *Lesson:* Use your campus experts to coordinate the publicity for you.

Providing security

Security is an issue when you get closer to the auction day. You usually have the art works on display for a preview period (ours was three days prior to the auction). There is a period of set-up, which will take up to a week prior to the preview period. You need several kinds of insurance to protect the art works and you need a security force for the entire preview period. We were alerted during the set-up that a known art thief was in the area, which heightened our concerns. *Lesson:* Start early to work with your security force on a security plan. Work with the finance department and your auctioneer to arrange for the insurance needed.

Finally our preview period came. It was very exciting because the library itself was the showroom and we had 300 items on display, including 80 items from Siena (mostly art work), plus more than 200 other items of consignment from the auctioneers, including rugs, jewelry, lamps, clocks, canes, lawn sculptures, and all kinds of furniture. We started getting calls from the

Northeast as well as Europe. Representatives from important buyers and galleries came to visit. During this period you have to let the auctioneer take charge.

The big day—a big success!

The weather day of the auction was beautiful, thank goodness, because the auction was held in a tent. The auctioneer agreed that most of the Siena items would be sold in the first two hours. The auction was expected to last for more than three hours. It lasted for almost six hours, due to the phone bids from Europe.

The first item for sale was "Portrait of a Man" by Peter Lely, which was assessed for \$500 and sold for \$2,400. We knew it would be a good night when we came to item #30, the "Triumphant Entrance of Frederick Barbarossa into Palermo" by Giuseppe Scuiti. It was assessed for \$10,000 but the closing price was \$60,000. Siena had expected to gross \$150,000. We actually raised close to \$300,000. With the non-Siena items, the auction grossed more than \$600,000. It was financially successful.

Beyond that, it brought many persons not familiar with Siena to the campus. Through newspaper accounts, many others saw Siena in a whole new light. The publicity was very good for the college. Attendees had a very good time. It is not something that I would want to do again tomorrow because it is a ton of work, maybe five tons. However, it was worthwhile, because the publicity is great for the college.

Also we were able to raise money that will go into two funds, one directly for the purchase of contemporary art to adorn the new library, and another fund for the permanent endowment of a fund for the purchase of art for prominent campus buildings.

As many of you know, libraries have had a long association with the fine arts, with many libraries having noteworthy paintings hanging in them. With our old treasures that we kept to hang in the new library, plus our new treasures in the form of contemporary art that we will buy, as well as gifts we have already received, Siena College can be added to the list of libraries with significant art works to enhance its interior space.

Note

1. Hildesley, C. Hugh. *Complete Guide to Buying and Selling at Auction*. Norton, 1997. ■

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