



GUEST CHEF

Sold to the Highest Bidder

Three Russian paintings earn \$7 million for the Berkshire Museum

BY LESLIE FERRIN

In the spring of 2005, Stuart Chase, executive director of the Berkshire Museum in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, was preparing for a \$10 million renovation to the hundred-year-old building. A survey of the collections was under way when Chase pulled three paintings out of the racks. “I just knew they were something more,” Chase says. “While the works seemed out of context with the rest of the collection, I was intrigued and drawn to their apparent European regionalism.”

Two of the paintings, *Shepherd of the Hills* and *Man with Pipe*, by the ear-

ly-20th-century Russian artist Boris Dmitrievich Grigoriev, were given to the museum in 1948 by Josephine Boardman Crane. Her sister, Florence Boardman Keep, donated the third Grigoriev painting, *Binious (Pipe Players)*, the same year. Since the founding of the Berkshire Museum in 1903 by Zenas Crane, members of the Crane family have continued to be patrons of the institution.

Chase realized that although the paintings had apparently never been exhibited and he could not foresee doing so in the future, the artworks, if sold, could be of significant value to the museum. “At the time, I had no idea of the extent of that value,” says Chase. “I knew that through a sale, we could use those funds to improve the collection, care for, expand, and fill in our history.” Chase first showed the paintings to a colleague in the auction business who suggested that the

paintings might be worth \$1 million. But the Russian art market was exploding, so Chase invited auction representatives to view the paintings and make offers to the museum board.

At Sotheby’s, Sonya Bekkerman, senior vice president and head of the Department of Russian Paintings, responded within hours of learning of the find. Having attended Williams College, she was familiar with the Berkshires and took a personal interest in the project—a deal was finalized in late spring of 2008.

Sotheby’s presented a detailed marketing plan, including a promotional tour that took the paintings directly to the clients for viewings in London and Moscow. Sotheby’s positioned the Grigorievs in the first and most important of the art market’s fall impressionist sales alongside other major Russian Modernists. The final estimates set for the paintings

ranged from a combined low of \$7,100,000 to a high of \$10,300,000; the date for the auction was set for November 3, election eve.

When deaccessioning objects from the collection, there are specific ethical and legal guidelines, as established by the American Association of Museums and by the mandate of the State Attorney General, to which the Berkshire Museum must adhere. The proceeds from the sale can only be used for future acquisitions or for direct care and conservation of the permanent collection. When the board decided to offer the paintings for sale, they agreed to create the Florence Keep & Josephine Crane Fund, which will help to support a preexisting collection fund of \$1,500,000, also used solely for acquisitions and conservation of the collection.

When the sale was publicly announced in summer 2008, oil and gas prices had escalated. Hopes for Russians flush with oil money competing to purchase a rare Grigoriev also soared, and some members of the board even whispered “fifteen million” to one another over cocktails at Berkshire gatherings. The Russian material was of particular interest to the auction house, as the values of both historic and contemporary Russian art were rapidly rising and attracting new buyers. While “contemporary” art was of interest to some, Russian tastes leaned primarily towards the repatriation of art that had left the country during the Second World War—and Grigoriev was one such artist.

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On September 23, members of the museum’s board of trustees, Crane Society, and the Sotheby’s sales team gathered at Sotheby’s for a dinner on New York’s Upper East Side in honor of the paintings. Surrounded by the Grigorievs, Bekkerman presented a short lecture on the artist and the significance of the artworks. The next day, the paintings left for their tour. But by the time they made it to Moscow, the global economy was in crisis. Back in the Berkshires, Chase and his board discussed the fate of their

paintings. With the marketing campaign in high gear and the museum’s holdings so prominently featured, there wasn’t much choice but to hope for the best. On November 3, Chase, accompanied

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by board president Michael Christopher, board member Gigi Wilmers, and invited guests, returned to the boardroom at Sotheby’s to watch the final act unfold on the television monitors.

Auctioneer Tobias Meyer, the vice chairman of Sotheby’s, used humor and drama to coax bids from the crowd of international collectors and dealers. The Grigorievs were positioned halfway through the sale, following several major offerings, including the 1916 painting *Supremacist Composition* by Kasimir Malevich, which sold for \$60 million. But the auction wasn’t going well—20 percent of the lots were passed, and most of the works that were selling went at or below their low estimate.

Auctioning the Grigoriev paintings lasted just minutes. Chase took a deep breath of relief as two of the pictures garnered the only prices in the auction that surpassed their estimates. The \$7 million realized from their sale will directly support the development of the museum’s permanent art and natural science collections. The acquisition fund will enhance the Berkshire Museum’s role as one of the region’s institutions with a strong economic impact on the local economy. Spending from this sale to acquire art by living Berkshire-based artists will re-circulate through the local economy as spending in the mix of businesses that they support—and that support them. The collection serves as a draw in marketing the Berkshire Museum and the Berkshires. Seen together, this is the type of investment and spending that makes up our “creative economy.”

BBQ

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