

IT'S WHO YOU KNOW

1
2 In the 1980's the British pound was very strong against the US dollar, art auctions seemed
3 to be doing much better across the pond, and I was looking for a little adventure. I had
4 accumulated a number of paintings worth enough to be considered for sale at a serious auction.
5 In those days the major galleries would consider selling paintings worth as little as a couple of
6 thousand dollars. Selling them in England looked like it could be some fun as well as lucrative.
7 I started up a correspondence with Sotheby's London and decided to send them five of the
8 paintings. Four were 19th Century European landscapes. The fifth, and potentially most
9 important, was a still life with flowers by Henri Fantin-Latour (French 1836-1904). Similar
10 authentic paintings by the artist were selling at the time for around \$40,000. I purchased it cheap
11 along with other items before recognizing the artist's signature. No provenance came with the
12 painting, and I allowed for the possibility that it was not authentic.

13 A friend had a moving company where he also did crating. I took the paintings to him
14 and waited while he built a sectioned crate, inserted the paintings each in its own slot and sealed
15 the crate. Before the lid was nailed down I inserted a copy of the letter of transmittal that
16 included a list of the paintings being shipped. The crate was placed into my SUV and I
17 immediately took it to British Airways where another friend worked, completed the paperwork
18 and sent it off to London.

19 It was months later before I heard from Sotheby's, and then only after repeated requests
20 for them to let me know what kind of condition the paintings arrived in. By the time I got an
21 accounting they must have had me pegged as a real pain in the ass. The accounting was in the
22 form of auction estimates for the four minor paintings. The Fantin-Latour was not even

46 Mario's gallery opening was later that evening. Still rumpled from the red eye flight from
47 Miami, and my disappointment at Sotheby's, I arrived at the opening unfashionably early.
48 Everything was tiny. Mario's gallery was even smaller than mom's first antique shop, no more
49 than four hundred square feet. He specialized in medieval art, and the paintings were little more
50 than miniatures. Refreshments included champagne and what I was told were Persian canapes
51 that were no bigger than the tip of your finger. There was a train of servers, like a column of
52 ants, continuously coming in from somewhere around the corner. Mario's guests started to
53 arrive. Most the men wore black tie, some Arabs in white robes, and women draped in long
54 gowns. There was little for me to do but stand around with my thumb up my ass, eating canapes
55 by the dozen and drinking champagne. Finally a contingent academic types in tweed filtered in.
56 While not as rumpled as me, I no longer stood out like a sore thumb. After a few minutes Mario
57 brought over one of the academic types and introduced him as some big wig at Sotheby's. I
58 explained my problem in a couple of minutes, and he said he would get back to me the next day.
59 It was with some relief that I left the opening for the comfort of my hotel room and its bed.
60 Much later in my career I learned Mario's little paintings could easily exceed a million dollars
61 each in value, were easy to authenticate, and that the super-wealthy could keep a fortune's worth
62 of them in a satchel — just in case”

63 * * *

64 There was a message for me the following morning when I returned to my hotel room
65 after breakfast. It was from Sotheby's. “Your painting has been located, and you can pick it up
66 at your convenience.” I immediately went to Sotheby's. The girl at reception called for Mr.
67 Abscess. He appeared wearing the same clothes as the previous day, this time holding the
68 painting wrapped in brown paper.

69 "We found the painting. Sorry for the trouble."

70 "What happened?"

71 "It was misplaced under a secretary's desk."

72 "Can you sell it for me?"

73 "No, it isn't right."

74 "What do you mean?"

75 Slipping into his Brooklyn accent, "It ain't **right**."

76 I assumed he meant that it wasn't authentic. "Who's opinion was that?"

77 "Ours."

78 It was clear that I was not going to get any more information out of Mr. Abscess. The
79 painting was *burned* figuratively. Just as badly damaged as if it had been literally burned. I took
80 it home as carry-on luggage. It's been hanging in my house since then cooling off. I am waiting
81 for the world to forget its sullied reputation before trying to authenticate and sell it again. The
82 other four paintings sold in London as expected.