

Case Study

Undocumented Collection Creates Massive Estate Headache for Heirs

The following case study comes from Art Collection Manager and Documenter,
Carrie Haley.

An enthusiastic collector, who unexpectedly passed away, left a half-managed estate with several valuable collections undocumented and unclearly allocated to museums and family members. As you can imagine, this is a logistical and legal nightmare for all parties who claim inheritance of the collections.

Prior to the collector's sudden passing, extended family members attempted to help organize the estate. However, their busy lives kept them from acting quickly and clarifying his reasons for selecting certain works of art and the previous collection's history (provenance) associated with each object. Therefore the information was lost and the heirs now faced the enormous task of properly documenting some 10,000 works of art.

The heirs, unfamiliar with the collection's value, history, or origin of the art, tried to reorganize, document and reconstruct provenance without proper records. With this daunting, yet legally necessary cataloging effort, they needed to hire several professionals. Regrettably, the voracious collector left no funds to help manage the estate. Thus the executor, being exhausted and frustrated, and lacking in funds, decided to sell off portions of the collections to pay for estate management services, and appraisals for museum donations.

Not only were the collections undocumented, but they were also displayed and stored in such a way that caused damage. Extreme fluctuations of temperature and humidity as well as water from leaky roofs and flooding resulted in irreparable harm to valuable works of art. Pest management was another very serious matter not considered by the collector or his heirs. Consequently, extensive damage caused by wool-eating moths was discovered when several trunks of early Navajo textiles were opened. A textile conservator was consulted and said the damage was so severe that restoration was impossible. So the once gorgeous blankets were sadly tossed into the trash. As this case study reveals, incomplete documentation and poor management destroyed a treasured collection and ultimately has become a burden for the family.

It is important to remember that as a collector, it should be your goal to protect and preserve the objects for future generations. You are only a temporary caretaker of these works of art.

Over the past 10 years Carrie Haley has encountered many collectors who do not have their collections properly documented with photographs, a computer database or hard copy files stored safely away from their home. As a result, much of the art and other assets have been sold on the market for a fraction of their value or left to an inexperienced family member to sort out their unknown inheritance.

To learn more about Art Collection Services, call 505-690-3130 or email:
ortizhaley@yahoo.com