

Rembrandt Sings by Michael Johnston – An Extract

20050131

This is something I really do not need – somewhat of a cliché that, for the author of a dozen prize-winning books, but let it pass. The fact that I'm learning the news from a newspaper reporter who, somehow or other, has got hold of my ex-directory number, simply increases the feeling of irritation, annoyance; dammit let's be blunt, anger – and just a smidgeon of fear. I mean, what the hell does she mean by it? In truth, she probably doesn't know anything about it.

And the questions he asked. What an uncultured oaf! What would it 'go for?' Would I be 'flogging' mine too?

The trouble dealing with a lawyer who's also a friend is that when it comes to the crunch, (another cliché), lawyers don't have friends. It was simply a mutual understanding, unwritten, that neither canvas would be sold in our lifetimes; hers or mine, and we were both young enough then. Now that lawyer and quondam friend is dead; his feculent son-in-law and his no less odoriferous wife are in charge, and they are on the make. And they could make tens of millions; not from this one item, of course, but from the whole collection, one of the most remarkable still in private hands. What's more, you don't need to be paranoid to feel damn-well certain they've chosen Shepherd's as the auction house because its place of business is just across the square from my office in the Contemporary Arts Foundation.

I told the reporter the painting would fetch what the market thought it was worth and that it was very hard to know what that would be now, many years after the event. Yes, it was one of only two in private hands and, yes again, I owned the other. I'd like to get my private hands on that son-in-law until I choked the life out of him, but I managed not to say so, nor even imply such a feeling; remarkable restraint in the circumstances. I'd like to get my hands on the painting too. I wonder if a private treaty sale is still possible.

After all, it would only be one item from a significant catalogue and, by any reasonable yardstick, the disposal of the wonderful Handschumacher Collection of German Expressionist paintings should be of greater significance than the sale of a single Golden. The Foundation's own funds for purchases are worth a great deal less than formerly but there are quite a few patrons of the arts who would not so much like to add a Golden to their collections as be known to own the painting. The trouble is this Golden comes with what my friends in television call a 'back story'. I don't know if I could survive its telling. Well of course I could, physically and even financially, but my reputation certainly wouldn't.

It's crass really, and typical of that man and his manners, to abuse his position as her trustee by slipping this painting into the disposal of his father-in-law's estate. If he thought to conceal it then his plan has spectacularly back-fired. The press and the art world seem to be regarding the sale as consisting of only two items, one entire Expressionist collection and one solitary Golden painting.

If Shepherd's follow their usual practice, they will ask the most appropriate independent experts to run their rule over the individual items and pass their highly respected judgement, on the provenance and authenticity of each work. Amid all the auction house

scandals of recent years, Shepherd's policy of ostentatiously making sure beyond all reasonable doubt that the emptor had rather less to caveat has stood the house in good stead. However, this means that it is almost inevitable – and never mind the 'almost' – that I will be asked to vouch for the Golden. Quite apart from being the Director, the youngest ever Director, of the normally very conservative Contemporary Arts Foundation and the owner of the only other Golden in private hands, I am, by design and by default, the world's leading expert on the paintings of Alexander Golden (1880-1938?), best described as a Scottish abstract expressionist – best described by me, that is. I placed the date of his death as 1938 (and most other scholars, in consequence, omit the question mark) but, in truth (that rare commodity) no one can be really certain when, where, or even how he died.

[The automatic back-up started up here and kicked me out for a moment while it burned all the past week's new data onto a CD which it then spat out. I have dutifully followed the on-screen instructions and put in a fresh disk. Can't be too careful with precious work.]

As I was saying then, all this means that they are bound to turn to the person one witty Australian art critic – sui generis – recently labelled 'the art world's Golden boy, who, after a jeunesse dorée, could now be thought of as a potential future Director of the Tate.' Who am I to argue? However, I am well past my youth and although some of the gilt still adheres I also feel a certain secret guilt that clings no less tenaciously. My next step must surely be to speak to (or as he would say 'with') Abramowitz. I have only met him a couple of times and the second occasion was after the funeral of his father-in-law. I'm not ashamed of the fact that I lost my temper, which was entirely justified, but I am annoyed now, in retrospect, because it's certain to complicate, it might even prevent, an amicable resolution.

20050201

As I predicted in yesterday's diary entry, Shepherd's have been in touch, by e-mail. Having had a moment or two to think about it, I explained I was 'unavoidably committed to a short visit to the USA.' Conveniently, I'd already arranged a spell of time away from the office, to work on the forthcoming package of television series and glossy book. (How I wish my producer would not badger me to write the television script then expand to book length, rather than abstract it from the narrative of the book itself, but that is another matter.) However, the fact Shepherd's intend to ask another of the Foundation's distinguished scholars to look at the German Expressionists, the man who was my only serious rival for the directorship, means (given how painstakingly, and Ye Gods how slowly, he works) that I can say I will get round to looking at the Golden in ample time for the auction itself. Besides, I know the painting intimately, even if I haven't stood in front of it for many years.

Having committed myself to the trip, I then had to book a flight to San Francisco and, gritting my teeth, speak with Abramowitz's PA to make an appointment. How that must be making the bastard chortle. I must keep my temper.

20050202

This flight contrasts in almost every detail with that first visit to the New World. Then I was squashed up in the back; near enough to smell the toilets but just too far away to get in ahead of the queue. Now? I think the young lady would even bring me a bed bottle if I asked nicely, and the one aroma I can detect is her perfume. Then, I had a notebook and pencil. (I also had a sharpener and what I had been warned by an American friend always to call an eraser.) Now, I have this top-of-the-line laptop with almost infinite storage capacity. It holds a

whole gallery of paintings, from the Foundation's archives, and, of course, I have images of every Golden; including hers and mine. I even have the written transcripts and even the audio of my tape-recorded interviews with Joe and one or two facsimiles of crucial letters; a portable archive no less. It cost me a small fortune to have it done. By rights I ought to have deposited primary source material with the Foundation when I completed my thesis but, somehow, I never got round to doing so. The originals can stay where they are. The less said about Joe in the next few weeks and months the better, I think. We don't want an investigative journalist or, just as bad, some eager post-graduate art historian in search of a PhD (like I was once) working over that ground. However, since I am the Director it simply won't happen.

Despite everything, I can't help smiling whenever, and it's quite often, I think about Joe. Perhaps that's the real measure of his influence on my career, and on me as a person. If what one thinks about often makes one smile, can one be altogether a bastard? (According to Hamlet, yes, but what did he know about Modern Art?) Now, unable to sleep though cocooned in a comfortable First Class seat, I have nothing else to do but think which, in my case, means write and, with this box of tricks, I can switch from diary entry into memoir, or do I mean monograph mode; and I can do that in two clicks of a mouse's tail. [Click, click.]

I flew to San Francisco all those years ago after having written a short letter on Foundation notepaper but, with time pressing, I didn't wait for an answer. The first frustration had been to discover Joe's phone number was unlisted. However, some amateur sleuthing in the gaggle of galleries in Carmel identified the one he seemed to be associated with and, an innovation for the time, it had a bar and restaurant. By American standards I was nearer the net worth of one of Steinbeck's Salinas Valley characters than the cream of Carmel society but as I was still spending my way through my aunt's legacy I felt no great anxiety as I stood on the sidewalk contemplating the menu without first looking (as one does in Harrogate) at the prices. Hungry for the life-style as much as the linguine, I turned to go in. Coming out in a hurry, the man in the loud plaid jacket simply didn't see me. I had to dodge aside or he would have walked straight into me. Short, squat and angry, he pulled a stubby cigar from his lips, spat copiously on the sidewalk and disappeared round the corner into the car park.

Giving it no more thought, I stepped inside, spotted the all-important sign and pushed open the door. As I took my first pace towards the urinal, the cubicle door flew open and slammed me in the face. Halfway between dazed and stunned, I slithered to the floor. Through watering eyes, I dimly saw the tall, white-haired, and very angry man charge out, yank me to my feet, put my head in a crushing arm-lock and begin to twist it off.

Then he saw who I was, or rather wasn't, and let go. I sank, sore, scared, bruised and breathless to the floor of the lavatory.

'Sorry,' he grunted and began to leave.

Whether I spoke or just wheezed I can't remember but it was enough to make him pause. God that worried me! I wanted to see the back of him. A solitary Brit in an American john: who wants to prolong such an encounter? As he reached down I cringed. He pulled me to my feet. His fists tightened on my lapels and he stared hard into my face.

'Owe you a beer,' he said and steered me to the relative security of the bar. I'd forgotten all about needing a pee. Needing the beer, even American beer, to give me the strength to flee, I let him prop me in a corner and deftly load our table with peanuts. He sat opposite me, obviously exhausted by the exertion himself, and we raised our glasses.

'Name's Rembrandt. Guess I owe you an explanation. Thought you were my ex-business partner. Just told him next time we met I'd kill him.'

'Somehow, Mr Rembrandt,' I said in my best Dashiell Hammett accent, 'I think we were meant to meet. And there's something else I'd quite like you to explain.'

Then, quite literally, the men in white coats (one man and one woman actually) came for him; and that was how, next day, I came to be sitting at the bedside of a dying artist.