

Lee's Letter

The Time Machine

It is a fact of history that the further removed we are from a time period or an event, the more we can know about it. For instance, to the American public in 1944, D-Day was defined as the Allied invasion of Europe that took place at Normandy. Those who actively participated were able to view it only in terms of their own experience. Now, more than 60 years later, historians can comprehend the totality of the event and see it in a perspective that would have been impossible at the time and for years thereafter.

The ability to delve into history has been brought home to me on an extremely personal level since founding The Johann Berthelsen Conservancy. Artworks have come to light that I did not know existed, and many delightful anecdotes have come from individuals who were formerly strangers and whom I now consider friends.

A major discovery was recently made by my cousin, Mercedes McGowen.

"Lee's Letter" continued on page 5

Forgeries ~ Some Advice for the Knowledgeable Collector



Authentic Berthelsen



Forgery



Authentic Berthelsen



Forgery

For as long as people have collected art, there have been forgeries. Even the most careful and knowledgeable collectors, galleries, and museums have fallen prey to counterfeit works. In fact, as technology has improved, an increasing number of artworks thought for years to be authentic have been unmasked as fakes. Even such a collector as educated and discerning as the late J. Paul Getty — who favored classical art — occasionally became a victim. It is not surprising that the works of the Roman-Greco period were counterfeited as early as the Middle Ages, and some can only be detected through x-ray techniques that reveal the metal composition

and workings of the internal armature.

"Forgeries" continued on page 2

Canvas Contents

Lee's Letter.....1, 5
 Forgeries.....1, 2, 4, 5
 Have you seen these children?2
 Friends.....3, 6



Johann Berthelsen
The Johann Berthelsen Conservancy, LLC

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Have you seen these children?



Wayman Adams, the noted portraitist and life-long friend of Johann Berthelsen, painted several portraits of the Berthelsen children, Karen, Lee and John. Because of his sentimental attachment to the family, Adams retained them in his personal collection.

Following his death in 1959, many of his works were lost in a fire at his Texas home. Others were subsequently auctioned and, over the years, the whereabouts of the Berthelsen children's portraits have become a mystery.

The Johann Berthelsen Conservancy requests your assistance in discovering where these "missing children" are now.

Please send any information to lee@berthelsenart.com. If possible, we would like to see the family reunited.



"Forgeries" continued from page 1

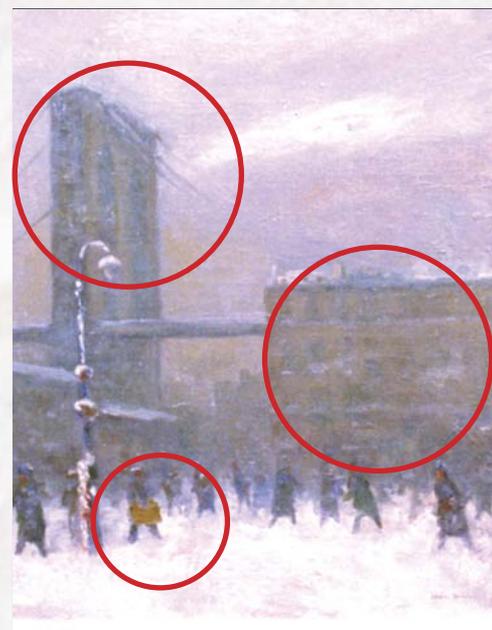
The Rospigliosi Cup, one of the most popular exhibits in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, was long thought to be the work of Renaissance goldsmith Benvenuto Cellini. Documents and drawings discovered in the late 20th century in London's Victoria and Albert Museum proved it to be the work of an extremely clever and talented artist who wished to play a joke on the public. Despite its dubious origins, the quality of the piece is so unique that, in the words of a curator, "We will just change the description from the Renaissance to the 19th century."

Painting has long been a fertile field for dishonest copyists, some of whom devote long hours of study to the artists they emulate. Detection techniques including x-ray, carbon dating, and chemical analysis of pigments have been useful in detecting forgeries of old masters. This, coupled with the extensive study and documentation relating to artwork valued in the millions, has caused many forgers to concentrate their efforts on the works of more popular painters generally found in the hands of the wider public.

The paintings of Johann Berthelsen fall into this category for a number of reasons. In the first place, they are popular because their content is so accessible and appeals to a wide market. In addition to serious art collectors, those with a love of New York City or with a particular attachment to any of the many locales that Johann Berthelsen painted would be likely to purchase his work without applying a heavy degree of scholarship.



Authentic Berthelsen



Forgery

Further, in the 1930s through the early 1940s, prior to establishing his reputation as a major American Impressionist, Berthelsen was attempting to support his family through painting and was prolific in the number of canvases he produced. Because he was attuned to the public taste, he painted many versions of the same scene — the Little Church

Around the Corner, the Brooklyn Bridge, Times Square, and others were painted over the years in numerous, but similar, versions.*

Perhaps most important, although values of Berthelsen paintings continue to rise, they are still accessible to a wide public, many of whom lack serious artistic training and make their purchases without professional guidance.

Approximately 20 years after he began painting professionally, the first Berthelsen fakes began to find their way onto the market.

According to Lee Berthelsen, “As a result of my father’s involvement with art, my brother, sister and I were all attuned to the New York gallery scene and frequently stopped in to see what was current. About 1953, my sister, Karen, stopped into a gallery and was horrified to see a rather large number of paintings attributed to my father that clearly were not his. She immediately notified the New York City Police Department, which maintains a branch in charge of dealing with art thefts and forgeries. As a result, a number of the perpetrators were discovered and arrested.”

Throughout the ‘50s, ‘60s and ‘70s, forgeries began to surface with increasing frequency. In several cases, a totally different problem presented itself when a number of actual Berthelsen paintings appeared with the signature obliterated and replaced with the name of a well-known entertainer. It has never been discovered whether the intent to characterize the individual as an artist of great merit was his

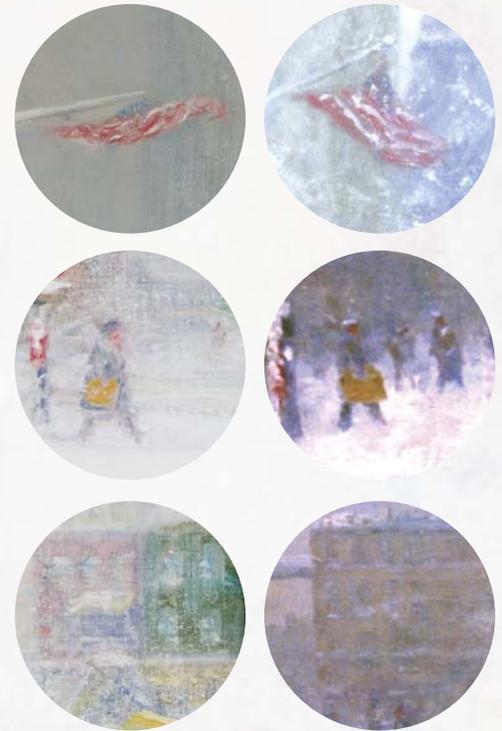
own idea or had been concocted independent of his knowledge by a publicity agent. In one case, in 1984, Lee Berthelsen challenged the gallery as to the true authorship, and the painting was subsequently withdrawn from sale.

As the Berthelsen children pursued their lives and careers outside New York City, and the artist and his wife lived in semi-retirement in Connecticut, there were more frequent instances of counterfeit Berthelsens coming onto the market. The scope of the problem became shockingly evident to Lee Berthelsen early in 1989: “I was contacted by my good friend, the late Lee Howard, who was curator of the Sheldon Swope Art Museum in Terra Haute, Indiana. In view of my father’s Indiana connection and his increasing popularity, Howard had planned a retrospective exhibition and assembled some 55 oils from various sources. He had his doubts about several of the works and asked if I would be willing to preview the exhibit and provide authentication. I, of course, agreed and you can imagine our mutual shock when we discovered that some 45 to 50 of the 55 paintings were indeed forgeries.

“Given the fact that works from multiple collections in various states were involved, this was clearly a federal matter, so we contacted the FBI which, like the NYPD, has a special office for investigating crimes related to art.

“I think that at the moment that I realized there were so many forgeries, the idea for The Johann Berthelsen Conservancy first took root in my mind.”

Subsequent investigation revealed the fact that most of the forgeries were the work of the same group. They specialized in paintings by Johann Berthelsen and his contemporaries and had evaded detection by moving frequently between Miami and New York. Ultimately, the criminals were captured and jailed.



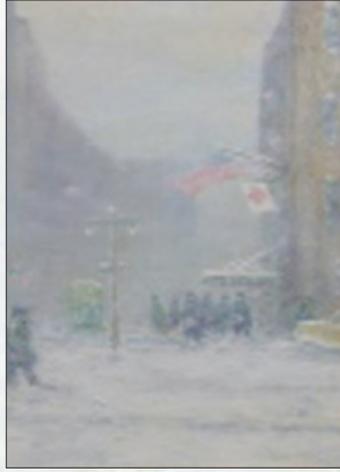
Above are comparisons showing details from authentic Johann Berthelsen paintings on the left and forgeries of his artwork on the right.

When Lee Berthelsen founded The Johann Berthelsen Conservancy, one of its primary aims involved creation of a resource through which collectors, dealers, galleries, and institutions could obtain definitive authentication of Berthelsen paintings. “Many of the forgeries that have come to our attention are quite clumsy when compared to the works they purport to represent. For instance, my father always indicated a great degree of animation: people appeared to be in motion, flags fluttered in the breeze, and the entire scene pulsed with life.

*Painting the same scene with minor changes is common among major artists. American painters, including Durand, Hicks, Bingham, Audubon, and others, all produced numerous copies of their most marketable works.



Authentic Berthelsen



Forgery

Many of the forgeries, by contrast, are dead and dull. Another area neglected by forgers is the attention to architectural detail. My father was always extremely precise in recording details of the scenes he was painting. In fact, many of his paintings can be dated by changes that have taken place in the buildings and skyline. In their haste, most producers of fakes pay little attention to the fine points.”

To Lee Berthelsen and his associates at the Conservancy, the number of authentications regularly issued have become a great source of satisfaction. Many of the finest galleries now routinely question works consigned and have been saved from expensive mistakes. The same is true for collectors, and even individuals who own anywhere from a single work to a major collection.

“The work we’re doing will assist lovers of my father’s art, both now and into the future. When we designed the Certificate of Authentication, we included space for a photographic reproduction of the painting or other work, which is then embossed with the seal of the Conservancy. As a result, it can follow the artwork even as it changes ownership and provides future collectors with the assurance that the work they are purchasing is true and authentic.”



Although we know a good deal about my father’s career as an artist, comparatively little was known regarding his experiences as an opera singer and voice coach. Thanks to her research through Ancestry.com and other sources, we have uncovered numerous newspaper references ranging from reviews of musical performances to coverage of gallery expositions that provide an invaluable contemporary window on Johann Berthelsen’s amazing career. A personally modest individual, my father never boasted of his achievements on the stage. Today, in reading reviews of his own performances, it becomes obvious that he was not only considered a superlative singer but that he was quite well known to the public of his time.

In reading these delightful documents and in keeping up with the regular business of the Conservancy, I cannot help but consider the fact that without the computer and the internet, most of this would have been extremely laborious or impossible. Access to people, publications, documents, periodicals and artifacts has quickly become routine and is taken for granted by many. In reality, it represents not only a tremendous technological achievement but a great gift in its ability to connect not only to one another but to the near and distant past and to help produce that which will survive into the future. Man’s latest technology has truly provided us with a time machine that enables us to chart our way forward through an appreciation of where we have been.

Yours sincerely,

Lee Berthelsen
Chairman

The Johann Berthelsen Conservancy, LLC
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Friends

In the course of a lifetime in the Arts, Johann Berthelsen became acquainted with many extraordinary individuals. In this feature, we will introduce them to you.

Photo courtesy of Troy Chromatics Archives. Collection Rensselaer County Historical Society, Troy, NY.



Madame Ernestine Schumann- Heink

They met only once, but for Johann Berthelsen, his conversation with the legendary contralto Ernestine Schumann-Heink became a memory that he would treasure for a lifetime.

In 1905, Johann Berthelsen was a 22-year-old student at the Chicago Musical College. His combination of vocal talent (which had won for him a full scholarship) and great personal charm had made him a favorite with school director Willie Ziegfeld. The brother of legendary Broadway producer Florenz Ziegfeld and co-owner of the school, Willie Ziegfeld never missed an opportunity to promote the talent of his young protégé. A favorite technique was to choose Johann to deliver a personal message to a leading musical or theatrical personality who happened to be in town. At the bottom of the message, he would add, “Please ask the young man who delivered this to sing for you.”

On that day in 1905, the message may well have been wedding congratulations for Madame Schumann-Heink who on that day was to marry Chicago attorney William Rapp Jr., her manager. Johann could be forgiven if he evidenced any nervousness when he delivered the message for he was about to enter the presence of a woman who had already established herself as one of the preminent stars of opera’s Golden Age.

Born in Bohemia in 1861, Ernestine “Tini” Rössler was the daughter of a shoemaker. The family moved frequently during her childhood, eventually settling in Graz when she was 13. It was there that she began to study voice with Marietta von LeClair, a former opera singer, and made her debut in 1877 in Beethoven’s

Ninth Symphony. Her operatic debut was followed the next year in *Il Trovatore*.

The circumstance that was to propel her to stardom occurred at the Hamburg opera when, because of a dispute between the manager and their lead singer, she agreed to substitute and sang three different roles on three consecutive nights. She sang at the Bayreuth festivals from 1896 to 1914, and in 1898, she made her debut at the Metropolitan Opera in New York.

It was Schumann-Heink’s versatility in creating vocal characterizations that established her among the operatic immortals. Examples of her unique style can be found in the recordings she made that demonstrate her range, both as a singer and an actress. In the duet, *Ai Nostri Monti* from Verdi’s *Il Trovatore*, which she recorded with the great tenor Enrico Caruso, she is, to quote Caruso biographer Francis Robinson, “A broken old woman dreaming of home.” Conversely, her interpretation of “O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion” from Handel’s *Messiah* eschews the polite monotony so often found in oratorio in favor of a command and authority worthy of an Old Testament prophet.

A naturalized American citizen, Madame Schumann-Heink was intensely patriotic. In World War I, she raised money for the Allied cause and afterward supported various veterans’ charities.

“Friends” continued on page 6

"Friends" continued from page 3

The War brought a great personal tragedy, as she had relatives fighting on both sides and one of her sons, August Heink, died during the conflict.

After reading the message that Johann Berthelsen delivered, she looked up, smiled and asked him to sing something for her. According to Lee Berthelsen, "My father sang a German leid and, when he had finished, Madame Schumann-Heink said, 'Come over here and sit down next to me.' She put her arm around the young man, praised his voice and predicted a great career. What happened then was what impressed my father most. The greatest contralto of her age, on her wedding day, discussed singing with him for the next two hours. The fact that she would spend so much time with an aspiring singer on such an important occasion made this a very special memory and provided a lesson in kindness that he never forgot."

In later years, Madame Schumann-Heink would become familiar to the non-opera going public through concert

appearances, movies, and especially through radio. Beginning in 1926 until 1935, the year before her death, she sang Silent Night in both German and English at the stroke of midnight on Christmas Eve. To again quote Francis Robinson, "It was Christmas past, present and to come."

She died on November 17th, 1936, in Hollywood of leukemia. In recognition of her patriotism and generosity to veterans' causes, she was buried with full military honors.

Johann Berthelsen went on to achieve high critical acclaim for his vocal performances. After a relatively short time in the spotlight, he would move on to teaching and later to painting but, as long as he lived, he would never forget the gracious artist who took the time to encourage and advise him. 