Book spin doctor extraordinaire Edward Bernays, with wife Doris.

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PUBLISHER

Journalistic, Inc.

ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER

kimberly@finebooks magazine.com

ART DIRECTOR

Brett Miller

www.finebooks magazine.com

Managing Editor

Greg Landers

Landers@finebooks magazine.com

COLUMNS

Rich Agnello

Leila Janie@finebooks magazine.com

Jeremy Gibb

jgibb@finebooks magazine.com

Bet Mcknight

bmcknight@finebooks magazine.com

Jeffrey S. Murray

jeffm@finebooks magazine.com

Jill Silver

jsilver@finebooks magazine.com

Andy L. York

andy@finebooks magazine.com

CIRCULATION:

M. Webster

circulation@finebooks magazine.com

CONTACT INFORMATION

Fine Books & Collections (ISSN 1551-5001)

101 Europa Drive, Suite 150, Chapel Hill, NC 27516

Phone: 1-800-662-4834

www.finebooks magazine.com

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Auction Guide

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Showcasing the Writing Process
Bonhams’ spring sale features draft manuscripts from key literary voices

This March, the Bonhams Auction House fine Books and Manuscripts sale returns during the New York Antiquarian Book Fair and will feature pieces that give insight into the writing and editing process of major authors.

The top lot in this sale is Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s notebook from 1850-1851. This autograph manuscript contains drafts for every poem appearing in her first significant collection of poetry, The Seraphim and Other Poems, including extensive additions, deletions, and emanations. It also contains several never before seen poems. The notebook is estimated at $400,000-600,000.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning was a standard-bearer for women’s political thought,” said Tom Lamb, business development director of the books and manuscripts department at Bonhams. “She grasped the mettle of political intrigue and put it into writing. That was very unusual for any woman who has come down to us from the nineteenth century. As time goes on, the exceptional quality of her work and her mind becomes more important.”

Several other Barrett Browning notebooks are also up for sale, including an autographed working draft of Poems Before Congress, estimated at $150,000-200,000; an autographed draft of her revised translation of the Aeschelus play, Prometheus Bound, for publication in her 1850 work, Poems, estimated at $200,000-300,000; and her autographed transcripts of early English poets, including Geoffrey Chaucer, Edmund Spencer, John Fletcher, and popular balladry as appropriate on the writing process. This existing collection of some of literature’s greatest voices offers a rare glimpse into their minds.

“This sale concentrates attention on literary manuscripts and the way that writers compose,” Lamb said. “We have pieces that real book collectors want to buy, and there will always be something interesting.”

Elizabet Barret Browning’s Autograph Manuscript, being a working draft of her revised translation of the Aeschelus play, Prometheus Bound, for publication in her 1850 work, Poems, estimated at $400,000-600,000.

“Printed by Tho Cotes for Robert Allot to be sold at the signe of the Black Beare in Pauls Church-yard, 1632.” Apart from a manuscript that came up in 2008 at Christie’s, these are the only substantial Elizabeth Barrett Browning manuscripts to have appeared at auction in 40 to 50 years,” Lamb said.

Other manuscripts in the sale also concentrate on how writers compose, including an autographed early working draft of H. G. Wells’ “The First Horseman” from part II of the novella A Story of the Stone Age. This manuscript includes extensive notations, and corrections, and is estimated at $15,000-20,000. Another lot includes two leaves of an autograph revision of the book-version of Oscar Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray, published in 1891. This is the only surviving portion of this state of revision and is estimated at $40,000-60,000.

Another leading lot in the sale is a complete and large copy of the second folio of Shakespeare’s comedies, histories, and tragedies, initialed (“E.B.B.”), estimated at $180,000 - 250,000. This copy was rebound in blue morocco. “Blue morocco is very rare because it is usually red or crimson [that you find],” Lamb said. “This is a very nice copy.”

This sale promises to delight collectors and scholars alike with its emphasis on the writing process. This exciting collection of some of literature’s greatest voices offers a rare glimpse into their minds.

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Peggy Caruthers lives in North Carolina and is the editor of custom content at Journalistic Inc. She was a fine books and manuscript auctioneer at Christie’s, and is the president of Christie’s. "Apart from a manuscript that came up in 2008 at Christie’s, these are the only substantial Elizabeth Barrett Browning manuscripts to have appeared at auction in 40 to 50 years,” Lamb said.

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FINE LITERARY MANUSCRIPTS
Thursday March 9, 1pm
FINE BOOKS AND MANUSCRIPTS including the Kennedy Years
Thursday March 9, 1:30pm
New York
A History of Excellence
Swann celebrates its 75th anniversary

The story of Swann Galleries began on March 27, 1942, when Benjamin Swann held an auction dedicated to rare and antique books. From its beginnings in a four-person office to the dynamic community of collectors and specialists on staff today, Swann has grown to become the largest specialty auction house for works on paper. After seventy-five years, this third-generation, family-owned business continues to uphold the traditions of the auction and antique world while remaining open to innovative ideas.

"As a smaller house with experts who are working every day in their chosen fields, seeing material, and meeting collectors, we are in a position to move quickly," said Nicholas D. Lowry, president and principal auctioneer of Swann. This flexibility has allowed Swann to break new ground in the auction world.

Swann was the first house to conduct auctions of both Printed & Manuscript African Americana and African-American Fine Art. In 2006, the auction house launched a dedicated African-American Fine Art department when Nigel Freeman, now director, noticed how strongly works by African-American artists were selling in Prints & Drawings sales. "That first auction overflowed to our second floor, where we had an audio feed as well as a second auctioneer to field bids from the record-breaking crowd," Lowry said, noting that the now biannual Fine Art department met with such success that by 2010, it had to expand, and now holds biannual auctions. As the industry continues to change, so does Swann. "One thing people can expect from Swann is that as things change, Swann will certainly adapt to the times, but we will never lose sight of our traditional roots," Lowry said. "There is something so psychologically primal about an auction, and we don’t want to lose touch with that profound emotional connection."

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Illustration Art
Swann added a department of Illustration Art in 2013, offering original artwork intended for publication. That wide designation includes magazine covers, cartoons, advertisements, and illustrations for books. The department met with such success that by 2016, it had to expand, and now holds biannual auctions.

"The way auction houses work. With a firm foot grounded in the house’s long history, Swann continues looking towards the future and leading the industry."

George S. and Nicholas D. Lowry.

Through these sales, we have brought many artists to auction for the first time and have cultivated a whole new field of collecting interest," he says. The department shook the auction world with single-owner sales, not only redefining categories but establishing new auction records for established artists, and set those with no history.

"The sale featured albums, snapshots, and documentary photographs celebrating everyday life and beauty," Lowry said. "Swann added a department of Illustration Art in 2013, offering original artwork intended for publication. That wide designation includes magazine covers, cartoons, advertisements, and illustrations for books. The department met with such success that by 2016, it had to expand, and now holds biannual auctions. As the industry continues to change, so does Swann. "One thing people can expect from Swann is that as things change, Swann will certainly adapt to the times, but we will never lose sight of our traditional roots," Lowry said. "There is something so psychologically primal about an auction, and we don’t want to lose touch with that profound emotional connection."

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The Greatest Sale on Earth

Leslie Hindman’s spring sale highlights the long history of The Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey circus.

During its May 4 fine Books and Manuscripts auction, Leslie Hindman Auctioneers will welcome one and all into the world of “The Greatest Show on Earth.” This sale will feature one of the largest single-owner collections of circus memorabilia to come to auction in several years, including memorabilia from The Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, as well as hundreds of different circuses.

This sale is especially exciting for collectors due to the announcement of permanent closure of The Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey circus this May after 133 years of operation. “It’s like stepping back into a time that will never return,” said Jim Sharp, vice president of regional offices and operations for Leslie Hindman. “This memorabilia is part of American history that will never be seen again. The circus was the center of entertainment for many communities throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s.”

This collection was amassed over sixty years by Richard Bennett, one of the last remaining friends of the Ringling family. Bennett personally knew many members of this prominent circus family, including Ida B. Ringling, the last widow of the Ringling Brothers, who died in 1966. Included in the sale are numerous circus lithographs, posters, and photographs, as well as a piano that was owned by Ida Ringling and used in the early days of the circus.

“Mr. Bennett spent countless hours with his friend Ida discussing family and circus history, and many of the items, including the piano, programs, photographs, and route cards were given by Ida directly to Mr. Bennett,” Sharp said. Bennett himself became a performer and traveled across the country with various circuses in the 1960s and 1970s.

Framed poster for Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey’s “Lady on a Horse” (1930).

Framed poster for Ringling Brothers’ “Joan of Arc” (1912).

Inspired by the memorabilia he collected, the fascinating people he met in his travels gifted him property from numerous circuses. Leslie Hindman’s staff from the auction house’s Chicago and Milwaukee offices has been able to visit Bennett in his home in Baraboo, Wisconsin, and gather firsthand information from him. This has allowed the auction house to fill in much of the history behind these items to share with collectors, while the house’s six regional offices simultaneously provide international exposure to buyers to ensure a successful sale.

“It has been a privilege for Leslie Hindman Auctioneers to work with Mr. Bennett to bring his collection of over sixty years to auction,” Sharp said. “Mr. Bennett’s extraordinary memory of the Ringling family history and the circus memorabilia has been very beneficial in putting this auction together.”

After more than a century of entertaining families, the closure of this festive enterprise will close a chapter of American history with it. The Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey circus will be leaving behind stories and memorabilia, including this collection, for circus enthusiasts and historians alike to cherish for many years to come.

Peggy Carouthers lives in North Carolina and is the editor of custom content at Journalistic Inc.
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