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Vincent Price

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The
Sears
venture
into
art



by Vincent Price

Mr. Price is a respected authority on art
as well as a distinguished actor.

Sears, Roebuck and Company has been a TRB&S client (Chicago) for many years. This article is reprinted from Business Horizons, Winter, 1963.

GEORGE STRUTHERS, imaginative vice-president in charge of merchandising for Sears, Roebuck and Company, is a persuasive man. I must confess, though, that he needed none of his charm when, in the spring of 1962, he asked me to put together a collection of fine art for sale in Sears stores. For twenty-five years I had been carrying on the battle for bringing art to people in their daily living—in the home, at the office, and in small museums and centers outside the great cities. Here was a chance to do just that on a strictly business basis—and with more than 400 potential outlets.

Almost as if we had thought through the scheme together, Sears executives and I came to quick agreement on our principles of operation. My job would be to seek out and buy original works of art under a tentative price ceiling of \$10,000 per unit and within a definite, though reasonably generous, total budget. For its part the company agreed to sell each item at the best possible price and with a guaranty of its authenticity as an original. The entire operation would be based on a mutual conviction that (1) a wide spectrum of American families would respond to a tasteful selection of art by buying good pieces at prices they could afford, and (2) American business firms should support the arts all along the line, from store and product design to the merchandising of creative works. Neither Sears executives nor I wanted any part of a collection gathered simply to imply that the firm was high class. Such collections are pretentious, for they neither work into people's lives nor make the company and its executives any differently disposed toward art in the day-to-day business of making a living.

Merchandising Art

The orthodox machinery for bringing sellers and buyers of art together has been hundreds of years developing. For those who know the ropes it is a simple market, one that requires little more equipment than an expert sense of values and a trader's temperament. But the finder-dealer-gallery structure of the art market perplexes those who are unfamiliar with it. Moreover, the market for most art is a thin one, to use the phrase of the securities dealers, with few sellers and buyers ready at any time to deal on a particular piece. Consequently, it is hard for the layman to judge values. Although gallery managers and dealers are probably as honest as any other category of businessmen, the uninitiated usually approach the marts with the uneasy feeling that they will be fleeced or that their artistic interests will be laughed at by gallery per-

sonnel. Unwittingly, dealers have fostered the idea that art is for an esoteric few, and only a totally new approach to selling art can correct this notion.

It was our view that the merchandising of art should not be confined to a few stores in the larger cities but should in time be an activity of all the Sears outlets. For this reason we decided to send out shows of selected pieces. The Vincent Price Collection began with 2,700 items and has grown to 35,000 despite sales beyond our most optimistic predictions. By now, the collection has appeared in seventy-five stores, and currently about twenty shows are on the road.

Although a few shows were sent to stores in areas considered particularly suitable for market-analysis purposes, the choice of locations has been largely random. In general, collections tie in with special sales of home furnishings and furniture, the promotional theme being that a work of art is the ultimate in home decoration. For this reason we have employed no special salesmen; and although I have tried to attend as many shows as possible, someone in home furnishings ordinarily takes over the basic selling job for the two or three weeks that a show remains in a store.

At first I personally supervised the selection going into a store. But after the first ten shows or so, the task of buying original works in the major markets of Western Europe and the United States became so time consuming that, despite increasing efficiency in managing sales from the collection, choosing the items for a particular store had to be reduced to routine. Except in special instances, we now follow approximate rules of thumb, selecting so many oils, so many watercolors, so many etchings, and so on. Prices vary from \$25 to \$10,000 with only a few pieces at the expensive end of the range, chosen largely for prestige and advertising value. The highest proportion of sales is in the \$100 to \$300 range. My good friends in Department 621 at Sears (gifts, lamps, china) have suggested that we use more high-priced items as prestige pieces to attract viewers. My own impression is that shows seem to draw about equally well no matter what the asking prices, and I must confess to an art collector's natural reluctance to spend too much of the budget on expensive pictures.

The Brooklyn collection about a year ago was typical; the printed list showed seventy-one pieces, of which eleven were oils and ten were watercolors. Artists included Vlaminck, Dürer, Goya, Rembrandt, and Chagall along with a sizable number of first-rate but unknown young people. Usually the store showing the collection receives 100 items plus walls, lighting, and instructions for hang-

ing; it also keeps fifty items in reserve as replacements for pictures that are sold.

One way we have reduced costs is to turn over the design of frames to my wife, Mary Grant. A former costume designer, she has undertaken the complex and delicate business of deciding what mat and molding go best with a particular picture. Her talent ensures an artistic setting at prices considerably less than those charged by galleries, which may add as much as 30 per cent for framing to the price of a picture in the \$100-300 range. A combination of volume buying of frames and Mary's clever design has resulted in high-style, quality framing at something like two-thirds the usual cost.

We started this venture with few prejudices, determined neither to trammel ourselves with unnecessary constraints nor to defeat our ultimate purpose with too ambitious an inventory. We began with only two restrictions from Sears. One was that we should go easy on abstracts. Very quickly, however, we began to get complaints about the absence of abstract paintings, and we discovered that interest in "way-out" stuff is greater than we had imagined. Second, it was suggested that nudes might be out of place. We now have 300 in the inventory and have received only one complaint — from a lady who regarded one of Hogarth's more flamboyant specimens as too vulgar to be in a Sears store. (Of course, it was not Hogarth who was vulgar. Like Henry Fielding, he simply caught the vulgarity that was uniquely late-eighteenth century, the vulgarity of his time.)

On the positive side, we began with a few precepts that, with minor exceptions, have served us well. The ones that have stood the test of nearly two years' merchandising make a short but important list.

1. The collection begins and ends with the principle that Americans should buy genuine works of art and not reproductions, even though reproductions have their place in certain settings. My concern is that people buy *originals*.

2. Original works may be classical or contemporary. We have honestly attempted to provide the works of established artists and continue to seek quality pieces within a predetermined price range. We nevertheless try to buy the significant output of promising young artists no matter what their present reputations among the public and in art circles.

3. We are careful to "shop" everything we sell. If the collection obtains a piece that is obviously a great buy, the company sets a bargain price on it. Where there is no basis of comparison for valuation purposes, the price is set according to a fair and reasonable judgment of the market.

Tribulations of Venturing

Any new business effort entails risk. Venturing implies picking up the dice and rolling them along a smooth, green surface against the wall. The Sears management—excited, challenged, completely devoted—was willing to gamble on this particular venture.

The operation has not been without its problems, although by now most of them have been resolved one way or another. Not the least of our trials was the public's misapprehension that art is synonymous with oil paintings, and even some of the Sears executives were terribly worried with me because 1,800 of our first 2,700 pieces were graphics, that is, pictures that are printed. Etchings, lithographs, aquatints, and engravings can be just as decorative, as appealing, and in their way as lovely as oils, watercolors, and gouaches. Indeed, we rule out no art form as long as the prospective item is judged to be of lasting value. Some of the really delightful additions to the collection have been the original sketches of eminent designers and nineteenth-century posters, which were done through the medium of lithography.

In the beginning, we felt that we would have to rely heavily on big names. "A Rembrandt in every Sears store" became a kind of motto, repeated only half in jest, for the early shows. Yet every time we brought in a Rembrandt etching, sometimes priced as high as \$1,500, it went out almost immediately. Finally we ran out of those of good quality, and only occasionally does a dealer (we buy only from the most reliable) come up with a Rembrandt etching or two. In general, this problem extends to nearly all the famous names except for the most expensive items. Our pieces are priced to sell, they are available on extended payment plans, and they move rather than remain in inventory.

A not altogether unexpected but nevertheless annoying result of our efforts has been the sharp rise in prices of certain prints that we have tried to obtain in quantity. Talking to a dealer in London not long ago, I asked about the availability of some Gerald Brockhurst engravings. His reply was that these engravings were now in short supply "because some nut in the United States has been buying them up." Clearly, Sears' aggressive entry into the art market has been a stimulant to certain sectors of that market. Avoiding substantial price increases while maintaining quality takes a certain amount of ingenuity and a lot of coldly calculated bargain hunting. Knowing a dealer's specialization and the parts of his inventory that have obviously been on his hands too long leads to bargains. Another shortcut to real buys is the purchase of early works of artists long since established as favorites of the

art-loving public. And we must always remember that public taste is heterogeneous, often hard to fathom, as likely to be old-fashioned as avant-garde, and perhaps less predictable than taste in women's fashions.

Little perplexities furnish their daily quota of decisions to be made and questions to be answered. We must set straight the people who have the misconception that we are set up to handle *objects*. Many others appeal to us in letters that can be summarized in two sentences: "I was left a print. What is it worth?" Other requests come from thousands of students who want to be shown; we wish to see the first-rate work of young artists, but the problem of screening is a continuing puzzlement only partly resolved by the device of inviting them to send us color slides of their material for preliminary viewing. And whereas most galleries take material on consignment, we early decided to buy outright and so have rights to use a picture for any purpose deemed suitable. Fortunately for our cause we have had the approval and cooperation of regular dealers, most of whom have benefited from our promotion. Good relations with the regular market organizations have helped settle many difficulties.

Art and Business

I do not divulge any business secrets when I testify that the Sears venture into art has paid big dividends. Not, perhaps, on the operation itself, though there is increasing optimism that, after all costs are met, the collection will ultimately show a profit. More important, at least in the short run, is the volume of store traffic generated wherever a show has been put on display. People who had never been inside a Sears store are now regular customers because they can find locally what they formerly thought was available only in New York, Chicago, or even Europe. And although shows have ordinarily been tied to promotions of home furnishings, other departments have steadily reported increases in business when a collection has been in the store.

Sears would not have undertaken so risky a venture in the sole hope of increasing its volume. The commitment to the encouragement of art and the improvement of taste was in part, of course, another step in the transition of the firm from a mail-order house to a department store chain of the first rank. It was, if you will, simply a logical move on the part of a company that had already become the largest merchant in the world of both diamonds and furs. There must have been a sense that art is the only commodity in the world with eternal value.

But what is really significant about the Sears adventure is that it puts the world of business into a different rela-

tionship with the world of art. For centuries—indeed, since we have any record of such matters—art and worldly success have been inseparable. Now one of the most successful organizations in the history of Western civilization has placed its vast resources squarely on the side of the proposition that the rarest commodity in the world, the closest thing to divinity that man has, may become the possession of a household that can afford any piece of workaday equipment.

Many would argue that the purchase of a work of art is a good investment. We hope that those who buy from the collection buy for another reason, the right reason. Whoever buys a work of art makes a statement of his taste and so doing predicts his success as a human being.

It is no secret to the business community that the American taste is becoming increasingly sophisticated. Good taste is a fragile quality, hard to define and hard to come by. It is a sense of fitness, an appreciation of proportion and symmetry, the gift of discerning beauty. It is nurtured in an environment of leisure and expanding educational opportunities and is certainly encouraged by rising incomes.

The American businessman, whatever he is selling, will have to rely more and more on his own taste and that of his associates to ensure his firm's success in the marketplace. In a society of steadily rising incomes and increasing education, good taste in design will be a requisite of product acceptance. The Sears experiment has demonstrated that consumers are even now artistically knowledgeable and perceptive, ready to buy first rate art.

In the November, 1963 issue of *Harper's*, Russell Lynes inquires plaintively, "Is Kindness Killing the Arts?" Specifically, he wonders if, by making art fashionable, we have not forced the artist to flee a society that adulates him, that, indeed, "insists on discovering corners of his soul that he has not yet discovered for himself." I like to reflect that the greatest periods in the history of art were the ones in which the artist was the most pampered. It is perhaps the nature of the artist to see himself for a time either neglected or exploited, but as a *mature* figure he has always ended up grateful and proud in patronage.

In any case, the young artists, the teachers presently lodged in our colleges and universities, the unknowns begging to be shown—these are by no means running from an overindulgent and oversolicitous public. Quite the other way around, they endlessly seek an outlet for their talents that neither softens nor humiliates. It is perhaps the lasting contribution of the Sears venture that it brings art back to the marketplace, whence it came, where it can be honestly judged, and to which it belongs.