

S.D. Unified rounds up its missing art

For years, few people realized value of pieces

By Helen Gao
STAFF WRITER

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During an estate-liquidation sale at a San Diego auction house in March, a painting by notable landscape artist Charles Reiffel raised suspicions.

The 72-year-old oil painting of a farmer on a plow, "Mountain Rancher, Southern California," matched the description of a painting missing from the San Diego Unified School District's art collection.

Just hours before the piece was to be auctioned, certified appraiser Pamela Bensoussan alerted the district to reclaim it.

"Mountain Rancher," later valued at \$50,000, has been returned to the little-known collection, which contains 97 pieces and has an estimated fair-market value of more than \$800,000. A dozen more paintings, which would push the collection's value close to \$1 million, remain unaccounted for.

The collection has been neglected for much of its existence. Its cash value is largely irrelevant, because it cannot be sold. Much of it was donated by individuals, who stipulated it be used for educational enrichment, or commissioned by the Depression-era Works Projects Administration, and technically owned by the federal government.

Bensoussan was hired last year to appraise the collection and conduct its first inventory in 33 years.

For years, some pieces were hung in offices, some in schools, some were stashed carelessly in a warehouse, and some had gone missing. At least one was destroyed.

Few people recognized the value of the pieces, and when district employees moved offices or retired, paintings disappeared. "Mountain Rancher" was taken home by a former employee three decades ago when "it was considered nothing," a district official said. The district did not pursue charges against her.

Calls for preservation were recently heeded by the San Diego school board.

At the insistence of trustee John de Beck, the senior member of the board, about \$22,000 was spent on an appraisal, and plans have



Charles Reiffel's "Mountain Rancher, Southern California" shows a man on a horse-drawn plow in San Diego's backcountry. The San Diego Unified School District reclaimed the oil painting that had been missing from its art collection just hours before it was to be auctioned.

been made to restore the works of art, some of which have been damaged over time, and mount an exhibit.

“I would like them to be on display in a public place where they can be seen by the kids and the community,” de Beck said.

One option is to lend the collection to a museum for an exhibit. Another is to make digital copies of the artwork for teachers to use in classrooms.

Among the paintings are works by some of San Diego's best-known early artists, including Reiffel, Maurice Braun, Charles Fries, Elliot Torrey, Belle Baranceanu and Margaret (Margot) Racle. Their lives spanned the latter part of the 1800s through the 1980s.

“It's a terrific collection,” said Bensoussan, noting that the Torrey paintings, of which there are more than 50, are enough for a retrospective on the artist's career.

The dozen missing paintings, worth \$168,000, include two oils by Braun with a combined value of \$100,000. One is a rare composition of buildings along what is probably San Diego Bay.

The artist's daughter donated seven of her father's paintings to the district on the 10th anniversary of Braun's death in 1951, with the stipulation that they be shared with “San Diego children for all time.”

The district, with Bensoussan's help, is registering the missing artwork with The Art Loss Register, a private organization that operates an international database of lost or stolen art and helps recover missing pieces.

The focus now is to identify some of the more valuable paintings for restoration. A conservator has been contacted to estimate the cost.

Most need only minor work, such as the cleaning of years of accumulated surface grime. Others need serious repairs. The most damaged, by far, is a \$15,000 painting by Baranceanu titled “Mission Hills.” Humidity and water caused paint to flake off the piece. District officials hope to raise money privately for restoration.

For now, most of the paintings are wrapped and in storage. About 20 are on display in the La Jolla High School library.

Because of the value of the paintings, the district will no longer allow them to be hung just anywhere, said Peter Iverson, the district's chief business officer.

“When people find out the value of the paintings, there is a high likelihood they will take it away,” he said.

History lesson

To look at the district's art collection is to take a tour through time.



“Celery Pickers” by Margaret “Margot” Racle is part of an art collection owned by the San Diego Unified School District. The painting shows farmworkers, probably in Chula Vista's fields.



Elliot Torrey's “Water on the Rocks” is one example of the artist's many seascapes in the San Diego Unified School District's art collection. Torrey was a leader of the WPA art project in San Diego in the early 1930s.

In 1934, city schools established a curriculum project in partnership with the WPA, which employed local artists to create educational materials. Artists made a subsistence living illustrating booklets and painting murals and other works of art that reflected local history, culture and scenery.

Some of the district's oldest paintings came from that era. For example, "Mountain Rancher," the Reiffel painting of a man on a horse-drawn plow amid lush scenery in San Diego's backcountry, was done in 1934. The back of the painting bears the remnants of a tag that identified it as a work created for the San Diego City Schools Curriculum Project.

Baranceanu's painting of a Mission Hills street scene and Roel's "Celery Pickers" portraying farmworkers, probably in Chula Vista's fields, were also WPA commissions.

Torrey, whose many seascapes and portraits of children are in the district's collection, was a leader of the WPA art project in San Diego in the early 1930s. He was a contemporary of Braun, Reiffel and Fries, who together founded some of the early local artists' associations, such as Contemporary Artists of San Diego.

"There were thousands and literally, thousands of artists throughout the country who were working for the WPA," said Bram Dijkstra, a University of California San Diego professor emeritus and author of several books on art.

Artists were paid on average between \$60 to \$80 a month and typically turned in a painting every four weeks, he said. The WPA accumulated tens of thousands of pieces, which the government then distributed to schools, libraries and civic buildings.

Until the mid-1980s, Dijkstra said, Depression-era paintings were overlooked because abstraction dominated the art world after World War II.

"These artists had lost their reputation to a large extent. Consequently, I suppose, not too many people in the school district were familiar with their work either," he said.

Art preservation

To the untrained eye, the 20 or so paintings hanging high up on the walls of La Jolla High School's library may not seem like anything of note.

Old, dusty and faded, some are in dingy frames. No labels or placards state their titles or artists or carry text explaining the historical context.

It's far from a museum-quality exhibit, but it represents the best effort to preserve the artwork.

Former La Jolla High Principal J.M. Tarvin, former art teacher Richard Christensen and a school librarian were credited with saving paintings in the late 1980s at a time when nobody else seemed to care about them. They retrieved them from a warehouse and district offices because they knew their significance. With the support of the Foundation of La Jolla High School, they opened a gallery in 1991 inside the library.

At the beginning of his career in the 1970s, Christensen recalled checking out the district's paintings as teaching tools to showcase artistic styles. Over time, he said, the collection fell out of use because "not many people were aware of it."



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"Cuyamaca Peak" is among the paintings in the San Diego Unified School District's collection on display in the La Jolla High School library. The collection's value is estimated at \$800,000.

“There is no institutional memory,” said Tarvin, who retired from La Jolla High in 1996. “There are things in the school district, like any private corporation that goes through management changes, that simply are forgotten.”

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