

How it feels to...

...pay \$30 for a masterpiece

When an amateur enthusiast took a punt at a house clearance sale, he ended up owning an artwork by Dürer. *Simon Worrall* reports

When Clifford Schorer, an American art dealer who specialises in Old Masters, realised that he had forgotten to buy a present for a colleague, he had no idea that a chain of coincidences was about to lead him to one of the most sensational finds in recent art history.

As a senior partner at the London dealer Agnew's, he is well known in the art world for his "eye". His speciality is misattributions: the Turner on sale as the work of a minor artist; the Winslow Homer no one recognises. "You're looking for the mistakes the auction houses make," he explains.

Last May, though, his only concern was finding a gift. He had spent the day on Cape Cod, Massachusetts. In the evening, he was due to attend a retirement party for a friend, Amy Myers, the director of the Yale Centre for British Art. It would be bad form to arrive empty-handed.

A Google search on his phone showed he was not far from an antiquarian bookshop, owned by a garrulous former English teacher and would-be novelist named Brainerd Phillipson. When Schorer arrived, he was amazed to discover a first edition of the 1925 Nonesuch edition of Blake's complete writings, a particular favourite of Myers's. A much bigger surprise was about to follow. As Schorer browsed through Phillipson's large collection of art books, the two men struck up a conversation. "He asked me if I knew anything about art attribution," Schorer recalls. "When I said that's what I do, he told me a friend of his owned an Albrecht Dürer drawing. I said, 'No, he doesn't. He has a Dürer engraving.' Fateful words I regret. But I left the bookseller my card."



Phillipson had seen the drawing in 2017 soon after his friend had bought it at an estate sale, in which the contents of a large private house are sold. He wasn't sure if it was an original drawing or an engraving, but knew his friend had financial challenges and so urged him to do something with it. "I had the feeling it was real," he says. "It looked very old, because of the frame.

"My friend is what I call a typical 'Yankee picker,'" he continues. "He's like a magpie who collects everything he can find."

Like many antiques "pickers", the owner, who is in his sixties, is more interested in buying than selling. (He and his wife have chosen to remain anonymous, so I will refer to them as Bill and

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Flora.) Bill did show it to a number of people with a view to selling it, but was unsuccessful, though one dealer offered him \$2,000 for its elaborate gilt frame. So, for the next two years, the drawing sat in the storage room of the modest, two-storey house in Massachusetts where Bill and Flora live, with hundreds of other items and framed artworks he had purchased at various sales.

Eleven days after his visit to the bookshop, Schorer received an image via email from Phillipson: a drawing of a Madonna and child. "I thought, this has got to be the greatest forgery that has ever been done," Schorer recalls. "I just couldn't make the mental leap that it was right."

Often called "the Rembrandt of the north", Albrecht Dürer was born in Nuremberg, Germany, in 1471. Prodigiously gifted from childhood, he became one of the most famous artists of the Renaissance. His double-panel painting of Adam and Eve, now in Madrid's Prado museum, is one of the most iconic images of western civilisation.

His genius, and the rarity of sales of his work, has kept prices astronomically high. The last time a Dürer drawing of this quality went under the hammer, at Sotheby's in 1978, in what has been called "the sale of the century", it fetched £250,000 (equivalent to £1.4m today). The Queen and Princess Margaret mingled with movie stars such as Alain Delon and Jack Nicholson to see the artist's works. There were gasps when one of his watercolours went for more than £600,000 (£3.5m today), smashing the record for a work on paper.

Most artists of that era made drawings only as preparation for

RECORD BREAKER

£3.5m

The amount in today's money that Dürer's *The Isolated Rock of Doss Trento* sold for in 1978 — making it the world's most expensive watercolour at the time

THE NEW YORK TIMES 1978



other works, but Dürer proudly signed his with his famous AD monogram and kept them in meticulous order in his studio, often adding notes later on to record the date and circumstances of their creation. Among the 1,100 artworks that survive, there are images of a life-size shoe, a group of dancing monkeys and his iconic depiction of a hare, which has hung in the nurseries of millions of children. He was deeply devout and many of his greatest works were also on religious subjects. The roots of Dürer's preoccupation with the theme of

the Madonna and child can be found in his own life. He was the third child of Barbara Dürer, who went on to give birth to another 15 children. All of them died, except for Albrecht and two younger brothers. Watching his mother bring so many children into the world, then lose them, left a profound impression on the artist.

When Schorer arrived at Bill and Flora's home to view the drawing, they were watching their favourite antiques show on TV. "The house was like Dickens's Old Curiosity Shop," Schorer recalls. "It was piled with knick-knacks, paintings,

REDISCOVERED
The recently found Dürer drawing of the Madonna and child. Left: a self-portrait of the artist aged 28 painted in 1500

old telephones, books." The couple told him they had bought the drawing for "a low sum" in an estate sale at the country home of Jean Paul Carlhian, a well-known Boston architect.

Bill recalled arriving early, queuing at the front with a number of other dealers. As soon as the door opened, he headed for the room where the art was being displayed on the walls and tables. "I noticed this nice, old-looking piece of artwork of the Madonna and child in the room," he recalls. "It had Dürer's monogram on it, so I picked ➤➤➤

it up to see if I could figure out whether it was just an old print or an actual drawing.”

Like most semi-professional “pickers”, Bill carries a magnifying glass. Scanning it over the image, he couldn’t be certain it was a genuine Dürer, the possibility of which seemed far-fetched. “Even though I’m not an art expert, I knew the chances were slim to none,” he says. “But I thought it was a wonderfully rendered piece of old art, which justified purchasing it.”

Later, after browsing a few other items, Bill noticed an early French gilt frame near the drawing. “It appeared to be an original late 17th- to early 18th-century period frame, with irregular dimensions,” he recalls. “When I placed the drawing on it, the frame fitted perfectly. This indicated to me that the drawing had been presented in this frame in its history, which intrigued me even more. So I purchased the frame as well.”

Back home, Bill examined it more thoroughly with his magnifying glass. Could it really be a Dürer? “My plan was to send photos to some of the larger auction houses to get their opinion,” he explains. “But I have a habit of procrastinating, so the drawing just sat in my storage room for a couple of years. The only person I showed it to was Brainerd, and he kept nagging me to do something with it.” Bill was almost ready to do so when Cliff Schorer came knocking.

The drawing was already laid out on the table when Schorer walked in. Bill showed him the entry in his “stockbook”, where he records all his purchases: “#8907 Albert Durer Madonna and Child drawing (?) \$30.00.”

“As soon as I examined it I instantly felt it was right,” Schorer recalls, his eyes gleaming at the memory. “I said, ‘This is either the greatest forgery I have ever seen, or it’s a masterpiece.’”

I meet Schorer, a fit-looking 52-year-old, at his house on Cape Cod. An inscription on a bookcase reads: “The harder you work, the luckier you get.” It’s a motto Schorer has lived by. Born in working-class New York, his first entry point into the world of collecting was via his great-grandfather, who had a hoard of more than a million stamps. Later, he began collecting paintings and

How it feels to...

SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL
The art dealer Cliff Schorer with Dürer’s drawing, which was bought by an unsuspecting couple at a house clearance



Chinese porcelain, teaching himself about art history in the basement of Harvard’s art library and studying the market by poring over decades of Sotheby’s and Christie’s catalogues. When in 2013 the London gallery Agnew’s became available, after two centuries of ownership by the same family, he put together the financing to take it over.

The hunt to prove the drawing was an authentic Dürer was now on. First, with the owners’ permission, Schorer commissioned a series of tests that lasted several months. By then, he had already written the couple a cheque for \$100,000 as a good faith advance, so they could take care of some immediate financial needs and hire a lawyer to negotiate a consignment agreement with Agnew’s. “I have spent my life disbelieving things,” Schorer says, laughing. “Now, here I was out on the thinnest of limbs. But I was sure it was right.”

The key to proving it was a genuine Dürer was the paper. In Britain, Schorer enlisted the help of the world-renowned expert Jane McAusland, who has worked on drawings in the Queen’s collection at Windsor Castle. After an initial examination, she sent Schorer an email from her Suffolk studio. It was headed: The news is bad. “She said the glue that held the backing on was synthetic; and the distilled water had removed some pigment, which implied that the paper had been artificially aged. I was very downcast. I had basically drunk my own Kool-Aid.”

After a sleepless night, Schorer asked McAusland to do further tests, and a few days later a second email pinged into his inbox, this time headed: The news is good. “She had transluded light through

the paper and found a watermark,” he recalls. “She sent me an image, and when I saw that my heart stopped. It was the trident and ring watermark that is known to have been made for Dürer by his patron. The Queen’s own signed drawing of 1503 bears that same watermark, as does the one in the Morgan Library in New York.”

Schorer knew that one opinion by a British paper expert, however well qualified, would never suffice, so he contacted others. One of the first was Andrew Raftery, a professor of printmaking at the Rhode Island College of Art and Design and an authority on early modern engraving. “I just couldn’t believe I had such a drawing in my studio, where I work on drawings myself,” Raftery recalls. “It seemed so vibrant and alive, even though it is over 500 years old.”

Raftery even did his own copy of the drawing, using Dürer’s original materials, a crow feather quill and carbon-black ink, which he made himself. What emerged as he made his copy was the speed and virtuosity of Dürer’s original. “This speaks to the fact that Dürer had done some of these motifs many times,” Raftery explains. “If you look at the grass, it’s clear that they were done with exceptional speed, you can almost hear the pen scratching the paper as he worked. No forger would be capable of doing this.”

How long does he estimate Dürer needed to do the drawing? His answer amazes me. “I couldn’t imagine it took more than an hour or two,” he says. “He probably had to wait quite a while for drying, because we see no blotches or blots. It’s an act of virtuosity.”

Schorer’s clinching opinion came from the leading Dürer expert Dr Christof Metzger, a curator at Vienna’s Albertina Museum, which holds the world’s most important collection of Dürer’s drawings. “He opened the folio, and 15 seconds after looking at it, he said, ‘This is absolutely right, it’s magnificent.’”

The drawing is believed to have been executed circa 1503-05, when Dürer was at the peak of his powers. What is unusual about it is that it shows the Madonna and child in a rare domestic setting. The Christ-child is turned away from his mother, who holds what looks like a nappy cloth, as though she is about to wipe his bottom, a ritual Dürer must

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have observed his mother performing countless times. “It is part of an attempt to humanise the Madonna in Germany,” Schorer explains. “To make her look like a typical *hausfrau*.”

The drawing’s journey from Dürer’s hand in 16th-century Vienna to an estate sale in Massachusetts reads like a labyrinthine Umberto Eco novel. Its first home was the collection of the Holy Roman emperor Rudolf II, who amassed the world’s largest collection of Dürer’s art (most of which now resides at the Albertina Museum). When Napoleon crushed the Hapsburg army at the Battle of Austerlitz in 1805, the drawing was seized by Baron Denon, the first director of the Louvre, who looted vast quantities of art in the wake of Napoleon’s conquests, sometimes parading them through the streets of Paris, with elephants and other wild animals, like a Roman triumph.

In the late 19th century, the drawing passed between the hands of renowned Parisian art collectors, ending up with André Carlhian of the Maison Carlhian interior design firm.

Carlhian’s speciality was supplying lavish interiors for America’s super-rich during the Gilded Age, often dismantling entire rooms and shipping them across the Atlantic. When he died, the drawing was inherited by his



son, Jean Paul, who had settled in America. Although the exact date the drawing passed into obscurity is unclear, it is certain that at some point in the late 19th century or early 20th century Maison Carlhian decided to tart the drawing up with a view to selling it. It was mounted on a new backing and enclosed in an ornate Louis XV frame. Foxing marks were even added to the paper to make it look antique. Ironically, it was these interventions that made dealers and collectors suspicious of the drawing. “They dressed it up to help sell it, but that made it seem like a fake,” Schorer explains.

As a result, this masterpiece, which had survived war and political upheaval, languished in the attic of Carlhian’s home in Concord, Massachusetts. On his death, his family, having no idea of its true worth, sold it for \$30. One can imagine how they feel now.

The drawing is now in safekeeping at Agnew’s in London. It was due to be unveiled at the Maastricht Art Fair in March, but due to fears about the effect on attendance of the coronavirus, it will now be unveiled at Agnew’s in July. Schorer is coy about its value, but when I ventured £1.5m, he said it would be “much more than that”.

The details of the deal Schorer struck with the couple are confidential, but it is undoubtedly tens of thousands times more than they paid at the estate sale. “This is a godsend for them,” says

MASTERPIECES
Dürer’s paintings of Adam and Eve hang in Madrid’s Prado. Left: his iconic study of a young hare

their friend Brainerd Phillipson. Already, the down payment Schorer gave them has enabled them “to pay off their credit cards, put a new roof on their house and buy a new car”. As devout Christians, they have also made a donation to a local church. “They felt God had put them in the room with Cliff,” Phillipson explains.

From the start, Schorer has been determined to treat the couple who discovered the drawing honestly, not simply because he believes it is ethical to do so, but because he does not want to become bogged down in the sort of legal quagmire that engulfed Leonardo da Vinci’s *Salvator Mundi* — purchased at a minor sale in New Orleans in 2005 for less than £5,500, it went on to become the most expensive artwork ever auctioned, after its sale for £340m at Christie’s in New York in 2017. Now the subject of a lawsuit, its current location and owner are unconfirmed.

“So many of these art discoveries become litigious,” he says. “I didn’t want to be sleepless for the rest of my life.”

As I am about to leave, he reads out a thank you card from the couple: “Wishing you the best possible outcome as you continue without us and that you will leave a lasting mark on art history”.

“That brings tears to my eyes,” he says, looking away as the breakers crash on the rocks below his house ■