



## Cottone's Auctions in Geneseo is Christie's in Cow Country

JIM MEMMOTT • SEPTEMBER 23, 2009

The large room, once home to the service department of an auto dealership, is filled with things. Nice things. Things to be sold at auction.

Paintings, rugs, clocks, sideboards, tables, a row of Tiffany lamps.

Some of these objects might have come up from New York City after the Erie Canal opened in 1825. Or they arrived in western New York in the wake of the 1901 Pan American Exposition in Buffalo, which sparked renewed interest in art and furniture.

All of them graced homes in places such as Rochester, Buffalo, Batavia — where new money quietly evolved into old money, where people drove a Chevrolet to their golf club (think Country Club of Rochester) but kept Utrillos and other originals on their walls.

Then somebody died, or a college tuition bill came in, or everybody just decided that a fine George III tea caddy wasn't their cup of you know what, and they called Sam Cottone.

Cottone and his wife, Cindy, run Cottone Auctions in Geneseo. Off the beaten track, Cottone's is Christie's in cow country, our area's surprisingly successful answer to the auction houses of New York City and London.

Treasures long tucked away in local houses have yielded big bucks — nearly \$1 million for a Whistler painting in 2006, \$600,000 for a Remington bronze last year, \$90,000 earlier this year for a Tiffany floor lamp.

"We're under the radar," says Sam Cottone. "It's amazing we can make it all happen here."

And it's still happening, despite a recession — or maybe because of it. A stock can lose 95 percent of its value in a week. Tiffany is still Tiffany, even if across the country treasured pieces are fetching less than they were a few years ago.

## **Good things going for good money**

Cottone, 53, started small in 1979, refinishing furniture in Mount Morris. He also became a regular at area farm and estate auctions. "I loved to learn about antiques and art," he says. "I trained my eye. I had a lot to learn."

Cottone hedged his bet by holding down a second job bagging salt at the nearby mine in Retsof. Eventually, he went to a school for auctioneers in Massachusetts and then started running his own auctions in 1985.

He'd collect the items, driving all over western New York and into southern Canada, mining territories that the bigger auction houses hadn't discovered and finding pristine pieces that had stayed in families for generations. Cottone would bring the items to his shop and storeroom in Mount Morris, and he'd rent a party house for the auction.

But now he's got his storeroom, his offices and his auction hall in a former car dealership in Geneseo. The dealership went belly up in 2002, but Cottone Auctions is doing just fine, with a big auction slated for Saturday.

"You've got good things going for good money," says Michael Watts, an antiques dealer from Big Flats, near Corning. "In upstate New York, no auctions have the quality Sam puts together. He's the man."

Kelly Schultz, a dealer from Clarence, agrees.

"Sam has built up a good following," he says. "He's a straight-shooter and he's very knowledgeable. ... Sam's a 100 percenter. If he tells you something, you can count on it."

Auctions aren't market-proof, but in Schultz's opinion, downturns in the economy hurt the low end of the business more than the high end. So far, that's been the case with Cottone. Last fall, one of his auctions took in \$2.5 million on a single Saturday — about \$500,000 an hour. IRAs were starting to tank, bankers were getting out their tin cups, but "The Bronco Buster," the Frederic Remington bronze, went for \$600,000, a New York gallery winning the day via the [phone](#).

Edwin McClellan, a Buffalo businessman who had known Remington at Yale University, had bought the statue in the early 1900s. His son, the late Robert McClellan, had it for many years in his house in Geneseo.

That price for the Remington didn't even top Cottone's high: the \$910,000 (plus a \$91,000 buyer's fee) paid in 2006 for a painting by American artist James A. McNeill Whistler. The 7-by-10-inch oil on wood panel had been in the possession of the Wadsworth family in Geneseo from early in the 20th century.

## **Dressing down to buy up**

There are usually between 200 and 300 people in the room at Cottone auctions. Some bid. Some just watch. Bids also come in by way of the internet.

"It's a spectacle," Cottone says. "They're there just to see the excitement in the air and to see these great objects that might never pass through this area again. It's like going to a museum where everything is for sale."

It's exciting, but low key and understated, as well. Cottone-crowd chic is flannel shirts, suspenders, blue jeans; Cottone is often the only man in the room wearing a tie.

Schultz, the antiques dealer, says there's a strategy in dressing down. "A person can walk in with a \$3,000 suit and he's driving a Benz," he says. "He's spent his money. The person who comes in dressed casually looking like he works at the 7-Eleven — he's the one with money."

Cottone adds: "People are very unpretentious in this business. But knowledge is power. You come in jeans, but you know what you're looking at."

### **And they're off**

At least you'd better know what you're looking at. Cottone advises potential bidders to do their homework. Read the catalog, get to the auction early, check out the items and the order of sale, make a list of what you're interested in, set limits on what you'll spend.

And be prepared to be swept along by your own adrenaline. "Part of the excitement of an auction is getting into the horse race of it," Cottone says.

As the auctioneer, Cottone controls the horse race, never hyping the bids, never really seeming to raise his voice. His eyes swinging from right to left and back again, he keeps calm as the room warms up.

"It's a nice little painting, fresh out of a home in Rochester," he says, starting bidding on an item that ends at \$40,000.

While Cottone is the face of the auction, his wife and their children and other people from the area usually work the phones, relaying bids from out-of-town buyers. Son Matt, 30, is a full-time employee of the business, having gone along with his dad on antique trips since he was a child. Daughter Kate, 27, is a teacher who helps out on auction days.

Working the phones can be tricky, Matt says, especially when there are inexperienced buyers on the other end. He tells them before the bidding starts that they have to be quick, that there's no time to think, that a pause or two can lead to defeat.

"Generally, people are happy when they get something, even if they paid more than they expected," he says. "They're only upset if they don't get it."

At a large auction, Matt's dad works through 300 items in four or five hours. One moment he's describing a painting, the next a clock.

"My level of stress is at the red line," Cottone says, confessing to an inner tension he keeps well-hidden.

### **Always in style**

You would be stressed, too. A five-hour auction can be preceded by five months of hard work. On a typical day, Cottone drives to Buffalo or some place in Canada; he meets the heirs; he looks at a table; he says what it's worth.

But that's just the start, because letting go — even if it means a big payday for the seller — can be bittersweet.

"I have to be a little bit of a psychologist when I deal with people," he says.

"I have to lay out a business plan. To me, everything is for sale if it could change your life."

Sellers could go elsewhere, to the bigger auction houses or to eBay. But Cottone notes that the same customers who search the catalogs of those internationally known auction houses also search his.

"The world is flat. It's a different ball game," says Cottone, who gets a 10 percent commission from the buyer and sometimes a commission from the seller.

If the world is flat, it's also strapped. People who had money now need money, which might prompt more people to decide to sell their art and antiques. But will there be buyers?

There were last March. The economy was on life support, but a "routine" Cottone auction took in \$1 million, including that \$90,000 for the Tiffany floor lamp.

"There are people who are passionate about (collecting)," Cottone says. "They seem to always have money. Good art objects don't go out of style."

*Memmott is a freelance writer and Democrat and Chronicle columnist.*