

# Dennis Jackson put Indiana artists on the chart

Dennis Jackson had a notion of his life's vocation when he was a boy growing up on the outskirts of Cincinnati.

"When I was 12 Dad bought a farm and we started going to purebred livestock auctions. I was mesmerized that an auctioneer could sell a cow and a calf for \$800 every minute," said Jackson, founder of Jacksons' Auction Co., known as "America's premier auctioneer of Indiana art."

Jackson was ready to attend auction school right out of high school, but he abided by his father's expectations that he would get a college degree.

"That was his dream for his kids and I did it, but in the back of my mind the auction was always there," said Jackson.

A college degree led to a career as a schoolteacher in special education, for two years in Ohio and then in the Anderson, Ind., public school system. Yet Jackson spent the summer after his first year of teaching attending Nashville Auction School in Nashville, Tenn. He then had to wait six more months before the Indiana licensing test was administered again in January 1971.

While keeping his teaching job, Jackson began working with Wayne Pheanis, a veteran auctioneer from Anderson. "I worked with him as an unofficial partner for 11 years until his death," said Jackson.

In the meantime Jackson turned down what he once had envisioned as his dream job, to be a purebred livestock auctioneer, because it would have meant spending time away from his wife, Sheila, and their year-old son.

In 1978, with his auction business



**Left:** Dennis Jackson, CAI/AARE, remains as composed selling a painting for \$200,000 as he is auctioning a home of comparable value. He is pictured here selling recently at his gallery on Zionsville Road in Indianapolis.

**Right:** Jacksons' Auction Co. set an auction record for a work by Hoosier artist John Wesley Hardrick (1891-1968) when this oil painting of a man fishing in a stream sold for \$27,500 in March 2004.



taking off, Jackson made the decision to leave teaching. He bought a barn on the southwest edge of Anderson and transformed it into an auction gallery. He's been a full-time auctioneer ever since.

"This is my 35th year," said Jackson, who appears composed and comfortable, whether he's selling paintings in front of an affluent audience in an Indianapolis auction gallery or country furniture in a barnyard in rural Madison County.

He's done it all and well.

Jackson takes pride in being the first auctioneer to recognize the potential of Indiana art at auction.

"About the time I started the auction gallery I attended a downtown Indianapolis auction and watched a T.C. Steele painting sell for \$2,500 on a Tuesday afternoon," said Jackson. "It was like a lightbulb came on in my head and I realized somebody should be selling Indiana art at auctions in Indiana."

Jackson began asking a lot of questions of gallery owners, collectors and museum curators. Everyone told him the same thing. Art auctions will not work in Indiana. They are for Chicago, New York, Miami and San Francisco, not Anderson, Ind., or even Indianapolis.

Unable to get the idea out of his head, Jackson went against the prevailing opinion.

"I put an ad in *AntiqueWeek* saying I was going to have an Indiana art auction. I got two consignments, a T.C. Steele and a non-Indiana piece, a Louis Icart drypoint etching. No one else would consign anything," said Jackson.

Undaunted, he bought about 35 paintings to resell at his inaugural art auction in Anderson in 1981.

"Midway through that sale, as I was feeling like it was successful, I announced my next Indiana art auction will be in September – and I had nothing consigned. The T.C. Steele that day brought \$3,500 so that was a leg up. The paintings I had given \$200 or less for – that was my criteria when I bought them – all made a little money," said Jackson.



**Above:** The late Joe St. Clair of Elwood, Ind., crafted and signed this hard-to-fine etched pink rose pedestal paperweight, which sold for \$1,600 at Jacksons' Auction Co. on Aug. 20. St. Clair glass has been one of Jackson's specialty fields since the late 1980s.

## Getting to know Dennis Jackson

**AntiqueWeek:** Which do you prefer, gallery or on-site auctions?

**Dennis Jackson:** I enjoy the gallery setting. It's more refined and has definition to it as to when things will sell. I really like catalog sales. ... It's not that it's more control, it's easier to sell. In today's world people like it better because they know when things are selling. They don't miss anything because it's cataloged.

**AW:** How did you become involved in selling St. Clair glass?

**DJ:** Joe and Bob St. Clair both died in 1987. I thought to myself, they made a lot of glass. Maybe this would be something to promote. Within about four months I had a collection of glass – the people would not consign it; so I bought it. It did very well so I started promoting I sold St. Clair glass. In the midst of that I was fortunate enough to sell Joe St. Clair's estate collection at his home in Elwood. ... In all, I've sold four estates from the St. Clair family. They were all fabulous and we continue to promote St. Clair glass.

**AW:** What do you hope you never sell again?

**DJ:** Live turkeys. How do you like that for a quick answer?

**AW:** What would you be if you were not an auctioneer?

**DJ:** I'm sure I'd be teaching school. I'd probably be a retired schoolteacher.

**AW:** What do you enjoy doing in your spare time?

**DJ:** I like spending time with my three grandchildren. I like sports – I'm a baseball fan and follow

the Cincinnati Reds. I like the Colts; we have season tickets.

**AW:** Are you a collector?

**DJ:** Not really. We have a few pieces of Indiana are that we've bought privately. After that, I'm probably not a collector.

**AW:** Do you attend other auctions?

**DJ:** Rarely. I will go beforehand if there's a piece of Indiana art selling. I'm usually too busy to go to other auctions. I will preview an auction every now and then to see something that's in it and possibly leave a bid. As for physically attending them, oh, a couple or three times a year.

**AW:** What keeps customers coming back to Jackson Auction Co. sales?

**DJ:** I hope it's because we're honest and up-front with them about what something is worth. We try not to misrepresent it or overadvertise it. I hope they like our personality and how we sell and treat them as a buyer.

**AW:** What is the best compliment an auction buyer can give you?

**DJ:** For them to say, "You were right. The piece I bought, I love it. It's perfect for me and what you told me about it was right."

**AW:** Is your retirement imminent?

**DJ:** My retirement from actually selling on the auction block is when my kids tell me I'm no longer what I should be up there. They will tell me when I slip and when it's time to come down and work the ring.

## AUCTIONEER PROFILE



BY  
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Consignments started rolling in and art collectors came to buy. Within three years Jackson was conducting three Indiana art auctions per year.

When General Motors began downsizing operations in Anderson in the late 1980s, Jackson sensed the impending economic downturn and sold his auction gallery.

In 1991 he helped found Jackson and Wickliff Auctioneers Inc. in Carmel, Ind., an upscale suburb of Indianapolis. "We [with owner Sue Wickliff] built a very fine arts auction company there," said Jackson. He remained there as partner in name and head auctioneer until he resigned in March 2004.

Selling a T.C. Steele painting for \$220,000 plus a 12 percent buyer's premium was Jackson's crowning achievement before leaving Jackson & Wickliff. "That was the highlight auction because it was an estate of a lady I had sold a lot of art to here in Anderson and she had also bought a lot of things at Carmel, so it was a highlight to get to sell her auction," said Jackson.

Out on his own again, Jackson knew he had to promote himself. "I knew coming back in the business I had to put myself in front of the people as Jacksons' Auction Co. So I went to *AntiqueWeek* and said what will it cost me. They told me if I ran weekly here's what the cost would be," said Jackson, who decided to run a series of four-color advertisements titled *Notes & Quotes*. "We ran it weekly for one year and it was very effective. Now we are going to use it as we need it leading up to certain auctions."

Jackson ran the 2-column by 5in ads in the run-up to his first big auction as Jacksons' Auction Co. in March 2004. Jackson said the art auction, conducted in Indianapolis, was the second biggest highlight of his career. "A client I had developed from Anderson had called and said, 'Come get my collection,'" he said.

Jackson sold the collection of more than 60 paintings with no reserve. "I watched many of those paintings bring

many times what they paid for them. ... Six or seven paintings brought 10 times what they paid for them. It was a great sale," said Jackson.

Jacksons' Auction Co.'s growth has been slowed this year with the deployment of Dennis' auctioneer son, Bryan, a sergeant in the Army Reserve, to Iraq.

"Bryan is a mental health specialist, a counselor. He left Oct. 23 and has been in Iraq since Jan. 1. It looks like he will be back in Indiana around Nov. 1," said Jackson. Although the younger Jackson has been a licensed auctioneer since he was 18, college and a six-year stint in the Army has demanded most of his attention. "He came back many times to help with art auctions and antique sales when he was in the Army, so he's stayed active as an auctioneer," said Jackson.

Jackson's daughter, Michele Jackson, an international adoption attorney in Indianapolis, will continue to play an important part-time role in the auction company. "She does any legal work for us and serves as our cashier at most Indianapolis auctions when her schedule allows. ... Michele will be a part owner of the business whenever it transfers over and that will be any time, and I will work for them," said Jackson.

"Our goals are to expand the Indianapolis business and to sell more real estate in that area, while continuing to sell estates, antiques and Indiana art," said Jackson.

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