

Campaign Mementos, Starting With Washington

Merrill C. Berman runs an investment firm in Rye, N.Y., that doubles as home to his collection of about 20,000 works on paper. With one full-time employee, he keeps track of prints, posters, drawings, collages, postcards, brochures, buttons, billboards, stationery and sundry graphics produced in the last two centuries. The pieces express strong opinions, whether protesting against capitalists or making ham and spark plugs look glamorous.

On Feb. 28, Mr. Berman will begin culling his American political campaign memorabilia in a series of sales through Heritage Auctions in Dallas. For the first batch of 347 lots, estimates range from under \$100 to \$30,000 each. The items have slogans for and against winning and losing candidates, beginning with George Washington, and include largely



HERITAGE AUCTIONS

A Woodrow Wilson campaign button from the 1912 presidential race.

forgotten also-rans at the conservative and socialist extremes.

During an interview at his office, Mr. Berman, 76, kept checking a computer screen full of mul-

ticolored stock numbers while explaining how his visual interests evolved. His teenage interest in political campaigns, he said, “trained my eye in graphics.” His 1970s stint as a collector of post-war paintings, including works by Jackson Pollock and de Kooning, ended when his investments soured; he sold the canvases.

After that, he said, “I started over with affordable small items.” If he had stayed in the collector mainstream of 20th-century paintings, he added, “I wouldn’t have had any fun.”

The fall of Communism brought out entire archives from Eastern bloc graphic artists. “There was a flood of wonderful things,” he said, adding, “I scarfed up — I don’t like to use that word — I bought up as much

as I was able to.”

He brought out a boxful of Soviet diplomas printed with images of factories and rivers of grain. “I’ve never seen them on the market again,” he said. “It was one of those accidents of post-Soviet history.”

With his collection manager, Joelle Jensen, and a part-time employee, the photographer Jim Frank, he is working on numerous books about his purchases; one will focus on the diplomas. Volumes and exhibitions have already been devoted to various aspects of the Berman collection, including Cuban movie posters, the German collage artist Kurt Schwitters and Japanese avant-garde design. In New York alone, his list of upcoming institutional borrowers includes the Jewish Museum, the New-York Historical Society and Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum.

“The more I get known, the more people want to borrow from me,” he said, adding, “Maybe it’s fun to be courted when you’re old.”

His office building was formerly a baking company’s headquarters; his treasure-filled storage space there has been nicknamed the Twinkie Room. Boxes and drawers are minimally labeled. (Only a third of the collection is cataloged so far.) They contain highlights of artistic movements from Dada and the Bauhaus to postmodernism, and bear the signatures of figures as influential as Rodchenko and Moholy-Nagy.

In some crannies, he is no longer quite sure what is rolled up and stashed there.

“I have tubes and tubes and tubes and tubes,” he said. As for Ms. Jensen, he added, “She tries to keep on top of it, but I con-

Antiques

Eve M. Kahn



LESLIE HINDMAN AUCTIONEERS

Some Art Nouveau items of the poet Louis Daniel Brodsky that are set for auction.

stantly defy her.”

His sources over the years have included the Manhattan dealers Michael Weintraub and the Reinhold-Brown Gallery, along with auction houses. He owns pieces that were stolen by Nazis and restituted to the owners’ descendants in the past few years. He jokingly said that he tried not to tell his wife, Dalia Berman, a ceramic artist, about his latest finds.

He opened a few more drawers, bringing out ads for assorted politicians and a tattered placard announcing that “Robert F. Kennedy Will Pass This Point Monday at 5:00 P.M.”

Kennedy lots in the Berman auction through Heritage include John F. Kennedy buttons that were handed out by shoemakers, Nebraskans and residents of Hoboken, N.J. A prototype promotion for a campaign that never happened is emblazoned “Jack Once More In ’64.”

Crossword

Edited by Will Shortz

PUZZLE BY PATRICK BERRY

- ACROSS**
- 1 Seethe
- 5 Campaign
- 9 Single-price auction purchase, informally
- 14 Leave the gate, say
- 15 Supposedly, but not really
- 17 Strummed instruments, for short
- 18 Not-so-big wheels?
- 19 Kayo
- 20 One taking things up with the crew
- 37 Queendom in I Kings
- 38 Ones hanging around med school?
- 40 Namby-pamby sort
- 41 Chinese zodiac animal
- 42 Maker of markers
- 43 Number for two
- 47 Faculties
- 50 Unit of pressure: Abbr.
- 51 Wipe out
- 53 Soup flavoring
- 54 First United States Volunteer

