



## Lee's Letter

## The (dollar) value of history

In ascertaining the authenticity of a painting, especially one from another era, one of the primary determinants is provenance—a record of the painting's previous owners. Another crucial element, but one less frequently mentioned, has to do with the history of the painting as it relates to the artist and/or the subject matter.

For instance, the paintings done by Vincent van Gogh in the period when he and Paul Gauguin lived at Arles are important, not just as individual works but because they collectively reflect a marked development in his style, as well as his experimentation with other subjects. The importance of history in the works of Johann Berthelsen can be seen in a number of areas. One particularly important example is the painting of the UN building that was done for Dag Hammarskjöld, Secretary-General of the United Nations in the 1950s until 1961. Not only was it a very early recorded artistic depiction of the structure, but

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## The Sembrich-Berthelsen Connection, and an ongoing mystery



Madam Marcella Sembrich



Johann Berthelsen

Although her magnificent voice has been stilled for more than 80 years, thanks to her recorded legacy, opera connoisseurs continue to savor the range and facility of Madam Marcella Sembrich—one of the great singers of opera's Golden Age. Now, thanks to the work of Director of Outreach Caleb Eick, with the assistance of Lee Berthelsen, the connection between Madam Sembrich and Johann Berthelsen has resulted in a search for five paintings that represent a singular aspect

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*Johann Berthelsen*  
The Johann Berthelsen Conservancy, LLC

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To reach Frank Burke or to be added to the mailing list, email him at frank@berthelsenart.com



Madam Marcella Sembrich

of his interpretative skills and a most touching act of kindness on her part.

Born in 1858 in Austrian Galicia—then part of Poland and now attached to the Ukraine—she was an accomplished musician on both the piano and violin when she entered the Vienna Conservatory in 1875. There, her unique vocal capabilities were discovered, and she began training in voice. An extremely facile coloratura soprano, she made her debut two years later and began a career that achieved world-wide acclaim in a wide repertoire.

Off-stage, she indulged in a number of personal and athletic interests, one of which was mountain climbing. She was an avid climber in the European Alps, and there is a photograph of her at the top of the Matterhorn.

Associated with New York’s Metropolitan Opera since its first season in 1883, she was to sing 450 performances in 11 seasons there. Following her farewell gala in 1909, she gave recitals until 1917. When World War I made it impossible for her to return to Europe, she discovered the Adirondack mountains in New York and spent summers at Lake

Placid before purchasing a home on Lake George in 1922. There she indulged her passion for mountain climbing and taught many outstanding young singers. Following her passing in 1935, her daughter-in-law and others opened her studio as a museum in 1937.



Johann Berthelsen circa 1903

Today, the museum, now known as The Sembrich, offers summer visitors concerts, lectures, and recitals, as well as providing a window into the life and career of Madam Sembrich.

According to Lee Berthelsen, “My father met many distinguished singers and musicians while he was studying at the Chicago Musical College. In the two years prior to his graduation in 1905, he won the Gold medal for Best Artistic Development. It was customary to send him to a hotel where they were staying with a note saying, ‘Please ask the young man presenting this message to sing for you.’ In this way, he was introduced to many leading performers, including Ernestine Schumann-Heink and of course Marcella Sembrich, both of whom encouraged him in his career.”

Although no known correspondence exists, it is believed that Johann and Madam Sembrich remained “in touch” when he pursued his career in opera and later as a voice instructor in New York.

In 1930, Madam Sembrich, either directly or indirectly, became aware of the financial straits in which the Depression had placed Johann and his family with the forced closing of his vocal studio. Hearing of his work as an artist, she contacted him and generously commissioned a series of 12 paintings reflecting scenes that related to her life and career.

As an amateur painter herself, she was extremely taken with Johann’s skill and presented him with her brushes and palette knives saying, “You will make much better use of these than I will.”



*Dresden waterfront* by Johann Berthelsen

Over the past year, Caleb Eick, himself an accomplished musician, assembled seven of the paintings still in the collection of The Sembrich. Mr. Eick comments, “These works are most important to us, not only for their artistic value but for the subjects they depict. Madam Sembrich requested images of scenes, buildings, places, and events that were important in her life and are therefore valuable in an autobiographical sense.”



*Madam Sembrich's childhood home* by Johann Berthelsen



Brushes and palette knives given to Johann Berthelsen by Madam Sembrich

Five of the seven paintings measure approximately 8 inches x 12 inches. Three are portraits and two are landscapes. The other two measure approximately 2 feet x 3 feet and depict Madam Sembrich's childhood home and the Dresden cathedral.

Lee Berthelsen states, “In addition to their high historical and personal significance, they are important for the subject and style. My father rarely painted scenes or buildings

with which he was not personally familiar. Several years ago, we discovered paintings of Paris scenes and remarked on how atypical it was. Of course, Johann never visited Poland, and so these subjects had to be painted from photographs or, in the case of Madam Sembrich's home, from a photograph and/or her personal recollections—especially as regards coloration.

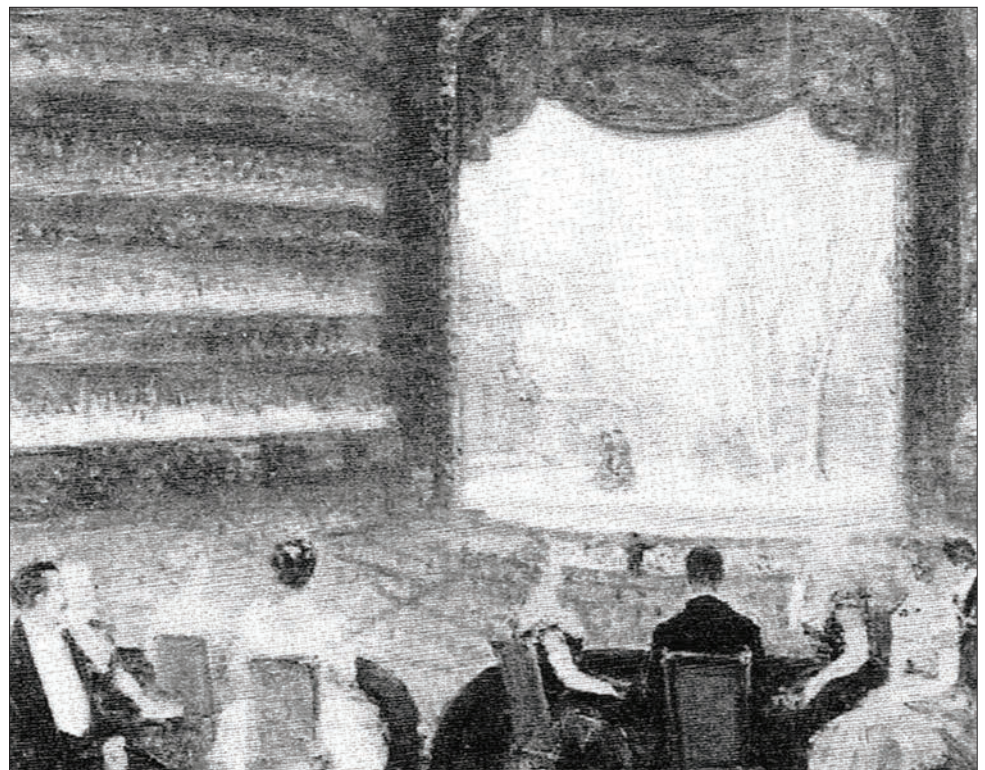
"Perhaps most unusual and indicative of Johann Berthelsen's exceptional versatility is the style that he employed. His New York snow scenes, still lifes, and other paintings are alive with vivid colors. In fact, in some, one can almost sense the influence of the then-popular Colorist school. In the Sembrich paintings, however, the palette is much more subdued and poetic. The style mirrors the historic period of the buildings. It is almost as though we were viewing the subjects through the veil of memory, and that, I think, is what he intended."

Unfortunately, there is no record of the subjects or whereabouts of the missing five paintings. One of them might possibly have been a depiction of the opening of the third act of Puccini's *La Bohème* in an interior view of the old Metropolitan Opera House.

In launching the search for the missing paintings, Caleb Eick explained, "We are continuing to search any possible documentation that might reveal to whom the paintings were bequeathed or given but, as of now, we don't know. We are, therefore, making a plea to galleries, Berthelsen collectors, and/or admirers and others who



*The Met* by Johann Berthelsen



*La Bohème at the Met* by Johann Berthelsen

might either own or be aware of the location of any of the missing paintings. Because of the highly personal nature of the examples that we have, we are most eager to discover whether the others might shed new light on an aspect of Madam Sembrich's life or career."

Lee Berthelsen pledged the assistance of The Johann Berthelsen Conservancy in ascertaining the authenticity of any works discovered. "Through our newsletter and any other means, we will be contacting our friends and collectors.

## Two recent discoveries from the John Berthelsen collection

The passing of John Berthelsen, a son of Johann Berthelsen and brother of Conservancy Chairman Lee Berthelsen, has resulted in the first public exhibition of two Berthelsen paintings with great family significance.

Bequeathed by John to his brother, Lee, a snow scene of the Low Memorial Library at Columbia University was originally presented to John by his father on the occasion of his graduation from that institution. The second, a horizontal view of the United Nations building, is significant in the juxtaposition of the vertical structure with the horizontal line of the river. There will be further information regarding these works in the near future.

A further new discovery is a recently sold nocturnal view of New York harbor that places particular emphasis on the Brooklyn Bridge.



*Low Memorial Library at Columbia University* by Johann Berthelsen



*United Nations building* by Johann Berthelsen

## Brushes and palette knives donated to The Sembrich

The brushes and palette knives originally owned and used by Marcella Sembrich (see feature article) have been donated by Lee Berthelsen to The Sembrich. In announcing the donation, Lee stated, “I have always felt that these tools are especially significant in that they establish a warm personal connection between two great artists—Madam Sembrich and my father. While I have long enjoyed owning them and lending them, along with my father’s palette, for exhibits of his work both in Manitowoc, Wisconsin, and Richmond, Indiana, I believe that, in the long term, they belong in the institution that honors their original owner. I look forward to viewing them in the future at The Sembrich.”



Brushes and palette knives donated to The Sembrich by Lee Berthelsen

## Booth Tarkington—A Hoosier original

It is a sad fact that many significant artists and writers who have enjoyed great popularity in their lifetimes fade into obscurity in later years. In some cases, one or two of their major pieces remain in the public consciousness, but the remainder pass into oblivion. Others are subsequently “rediscovered” and, long after their passing, achieve a well-deserved fame.

The recent publication by The Library of America of two of the major works and a number of short stories by Indiana native Booth Tarkington signal an awakening of interest in the large and varied repertoire of this extremely versatile individual who, in 1921, was voted by book sellers as “the most significant contemporary American writer.”

Born into a prominent Indianapolis family in 1869, Tarkington completed his secondary education at the exclusive Phillips Exeter Academy and matriculated at Purdue University for two years. He subsequently attended Princeton where he discovered his theatrical and literary talents. A term in the Indiana House of Representatives in 1902 resulted in his book, “In the Arena: Stories of Political Life,” a volume so admired by President Theodore Roosevelt that he invited Tarkington to lunch at the White House. By 1910, his Penrod stories “which depicted the adventures of

a boy growing up in the Midwest,” had won an exceptionally wide audience and were compared by critics to Mark Twain’s “Huckleberry Finn.” He was paid thousands for each story and, when collected in a series of books, they remained popular for more than three decades.

His versatility can be seen in the scope of his subject matter. “Monsieur Beaucaire,” a romantic novel, was eventually dramatized with the lead role played by actors as diverse as John Barrymore on stage and Rudolph Valentino and Bob Hope in film. “The Magnificent Andersons,” which many consider his finest work, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1918 and was filmed in 1942 by Orson Welles with an all-star cast including Joseph Cotten, Dolores Costello, and Agnes Moorehead. His second Pulitzer Prize novel, “Alice Adams,” involves a young woman’s attempt to climb the social ladder and was twice filmed and nominated for an Academy Award as Best Picture.

Although he spent summers, and eventually the entire year, at his ocean-side home in Kennebunkport, Maine, he always maintained a residence in Indianapolis and




remained proud of his Midwestern heritage. He worked consistently until his death in 1946 and, in later years, edited several historical novels by his friend and neighbor, Kenneth Roberts.

Johann Berthelsen and Booth Tarkington became friends when Tarkington joined the circle of artists, musicians, and writers that Berthelsen had established during his tenure in Indianapolis. Having grown up in Wisconsin, Johann Berthelsen could readily identify with the Midwestern values and personal and artistic ethics shared by individuals in such diverse professions as Tarkington the writer,

Wayman Adams the portraitist, and Orville Harrold the opera singer. That all achieved success, albeit at different times in their lives, may well be due in part to the influence that they exerted on each other at a seminal moment in their early years.

At a time when European culture dominated most of the artistic establishment, the Indianapolis "Salon" helped launch a group of young people who would play a significant part in establishing the contributions of the United States in the visual, musical, and literary arts.

In examining Tarkington's artistic motivations, which were responsible both for his popularity and subsequent eclipse, critic Robert Gottlieb, writing in a recent issue of *The New Yorker*, states: "He tries conscientiously to identify benefits that can be ascribed to the march of progress, but what he registers and mourns is the loss of tradition and civility. He also tries to celebrate the virtues of emotional maturity, but where he really wants to live is in his boyhood, with all its harmless escapades under the protective eye of a benevolent mother."

Like his friend Johann Berthelsen, much of the appeal of his work lies in the ability to transport us to a time and place more peaceful and predictable, and to let us feel, for a time, a living part of it. 

Hammar skjöld was especially enthusiastic about the work and placed it behind his desk, calling it "Tranquility." The United Nations building was a subject to which my father often returned, and the various views that he painted depicted not only the building itself but the changes in the surrounding area.

A very important group of paintings were the 12 works commissioned by the great soprano Marcella Sembrich (see the feature story in this issue). Having known Johann since his early days as a music student at Chicago Musical College, she became aware of the difficult circumstances in which the Depression had placed him and his family and generously commissioned the series of paintings. These are important, not just because they depict especially emotional scenes and moments from the life of one of the great singers of the Golden Age but because Johann executed them in a highly stylistic manner.

The painting of Times Square personally commissioned by Louis Armstrong was sold, some years ago, for \$50,000.

One of our aims here at the Conservancy involves disseminating as much knowledge as possible regarding works that share a historical connection. It has been my pleasure to provide details to gallery owners and auction houses regarding paintings that they have for sale that carry significant historical value. Perhaps not surprisingly I have noticed that those who incorporate explanatory comments in catalogs, or verbally in the course of an auction, achieve significantly higher sales figures. On the other hand, several times I have supplied information that, for whatever reason, was never used. These paintings achieved much less financial success than the others.

I believe that the reasons for this are more than academic. For collectors and lovers of my father's work, every painting establishes—on some level—a bond between the artist and the viewer. Someone viewing one of Johann Berthelsen's multiple images of the Brooklyn Bridge might know that the Bridge had a strong emotional connection to the artist because two months before his birth in Denmark his parents walked across the bridge on the first day that it was opened. Such knowledge shares not only the beauty found in the composition and coloration but a very part of the artist's soul. And that is a value that cannot be measured.

Yours sincerely,

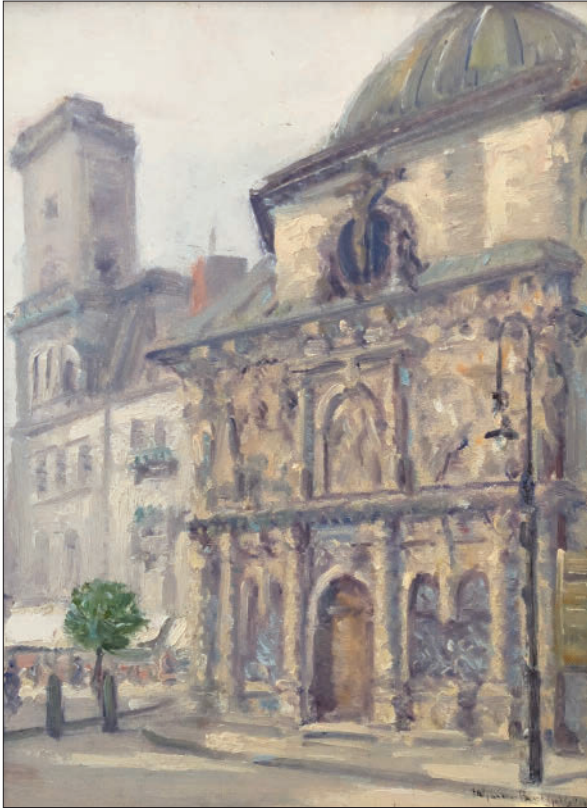


Lee Berthelsen

Chairman

The Johann Berthelsen Conservancy, LLC

lee@berthelsenart.com



*Boim chapel* by Johann Berthelsen



*Sembrich childhood parish* by Johann Berthelsen

Individuals with any information should contact [ceick@thesembrich.org](mailto:ceick@thesembrich.org) or Lee Berthelsen at [lee@berthelsenart.com](mailto:lee@berthelsenart.com). Any assistance will be deeply appreciated." Progress in the search will be reported in the newsletter and on The Johann Berthelsen Conservancy website [www.berthelsenart.com](http://www.berthelsenart.com).

