

How Much Would You Pay for Independence?

Wk 4

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Next time your mom tells you to clean your room and get rid of that “junk” you don’t use anymore, think about this...A collector who spent \$4 at a Pennsylvania flea market in 1989 for a dismal painting because he liked the frame, found himself the possessor of a first printing of the Declaration of Independence. It was expected to bring \$800,000 to \$1 million at an auction on June 4, 1991.

The discovery was announced by David N. Redden, head of the book and manuscript department at Sotheby's in Manhattan. Mr. Redden described the document, found behind the painting when the collector took the frame apart, as an "unspeakably fresh copy" of the declaration. "The fact that it has been in the backing of the frame preserved it," he said. Of the 24 copies known to survive, only 3 are in private hands, he added.

Mr. Redden said the unidentified owner bought the painting, "a dismal dark country scene with a signature he could not make out," for its gilded and ornately carved frame. He told Mr. Redden that he discarded the painting, which he disliked. When he realized the frame was crudely made and unsalvageable, he said he got rid of it also. "But he kept the declaration, which he had found behind the painting," Mr. Redden said. "It was folded up, about the size of a business envelope. He thought it might be an early 19th-century printing and worth keeping as a curiosity."

When the owner showed it to a friend, he became quite enthusiastic and urged him to look into it further, said Selby Kiffer, an Americana printing specialist at Sotheby's "At that point, he called us." Sotheby's is a well known auction house of rare art and antiques.

"The discovery of any first-printing copy of the declaration, even a fragmentary one or a poor copy, would be exciting," Mr. Kiffer said. "But this one, the condition is beyond reproach. It was folded up when we first saw it -- the way the owner said it was in the painting, less than one-tenth of an inch thick. I had to agree with him it was just as well that he kept it that way.

"There has been absolutely no restoration, no repair. It was unframed and unbacked." Only 7 of the 24 copies are unbacked, he said, which increases their value.

Mr. Kiffer said the declaration was the fourth copy of the first printing to surface in the last 10 years -- three of which were either known copies or had been handed down to heirs of the original 18th-century owners. The record for a declaration sold at auction is \$1.6 million, which was realized in January 1990 in a Sotheby's sale of a copy from the estate of H. Bradley Martin, an heir to the Phipps steel fortune.

"The ink was still wet on this copy when it was folded," Mr. Kiffer said. "The very first line -- 'In Congress, July 4, 1776' -- shows up in the bottom margin in reverse, as a faint offsetting or shadow printing, one more proof of the urgency John Dunlap, the printer, and others felt in dispersing this document."

The rare document was offered for sale by Sotheby's on 4 June 1991, and the lucky find fetched even more than had been anticipated: the \$800,000 to \$1.2 million estimate turned into a \$2.42 million sale by the sound of the gavel.

The same document was put up for sale again in June 2000, fetching an \$8.14 million bid from television producer Norman Lear in an online auction. It then became the centerpiece of the Norman Lear Center's **Declaration of Independence Road Trip**. The goal of the project was to bring the "People's Document" directly to all Americans — especially young people — to inspire them to see **citizenship** as an opportunity; to participate in civic life; to exercise their **rights**; and above all, to **vote**.

Think About it:

1. Explain how you would have felt to find out that you had such a valuable document in your possession.
2. How do you think the guy who sold it at the garage sale felt when he heard that news?
3. Explain whether you have ever thrown something out that you wished you still had.
4. Explain whether you would have paid over 2 million dollars for the document.
5. How do you think the declaration wound up behind a painting?
6. How does this article connect with what we are covering in civics?

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