

THE MYSTERIOUS JAMES BRENNERMAN; DID HE EXIST AND WHERE DID ALL HIS FAKES COME FROM?

IFAR Exposes Another Cache of Bogus Pollocks

LISA DUFFY-ZEBALLOS and SHARON FLESCHER*

“The sheer number of potential works involved, and the certain knowledge that more fakes from the “Brennerman Collection” will continue to dupe the unwary, impels us to speak out.”

Ever since IFAR began reviewing works by Jackson Pollock 20 years ago, soon after the Pollock-Krasner Authentication Board disbanded, our Authentication Research Service has examined well over a hundred spurious Pollocks and learned of a troubling number of “collections” of fakes. From the now-infamous Glafira Rosales/ Knoedler Gallery fakes, to the fakes peddled by Long Island con man John Re,¹ now serving time in federal prison, these “troves” have come to us with unsubstantiated, often elaborate and always unverifiable provenances, some involving fictitious people. To this rogues’ gallery, we now add the mysterious James Brennerman (FIG. 1), said to be a wealthy and eccentric German-born collector, the scale of whose purported “collection” of Pollocks, and its back story, may surpass them all.

The collection comes with a dossier of letters supposedly written by Brennerman and photographs said to show different views of his Chicago

mansion, but which in fact – and you can’t make these things up – are actually views of the 15th-century Sforza Castle in Milan and an 18th-century

Bavarian church! As to Mr. Brennerman himself, we could find no record of his immigration into the United States; no record of his death; no record of his life in Chicago; and absolutely no record or convincing explanation as to how he acquired hundreds – yes, hundreds – of works not only by Pollock, but other major artists as well.

Four purported “Brennerman Collection” Pollocks have thus far been submitted to IFAR by three different owners. All turned out to be fakes, and not very sophisticated ones at that. As discussed below, they were stylistically and materially wrong, with forensic tests and other laboratory examinations revealing anomalous paints and other anachronistic materials, and there was no credible documentation whatsoever linking them to the artist.

Given the potentially large number of paintings involved and their wide circulation throughout the U.S., IFAR feels compelled to share what it has learned and put the public on notice about this apparent and audacious scam.

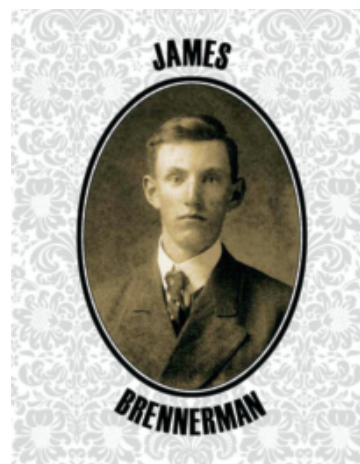


FIGURE 1. Photo said to depict the collector James Brennerman as a young man.

* Lisa Duffy-Zeballos, Ph.D. is the Art Research Director of IFAR and Sharon Flescher, Ph.D. is Executive Director of IFAR and Editor-in-Chief of the *IFAR Journal*. We wish to acknowledge the additional research of Michele Wijegoonaratna, Ph.D., former Art Research Intern at IFAR.

¹ See “20/20 Hindsight: Lessons from the Knoedler/Rosales Affair — An IFAR Evening,” *IFAR Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 2-3, 2016. See also, Lisa Duffy-Zeballos and Sharon Flescher, “Long Island Con Man John Re Sentenced to 5 Years for Fraud that IFAR Helped Expose,” *IFAR Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 1-2, 2015.



FIGURE 2. (above) IFAR# 13.11, acrylic on cardboard, 22 ¾ x 29 in., purported Pollock, “Brennerman Collection”.



FIGURE 3. (right) IFAR# 13.10, acrylic on foam board, 30 ¾ x 27 ¾ in., purported Pollock, “Brennerman Collection”.

“The collection comes with ... photographs said to show different views of [Brennerman's] Chicago mansion, but which in fact—and you can't make these thing up—are actually views of the 15th-century Sforza Castle in Milan and an 18th-century Bavarian church!”

THE BRENNERMAN COLLECTION

In late 2013, we received inquiries from two different owners about three purported Jackson Pollock paintings formerly in the collection of a James Brennerman, a name then unfamiliar to us. Two of the paintings had been purchased from a nightclub (more accurately, a strip club) owner in Roanoke, Virginia, who claimed to have acquired them from Brennerman's former servants, Bert and Ethel Ramsey. The same strip club owner also factors in the provenance of the other Brennerman “Pollocks” submitted to us via intermediary sellers. After careful examination and research, we sent negative reports on all three works in 2014. The following year, a fourth Brennerman “Pollock” was submitted to us, and we later rejected it, too. In addition to the four works we have formally reviewed, we have seen photos of ten other Brennerman “Pollocks”, which appear to be just the tip of

the iceberg. Alarming, we already know that at least one of the four works we rejected has been resold to an apparently unsuspecting buyer.

Two of the three paintings submitted in 2013 were drip, or poured, works imitative of Pollock's paintings of the late 1940s (**FIGS. 2 & 3**). Both were signed “Jackson Pollock” and were undated. They featured garish palettes bearing little resemblance to Pollock's palette or works of the period. The third painting (**FIG. 4**), titled *Homage to Gorky* on the verso, was a small, brushed — not dripped — quasi-figural work on cardboard, signed and dated “Jackson Pollock '42”. Despite their stylistic differences, all three works displayed certain hallmarks of the Brennerman group:



FIGURE 4. IFAR# 13.08 *Homage to Gorky*, paint on cardboard, 12 x 9 in., purported Pollock, “Brennerman Collection”.

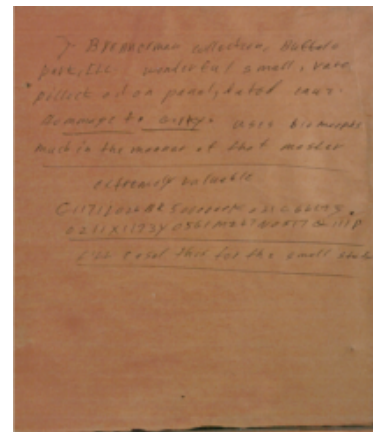


FIGURE 5. Inscription on the backing paper of #13.08.

- The backs of the frames were covered with brown paper.
- The papers bore a handwritten inscription identifying the work as belonging to the James Brennerman Collection.
- The papers also bore lengthy inventory numbers, and Brennerman's notes regarding where the painting would hang in his house (FIG. 5).

The inscription on the back of *Homage to Gorky*, for example, stated:

Wonderful small, rare Pollock oil on panel, dated 1942./
Hommage [sic] to Gorky uses biomorphs/
much in the manner of that master/
extremely valuable E11712026BR5000000K021C66175/
0211X1173Y0561M267N0517Q111P/
I'll easel this for the small study"

This long inventory number, made up of over 50 numbers and letters, apparently incorporated Brennerman's estimation of the painting's value, which in this case was \$5 million.²

One of the owners told us that he personally owned more than 50 Brennerman "Pollocks" as well as hundreds of works by other artists, also from the "Brennerman Collection".

A RECLUSIVE COLLECTOR?

So, just who was James Brennerman, and how did he amass such an enormous art collection without anyone knowing about it? According to the submitted documents, Brennerman immigrated to the United States from Germany in the early 1940s, and eventually purchased a large estate called 'Buffalo Park' on South Prairie Avenue in Chicago. Upon his death in 1974, Brennerman, a lifelong and solitary bachelor, is said to have left his vast art collection to his servants, Bert and Ethel Ramsey.

Although the dossiers presented to IFAR by the two owners of the works submitted in 2013 differed somewhat, both contained facsimiles of photographs said to show Brennerman's family and acquaintances, as well as pictures of his purported Chicago mansion. Also included were decades of

Brennerman's purported correspondence to family members (often in poorly-written German), to his friend and fellow art collector Charles Farmer, and to his servants, the Ramseys, in which he discusses his art collection. Curiously, however, not one of the letters was addressed to Brennerman, and it was unclear how so many of his "sent" letters ended up back in his possession.

In a series of letters dated 1968, Brennerman purportedly writes to Charles Farmer at the latter's estate 'Tall Trees' discussing the pair's planned trip to Long Island to purchase a cache of Pollock paintings from an unnamed collector, who, IFAR was told by the nightclub owner, was Pollock's widow, the artist Lee Krasner. In a letter of August 12, 1968, Brennerman tells Farmer, "We can buy everything in sight. I think carrying a great deal of cash might be the best way to seal this deal." Tellingly, Brennerman repeatedly refers to paying for the paintings with cash (FIG. 6, letter dated September 9, 1968) and to transporting them in his two personal trucks (FIG. 7, letter dated September 29, 1968), thus accounting for the lack of any payment or shipping receipts. The mention of *truckloads* (!) of paintings provided us with the first hint as to how many Pollocks may be involved in the Brennerman group.

In this letter, Brennerman also assures Farmer that if he ever wishes to dispose of his Pollocks, Brennerman will gladly purchase them. Not

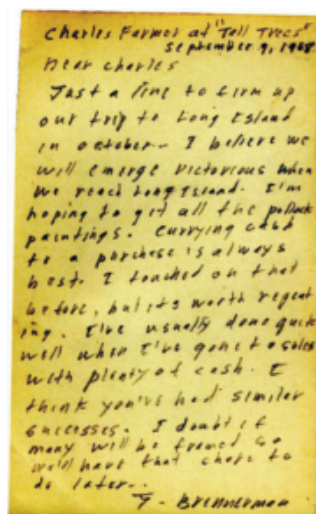


FIGURE 6. Letter said to be from James Brennerman to Charles Farmer, dated September 9, 1968.

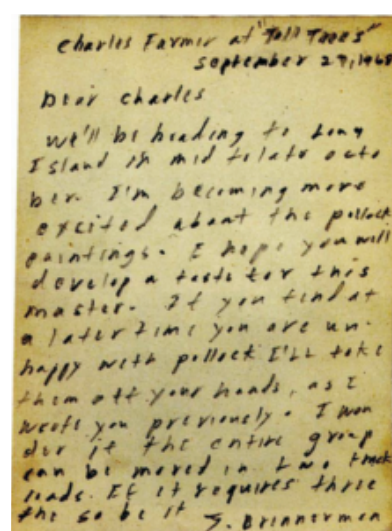


FIGURE 7. Letter said to be from James Brennerman to Charles Farmer, dated September 29, 1968.

² We were told that the value was the number between the letters "BR" and "K" in the inventory number ("BR5000000K").

surprisingly, this is exactly what happens. In a letter dated January 18, 1970, Brennerman tells his servant Ethel Ramsey that he is buying all 112 of Farmer's Pollocks. The full extent of Brennerman's collection is finally revealed in a letter from July 1972, in which he professes to own an incredible 748 works by Jackson Pollock. By way of comparison, the comprehensive Jackson Pollock catalogue raisonné³ lists only approximately 1,100 artworks – total, a number that includes known works that cannot be located.

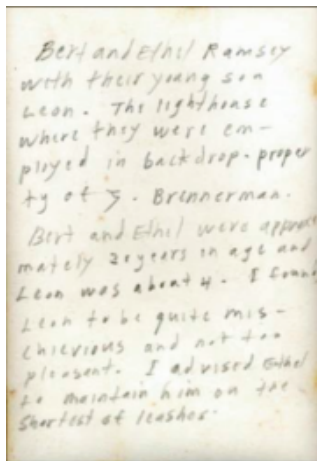
The suggestion that Lee Krasner would have sold over 700 Pollocks, more than half of his known output, wholesale for cash, simply defies belief. There were not that many Pollocks in the artist's possession when he died. Moreover, in 1958, Krasner contracted with the Marlborough Gallery in London, and in 1964, with the Marlborough-Gerson Gallery in New York, to represent her husband's estate.⁴ She would not have sold works directly. Nor was it financially necessary for her to do so. In the 1960s, Pollock's works were selling well. In February 1969, just a few months after Brennerman's alleged buying

spree in Long Island, the Marlborough Gallery sold Pollock's *The Deep* (CR #372) for over \$190,000.⁵

The letters make clear that Brennerman's collection was not limited to Pollocks. They also refer to paintings by Kline, De Kooning, Renoir, Monet, Hassam, Rothko, Manet, Hopper, Motherwell, Gorky, and many other artists, which Brennerman envisions will eventually form the core of his own art museum.

The letters to the Ramseys reveal that Brennerman coached his servants in their taste and knowledge of art. He even allowed them to hang his "Pollocks" in their quarters, but he then grew suspicious, and chastised them for greedily coveting his paintings. The documents suggest that Brennerman's eccentricity and paranoia eventually descended into madness, as his later letters are filled with delusional rants regarding aliens and his plans for world domination. In one letter to Ethel Ramsey dated June 7, 1970, Brennerman describes how he expects to be "transported to another planet over which I will rule. I am destined to become a god." More to the point, these letters serve to establish Brennerman's strange and reclusive nature, possibly in order to explain why none of his paintings was ever publicly exhibited, or perhaps to justify the bizarre bequest of his valuable art collection to his servants.

The photographic evidence presented in the dossier was, if anything, stranger than the correspondence. None of the photos depicted any of Brennerman's paintings in his house, and none show him older than his 20s. A photo said to be of Bert and Ethel Ramsey, both of whom allegedly lived into the 1990s, shows them as adults with their young son wearing turn-of-the-twentieth century bathing costumes (FIGS. 8 A & B). But directly below that photo is one of a man approximately the same age, also said to be Bert Ramsey, wearing a World War II-era army uniform (FIG. 9).



FIGURES 8A and B. A) (left) Photo said to show Bert and Ethel Ramsey with their son Leon; **B) (right)** Writing said to be Brennerman's.

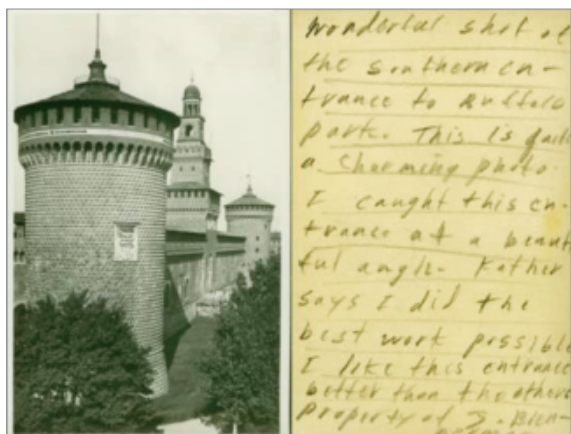


FIGURE 9. Photo said to show Bert Ramsey.

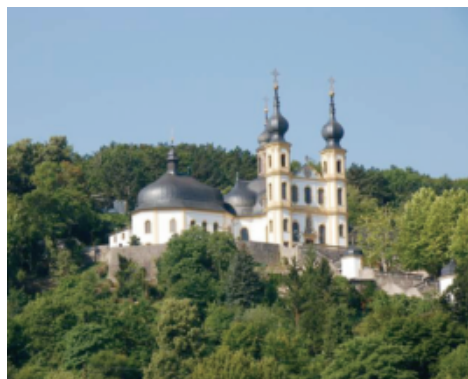
³ Jackson Pollock: *A Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings, Drawings and Other Works*, eds. Francis V. O'Connor and Eugene V. Thaw (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978); and *Jackson Pollock: A Catalogue Raisonné, Supplement Number One*, ed. Francis V. O'Connor (New York: Pollock-Krasner Foundation, 1995). Works in the catalogue are cited in our text as: (CR #).

⁴ Bobbi Coller, "Pollock's Champions: Peggy Guggenheim, Betty Parsons and Sidney Janis," *Pollock's Champions*, Exhibition held at the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center (July-Oct. 2014).

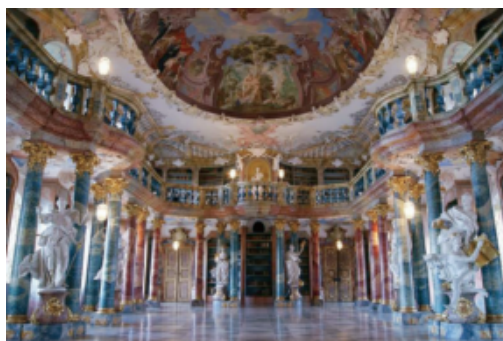
⁵ Sold to Sam Wagstaff; Lee Krasner received \$126,000 from the sale. Archives of American Art, Pollock-Krasner Papers, Business Records, Box 3, Fol. 17.



FIGURES 10A and B. **A** (left) Photo said to depict the southern entrance of Brennerman's mansion, Buffalo Park; **B** (right) Sforza Castle, Milan, Italy, showing one of its two round towers on the far left.



FIGURES 11A and B. **A** (left) Photo said to show an overview of Brennerman's Chicago mansion, Buffalo Park; **B** (right) View of the Wallfahrtskirche Mariä Heimsuchung (Das Käppele), Würzburg, Germany.



FIGURES 12A and B. **A** (left) Photo ostensibly of the library at Buffalo Park; **B** (right) Library at Wiblingen Abbey, Ulm, Germany.

“In light of the obviously false documentation provided with the paintings, the inevitable question remained—what evidence was there that the collector James Brennerman ever existed? *We could find none.*”

Evidently hoping to impress the reader with Brennerman's vast wealth, the dossier's compilers included numerous photos showing interior and exterior views of his opulent Buffalo Park estate.

As already mentioned, one image

ostensibly showing the “Southern Entrance” to Brennerman's Chicago mansion actually shows the Sforza Castle in Milan

(**FIGS. 10 A & B**), while a second photo

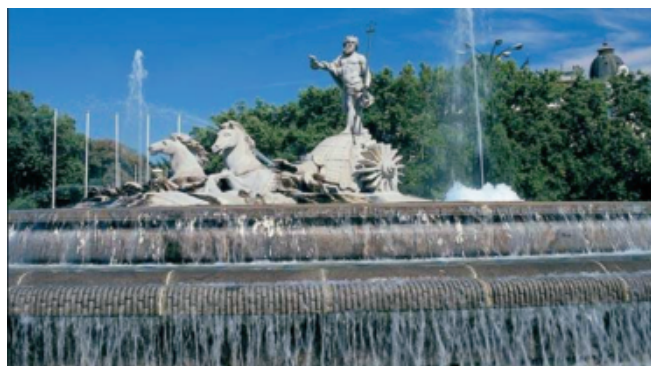
labeled “Over-

view of Buffalo Park” shows a pilgrimage church in Würzburg, Germany called the Wallfahrtskirche Mariä Heimsuchung (**FIGS. 11 A & B**). Similarly, a photograph said to show Brennerman's library, oddly labeled “Father's fine library at Buffalo Park” (**FIGS. 12 A & B**), in fact depicts the library at Wiblingen Abbey in Ulm, Germany, and a photo of a fountain, described on the back as “one of the great fountains that grace Buffalo Park,” is actually the Neptune fountain in Madrid! (**FIGS. 13 A & B**)



A historian specializing in Chicago's Prairie Avenue informed IFAR that he had never heard of James Brennerman or of a mansion called Buffalo Park. Furthermore, he said, although South Prairie Avenue had been a fashionable address in the nineteenth century, the area went into steep decline in the twentieth century and was largely abandoned by the 1940s.

In light of the obviously false documentation provided with the paintings, the inevitable question remained—what evidence was there that James Brennerman ever existed? *We could find none.* His name doesn't appear in government immigration records, in Social Security records, or in any other government archives we researched. Unable to verify his life, we attempted to investigate his death. According to the dossier, he died in Chicago in 1974 of a heart attack, and his remains were transferred to the Ostfriedhof Cemetery in Munich. We, however, could find no obituary for Brennerman in any Chicago newspaper from the 1970s, and the manager of the Ostfriedhof Cemetery confirmed that no one by the name of Brennerman was interred in that cemetery or crematorium. Nor does his name appear in the federal Social Security Death Index, or the Cook County, Illinois Death Index, and there were no probate estate records or wills registered for James Brennerman in Chicago at the time of his supposed death.



FIGURES 13A and B. **A) (left)** Photo said to show a fountain at Buffalo Park; **B) (right)** Neptune Fountain, Madrid, Spain.

The other players in the Brennerman saga fared no better. We could not find any information or official records regarding Charles Farmer, Farmer's estate 'Tall Trees', or Bert and Ethel Ramsey. In fact, the only reference we found to Brennerman and his associates was on the now-defunct website Mundia.com, which allowed anonymous users to build family trees online.⁶ In the end, we found no evidence that either James Brennerman, his Chicago estate, his friend Charles Farmer, his servants and heirs Bert and Ethel Ramsey, or his art collection *ever existed.*

THE PAINTINGS

More to the point, upon examination with Pollock specialists, the Brennerman Collection paintings did not hold up as Pollocks, either stylistically or materially. The two drip-style paintings submitted in 2013 (**FIGS. 1 & 2**) unsuccessfully borrowed features from two different phases of Pollock's career, with underlayers of brightly-colored gestural brushstrokes, imitative of Pollock's 1946 *Sounds in the Grass* paintings, overlaid with ersatz Pollockian drips of black and white paint. The third painting submitted to IFAR at that time, *Homage to Gorky* (**FIG. 3**), signed and dated 1942, was equally unconvincing. In 1942, Pollock is known to have executed only three paintings, all large works on canvas, none of which bear any resemblance to this work. Rather, *Homage to Gorky* represents a botched mash-up of the autumnal palette

⁶ All of the information on Mundia.com duplicated the information contained in the dossiers submitted to IFAR.

and multicolored background of Pollock's *Croaking Movement* of 1946 (CR #161) with the stenographic marks found in his works of the early 1940s, rendered with ribbon-like strokes that have nothing at all to do with Pollock in either period.

Forensic analysis on the two drip-style paintings was particularly revealing. Six samples were analyzed using FTIR – Fourier transform infrared microspectrometry – and dispersive confocal Raman microscopy to help identify both the pigments and the binding media. Additionally, pyrolysis gas chromatography/mass spectrometry (py-GC/MS) was used to analyze the binding media of some of the samples.

All of the sampled paints turned out to be anomalous for Pollock. All had acrylic binders. But, to date, no acrylic paint of *any* kind has been identified in *any* accepted painting by Jackson Pollock, although two types of acrylic paints – the acrylic resin Magna and the acrylic emulsion Liquitex – were available during Pollock's lifetime. That said, the acrylic paints found in the Brennerman paintings were not consistent with either Magna or Liquitex. Rather, they contained an acrylic emulsion formulation that was not commonly used until the late 1980s.

The results of the scientific examination confirmed our already negative opinion. In our final reports, in which we categorically rejected all three works as by Pollock, we expressed concern that the possible scale of the so-called Brennerman Collection and its continued circulation posed a significant threat to the understanding of Pollock's *oeuvre*, as well as the art market.

Our concerns that more fakes from this group would emerge were soon confirmed, as we began getting inquiries from optimistic owners of *other* Brennerman "Pollocks". One additional Brennerman work was formally submitted to IFAR in 2015. This fourth work, a large abstract painting on cardboard also signed "Jackson Pollock 1942" (FIG. 14), was a brightly-colored brushed composition, with significant passages of finger-painting. Not insignificantly, its dossier was missing some of the *very* documents



FIGURE 14. IFAR# 15.11, paint on cardboard, 32 x 42 in., purported Pollock "Brennerman Collection".

that we had singled out negatively in our earlier reports, in particular the discredited photographs of Brennerman's mansion and much of his early correspondence. Moreover, the painting itself was missing the brown backing paper with Brennerman's comments and the lengthy inventory number that we had criticized in our reports. It was clear that the backing paper had recently been cut away, as vestiges of it remained glued to the edges of the cardboard. Evidently, word of our previous negative reports was circulating.

Stylistically, this work on cardboard (#15.11) fared no better than its Brennerman predecessors. Although dated 1942, the painting had nothing to do with Pollock's biomorphic works of the early 1940s. More likely, the painter of the Brennerman work was attempting to imitate Pollock's early abstract brushed works of the mid-1930s, such as *Overall Composition* (CR #33). But even in those works, as one expert noted, "the forms are more clearly drawn"; whereas, the IFAR composition "dissolves in a flurry of brushstrokes." A conservator confirmed that the paints appeared too pristine and new and the cardboard support too flexible for a painting said to date to the early 1940s. Likewise, the white paper backing of the cardboard, original to the cardboard, fluoresced in ultraviolet light, indicating the presence of optical brightening agents, which were not introduced into paper until 1950, well after the painting's 1942 date.

Thus, none of the four submitted works from the so-called “Brennerman Collection” bore up as Pollocks upon examination. Fortunately, they are not sophisticated fakes. Unlike at least some of the Glafira Rosales/ Knoedler Gallery works, they would not fool any art specialist or sophisticated purchaser. Stylistically, they don’t hold up; the materials are wrong; and much of the documentation accompanying them is laughable. The sale prices are also suspiciously low; most are in the five-figure range, far below what an actual Pollock would be worth today.

That said, we hope to stop this insidious scam from proceeding further. The sheer number of potential works involved, and the certain knowledge that more fakes from the “Brennerman Collection” will

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continue to dupe the unwary, impels us to speak out. As previously noted, we are already concerned that one of the works on which we’ve opined negatively has recirculated. We do not know at this stage who created the works or is the mastermind behind the apparent scam. Perhaps a government investigation is in order. For now, caveat emptor is the catchphrase for any work from the mysterious “Brennerman Collection.”

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