



Selling/Auctioning A Carnival Glass Collection

We all have had the thought, "If I were to sell my collection, how would I go about doing it?" If you haven't had the thought, you should have. Lord knows, none of us are immortal and the glass that has enriched our lives for lo' these many years will someday be enjoyed by others. That's a fact folks --- something like death and taxes.

That knowledge need not force us to make a hasty decision to sell, but it is an inescapable fact. There are as many reasons to sell as there are carnival glass collectors. Like many subjects in this treatise, it is purely a personal decision, and I can't make it for you, but maybe I can give you some insights and personal feelings about the subject.

If you've ever 'built', or had built, a custom-home, you know there are many, many more decisions to make than you ever considered when you first made the decision to build. I am living proof, having built a home 6 years ago and then selling my collection last year.

I will sometimes use "my collection" throughout this discussion because as most of you are aware, my bride is not a collector (except of life-lasting friendships!) and even though I bounced various decisions off her in the sales process, I was the one who bought each and every piece and was most knowledgeable about the individuals involved, and the process. I will not apologize for using "my" or "mine" again.

There are various ways to sell your collection. Again, a very personal decision that you must make for yourself and it is not my intention to influence your decision here, except I may slip and tell you a few of the pros and cons of some of processes.

Because I have a lot to say, it's much easier on my brain to 'outline' or 'compartmentalize' the discussion herein. Some of the sub-categories are:

To Auction or Not
Choosing the Right Auction Company
Where and When
Proposals and Contracts
Damage and Mfg. Flaws
The Brochure
Reserves
Mail Bidding

Extending Credit Payments from the Auction Company

To Auction or Not

There are multiple ways to go when it comes to selling your glass. Some that come immediately to mind are: 1) sell your entire collection to one individual; 2) commission an individual to sell it for you; 3) sell it off as individual pieces (eBay and/or lists, and/or club newsletters, and/or club conventions, or open a booth in an antique mall); 4) sell it through a 'local (general antiques) auction company'; 5) sell part of it through a recognized 'carnival glass auction company' now, and the rest later; 6) sell the entire collection through a recognized auction company' now (well, more or less *now*.)

The decision must include a thoughtful review of many parameters; how fast do I want/need to sell and get my money?; am I a 'good salesman?'; is my collection a \$20K or a \$200K collection?; do I know an individual (or individuals plural) that I trust to do the job expediently and honestly for me? Be honest with yourself here.

Even though I had received some advanced advice recommending that I sell my collection myself, Jan and I decided on approach #6 above --- to sell the entire collection through a 'recognized carnival auction company' *all at once*. In retrospect, I am still happy with that decision. I didn't have a clue that many pieces in our collection would bring the high prices they did. If I had chosen to sell the glass myself, I **wouldn't have dreamed** to ask some of the numbers that were realized in the auction!

Offsetting these 'greater than expected prices' are the auction commission fees and some pieces that didn't sell well of course, but to my way of thinking they were considerably less than what I would have *lost* by pricing the glass myself. It remains my firm belief that at least in our case, the auction company we chose fully earned their commission. If you have a small collection, that might not be the case.

Choosing the Right Auction Company

Wow! This is such a personal and difficult decision, but without a doubt the single most important decision you will have to make in the entire process!

Some of the factors involved are more obvious than others, but I caution you to *consider them all*.

First, one you may not have thought of --- to 'tailor' your auction company/auctioneer selection to your collection. Factors involved may include, but not be limited to: do you have lots of 'rarities'?; is your collection 'manufacturer biased'? (there may be an auction company that you feel best sells Millersburg or Northwood); do you personally know *and like* the auctioneer?; have you heard good reports from other collectors about specifics when dealing with certain auctioneers or their companies?; have they sold (or even specialized in) collections similar to yours?; are they "hot"? (currently 'in vogue').

But even more primal, will they **do** your auction within the time frame and at the location of your choosing? In our case, an important factor was coming out to the west coast to pick up our glass. That may not be as important to those of you who live within spittin' distance of where your auction will be held.

Like I said, this is your most important decision, so make it carefully!

In our case, I even asked fellow collectors who had recently sold their collections (which more or less were similar to ours) for input. If you decide to consult with other recent sellers, don't just ask, "Who do you like?" Ask **specifically what did you like and dislike** about your recent experience? I think you will find that even though this is very personal information, most collectors will be willing to share their experiences with you. To my way of thinking their input should not be shared with others. Jan and I were most fortunate in getting wonderful input from several couples. It was invaluable!

Where and When

Unfortunately, this is an element that you may not have as much control of as you'd like.

I believe that the best place to sell a large collection is at one of the major club conventions. However, my thinking appears to be shared by others such that in at least one case, HOACGA, I heard that the auction 'slots' have already been filled through the 2012 convention! If you're in a bit of a hurry, obviously this may not work for you. But still, ask. You never know and maybe, just maybe, there'll be a cancellation.

I believe the next most favorable setting would be at a setting chosen by your auctioneer --- either at their own facility or at a location they have used before, say a motel or hotel. This obviously, needs to be coordinated with your auctioneer to make sure it fits his/her schedule and hopefully, doesn't conflict with other auctions or conventions. If you want to sell 'soon', say within a year or a year and a half, this may be your *only* option.

Where geographically? --- to my way of thinking, there are two prime locations, the mid-west (first choice) or Florida.

Proposals and Contracts

This is an area that I can speak about from personal experience. I have not had extensive conversations with lots of previous sellers about the subject, but I have extensive experience in my former life in the aerospace industry.

First, I selected multiple auction companies that I considered *candidates* for selling our glass. I then drafted what is called an "RFP" - *Request For Proposal*. In the RFP I stated the obvious ("I want you to sell my carnival glass collection.")

Think of the RFP as the 'core document' for your auction. It is where **you** get to define what you expect from your auction experience. It is what the auction company needs to define their costs and ultimately what fees to propose for their services. It is your chance to ensure that **you are 'in charge'** of your auction. You may not 'get it right' the first time, but at least the initial RFP is your chance to draw the first line in the sand! It's perfectly normal and acceptable for the auctioneer to get back saying that some of the specifics in your first RFP may either be impossible, or too costly, or just objectionable to their auction company. Then you redraft the RFP (and date it!) such that the final RFP becomes an iterated document between you and the auctioneer.

Then the auction company responds by providing you with a proposal, the dated ("final") RFP should be noted both in the proposal AND eventually in the signed contract between you and your auction company.

In our case, I already had an agreement with the HOACGA Board to sell at their 2007 convention, so I wrote *that* into the generalized language of the RFP. I also stated what kind of a 'tone' Jan and I hoped for ("Classy.")

Then I wrote a list of specifics that I wanted the auctioneer's proposals back to me to be 'costed' in their proposals. Things like picking up the glass at my house in Oregon, full insurance on the glass through all phases of it's transportation, washing and listing the glass, preparation of, and all costs associated with, mailing out brochures (I wanted approval privileges of the final version of the brochures - more on the brochure later), pictures of each and every piece on the auctioneer's website, etcetera, etcetera.

My thinking on getting down to details was twofold: first obviously, it served as a basis for untangling possible future disagreements with the auction company about what I was getting for what I was paying, and second, it served as a basis for negotiations about the final contract with the auctioneer (if negotiation were required.) In other words, if the auctioneer's proposal came in too high, we could tailor the requirements stated in the RFP to reach an equitable agreement.

I then reviewed the various proposals I received back, made a few phone calls to clarify details, and selected 'our auction company.'

It maybe goes without saying, but let me say it anyway, I don't believe your selection should be based solely on 'the bottom line' --- that is the auctioneer's basic commission. To my way of thinking, there are many other elements to consider --- some objectively, but most subjectively!

What is Auctioneer A's history of selling identically the same pieces in comparison with Auctioneer B's? --- say aqua opal Rose Show bowls? (Ha! --- since there are no 2 pieces of CG that are identical!)

What kind of a 'Mail Bid' *following* does Auctioneer A have in comparison with Auctioneer B? Pretty much a guess here, although I did talk with my auctioneer candidates on the subject.

How do you like Auctioneer A's **brochures** versus Auctioneer B's?

During previews, was the glass well displayed? Well lit? Obviously, this requires that you have attended auctions conducted by all the candidates.

Was the auctioneer available and amenable to discussing specifics *and making changes in their modus oporundi* with you?

Where and when is Auctioneer A planning on doing the auction compared to Auctioneer B? (Not a consideration in our case.) Can you live with that?

How do you feel about Auctioneer A's *appeal* to the target auction crowd versus Auctioneer B's? A way of trying to determine this is how did you feel about auctions by these auctioneers? (What was your impression when you first walked into the preview? How was the auctioneer's pace and general demeanor? Did you have fun?)

Did you talk to, or *hear* what other seller's thoughts were after their auctions?

How do you rate the auctioneer's honesty and integrity?

Use as many sources of data and knowledge as you can think of. I have only given you some of my thinking here --- you can come up with other criteria, I'm sure.

Unless you are independently wealthy, I suspect you will need to make a judgment that is somewhat (but not solely!) founded on what you think the 'bottom line' to you is going to be, even at the risk of displeasing or disappointing the other auctioneers, who have been 'best friends' for years!

Remember this is your auction, not anyone else's.

After iterating on the specifics of the RFP, as well as the auction company's fees, make sure they are all stated in a written contract to be signed by you and the auction company. As previously stated, have the final version of the RFP, specified by date, referenced in the proposal.

I'll now enter into discussions about some other specifics that may or may not appear in the written documents (RFP, Proposal, Contract) but should at least be discussed with your auctioneer so as to preclude any future disagreements. Remember, these reflect my personal views and are meant as *guidelines* for your discussions. They may or may not be pertinent in your case.

Damage and Mfg. Flaws

As with 'all things carnival,' there are various opinions on this subject. Obviously, there are the basic, "I think that's

damage", "No, it isn't!" discussions. Same goes with, "That is obviously a manufacturing flaw", "No it isn't!" and all versions thererto.

But let's talk about *real* damage --- chips (all sizes) or cracks. **If** you opt to allow Mail Bids (you may not!) the auction brochure must be accurate. If there is a disagreement between you and your auctioneer about what I'll call "a flaw" of any sort, reach an agreement with him/her about what should be noted in the brochure, but insist that if there are any mail bids on that item, the "flaw" will be fully discussed with the mail bidder before accepting their bid. That goes for mfg. flaws as well.

All our collections contain damage that we didn't know existed when we purchased the glass. Naturally, it's most disappointing when that is pointed out to us on specific pieces. Swallow hard and get on with it or as I have heard some of my bride's friends say, "Put on your big-girl panties and get over it!" It's going to happen --- be prepared when it does.

If you feel the need, a good idea might be to have an agreed-to, written listing of the condition of each and every piece when it leaves your house to ensure that there was no subsequent damage to the pieces during transit or the preview. But in the end, what does it matter *when* a piece is damaged? Broke is broke, to the buying public.

Do the right thing.

The Brochure

Most auctioneers have passionate feelings about their brochures. And rightly so! In most cases, this is the only document that the carnival glass world gets to see and therefore *represents* the auction company. It is a document requiring much thought and artistic input.

The "Order of Sale" is one of the most important features of an auction. It requires much thought and experience.

Pictures are infinitely important. They drive not only the mail bids, but also in lots of cases, who comes to the auction and who doesn't. Not only the quality of the color, but the size and amount of pictures in the brochure must be determined. I know lots of sellers feel that there should be loads of pictures of their glass in their brochure. I lean the other way --- I feel that if you have too many pictures, by definition (spell that e.x.p.e.n.s.i.v.e.!) they will be smaller and therefore not *decision makers* anyway (can't see enough detail.) (That's why I wanted each piece pictured on the auctioneer's website!)

Larger pictures have **Pop** (talk about an interior designer's word!)

In our case, I told our auctioneer that I wanted him/her to have 'full license' to design the brochure as they saw fit, in all areas! --- the order of sale, how many pictures, what items to picture, verbal descriptions (although I reserved the right of final review and in one or two cases, suggested alternative wording.) I told the auctioneer specifically, "Your experience in this matter is (part of) what I'm paying you for." I didn't mean that in a 'mean way,' just stating the obvious. You selected the auctioneer based on his experience and good judgment - let him use it!

Reserves

Ah! here's a subject to get the juices flowing!

There are two types of reserves; 1) "Hidden Reserves", and 2) 'up front' or 'stated' reserves. I feel strongly about the former.

"Hidden Reserves" come in various forms. They can be as simple as the old 'buddy tactic' of having the seller's buddy bid a piece up to where the seller wants it and then drop out, leaving the final arm-wrestling to the unsuspecting auction crowd. Then there can be verbal agreements between the consignor and the auctioneer not to sell a piece below a certain value.

Knowingly participating in hidden reserve practices is dishonest, immoral and in some cases, may even be illegal to my way of thinking! The word "conspiracy" comes to mind.

I have absolutely no problem with "stated reserves," although I would hate to see them extensively used in our country for carnival glass auctions. I love the thrill of *the idea* that I may just pick up a bargain by spending my \$1000 average travel expenses to attend a major auction. Usually doesn't happen, but I *keep hoping*.

'Stated reserves' can come in at least two forms; 1) "the reserve is X dollars", or 2) "there is a reserve on this item" (in other words the reserve value is not stated until the bidding surpasses it.)

If I knew that there were reserves at an carnival glass auction, I probably would not attend. However, the stated-reserves thing has been extensively used in England and seems to work (more or less) there.

In this country, a 'stated reserve' tactic was used only once to my knowledge, and didn't offend me in any way. Lord knows, assuming the rumor was correct, I'm sure I would have done the same thing if I had paid \$75,000 for a piece of glass!

Like I said, 'stated reserves' don't bother me in the slightest. Just hope it doesn't happen extensively here. And yes, I still **do** believe in the Easter Bunny AND Santa Claus!

Mail Bidding

The use of the "Mail Bidding" process is extensively used in carnival glass auctions in this country. It is a time-honored practice, and no doubt adds to the bottom line for both the auction company and the seller.

I don't have a lot to say about it except that this is where the verbal specifics of the condition and the pictures in the brochures are so vitally important. It is my opinion, that the auctioneer should take it upon himself/herself to have detailed conversations with any potential mail bidders to preclude future dissatisfaction. If an auctioneer feels that this function is 'out of scope,' I feel that he or she should so state that in their proposal/contract, or charge for performing this function.

Because you the consignor I feel, are 'in charge' (or should be!) you have the right to 'block' any mail bidders. If a person or persons wants a piece badly enough, let them pay the expenses to attend the auction and to attend the preview and buy the piece(s) 'in person' like all the rest of us! As I noted, in my case, it costs me between \$800 and \$1000 just to attend an auction, and that's before I even obtain my bid card! If I chose to submit a mail bid, I'm already 'ahead' in having pigeonholed that amount to spend on my mail bids --- depending upon your point of view, an unfair advantage.

If I was to have another auction, I would certainly accept mail bids (again) but I would inform my auctioneer of specific people who I would not accept mail bids from.

Extending Credit

This is a relatively new (to our hobby) phenomenon and certainly a difficult one on which to reach a decision. All I can say is, "It's your auction." There is no doubt that it can have significant impact to 'the bottom line.'

There may be multiple ways to extend credit, but in any case, suffice it to say, that you should have a written, binding agreement with any person(s) that you extend credit to --- including amounts, payment schedules, interest (if any) etc. Work out the specifics of how to formulate and implement the extension of credit before your auction, with your auction company and the individual(s) involved. Like the selection of your auction company, this is purely a matter of personal choice. **YOU** have to make the decision.

Payment From the Auction Company

Quite frankly, this is a subject that I neglected to address when I formulated my RFP, but it is rather important (isn't it?)

All I can say is, address the subject. Be tolerant of the auctioneer's needs. Mail bids can be a difficult area for the auctioneer. They have to worry about getting paid by the mail bidders, whether or not the mail bid will 'stick', making their own auction expense payments, hotel, workers, club, etc.

It goes (almost) without saying, don't ask your auction company to do anything illegal. They (the auction company) know what's legal or not (or they *should* know.)

So now. **DO YOU STILL WANT TO HAVE AN AUCTION???**