

The case of the fading art icon

By Erin Hollenbank & Christian Trabue



The case of the fading art icon

When art “investments” don’t pay off

While some vintage art will appreciate in value, trends for popular artists and art styles in the 1960s and 1970s have not always survived the generational collector shift. As children begin selling their parents once-esteemed art collections in the secondary market for little money, the market reflects those sales, and the values decrease. The work of Charles Fracé is a perfect example. Fracé began selling his prints of adorable or regal animals finished in a photorealistic style in “limited editions” through authorized dealers. Fracé’s print Giant Panda was being sold in 1975 as a “great investment” for \$45 unframed. By August 1, 1979, ads were being placed in newspapers for \$90. Unfortunately, tastes changed, the market became saturated with hundreds, even thousands of prints, and prices fell. Today, Giant Panda is regularly sold on eBay, for as low as \$35, including custom framing that was not provided with the original print. And falling prices are not restricted to prints — paintings and drawings have also become casualties of changing tastes, particularly when there is a surplus that are similar in style.

The situation

Enservio’s Fine Art Experts recently accepted a claim for a signed original painting by Hyacinthe Kuller Baron, depicting a portrait of a young child. Submitted with the claim was an appraisal document that was provided at the time of purchase declaring a value of \$16,500. Hyacinthe Kuller Baron, often known simply as “Hyacinthe,” had her first exhibition in 1962 in Greenwich Village, New York City, where she displayed and sold her large paintings on themes of womanhood and motherhood. This exhibition led to representation in art galleries nationwide, including in high-end markets such as Beverly Hills, Chicago, and Palm Desert. Due in part to the economic boom at the time, a frenzy of collecting for Hyacinthe’s work and other young artists began. Her fame escalated as she painted commissioned portraits for a who’s who of Hollywood celebrities, including Elizabeth Taylor and Marilyn Monroe.

"This is the perfect chance to start a valuable art collection (or add to your present one) for surprisingly little money. These 25 select prints are existing limited editions, not special prints or reissues.

Each print is of the highest quality, and each is signed by the artist... it may turn out to be a good investment, too. Many similar prints have at least doubled in value in as little time as two years. As the collector demand for each edition increases, so can the value."

Advertisement for Framehouse Gallery.
The Louisville Courier Journal,
September 14, 1975

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Insured's painting by Hyacinthe



Market comparable painting by Hyacinthe

Cracking the case

The painting presented to Enservio's Art Specialist to evaluate was a small portrait of a singular young child by Hyacinthe, with a stated and appraised value of \$16,500. The painting was from the artist's 'icon period' of the 1960s and 1970s. During this time in the artist's early career, mothers and children were the focus of her work. These small portraits, which were created by the artist in abundance during this time, are now finding their way back into today's market via estate sales, consignment shops, antique shops, and through eBay. Many of the portrait subjects have small, rounded features, with a tan or neutral palette set against a white ground. Both the style and colors of the paintings speak to that specific era, which has since fallen out of fashion.

The result

In 2021, a plethora of Hyacinthe's smaller portraits of children were sold in the secondary and vintage markets in the range of \$350-\$1,000. The provided appraised retail value of \$16,500 reflected a once overpriced market, which existed before the onset of online shopping venues, bringing with them unlimited market access to fine art and antiques. Generational shifts have not supported the demand for Hyacinthe's work, and paintings which once sold for over \$10,000 at high-end galleries throughout the country are now being offered for \$500. Enservio appraised the subject painting for \$500, reflecting a \$16,000 difference in value.

Erin Hollenbank, a member of the American Society of Appraisers, and Christian Trabue, a member of the Appraisers Association of America, are fine arts appraisers for [Enservio](#).



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