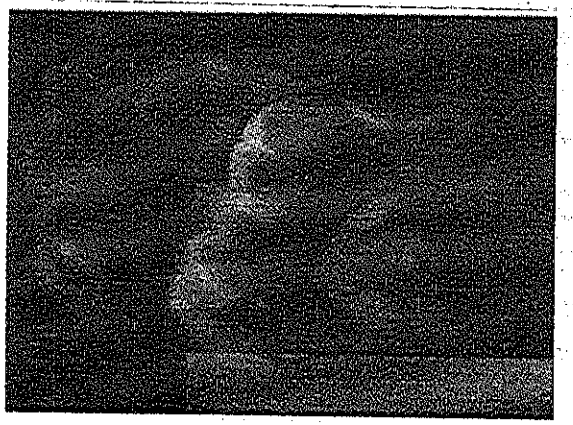
EARLY AFRICAN-AMERICAN MASTER ARTIST

Charles E. Porter Paintings To Be Auctioned

Rockville Artist's Works Recently Identified



By SUSAN DUNNE
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In the early '80s, Rita Rhines was house shopping, and favored a home whose owner had recently died. During the sale, Rhines' mother, Constance Davis, took a liking to seven paintings hanging in the house, a few still lifes and a landscape. At her mother's urging, Rhines bought those too.

THE PAINTING described as still life with peaches on branch is signed by Charles Ethan Porter.

"Mother knew some about artwork and antiques. It was her hobby," Rhines says. "She was just attracted to them."

Thirty years later, Rhines is feeling thankful for her mother's sharp eye. Three of those paintings have been positively identified as the work of master painter Charles Ethan Porter, and a fourth is believed to have been painted by Porter also.

All four are going up for sale on Monday, Sept. 10, at an auction house in Plainville.

Three of the paintings to be auctioned on Monday are signed "C.E. Porter." The fourth is not signed. The paintings, and their expected sale prices are:

"Fruit in basket," 13 3/4" height x 19 3/4" width, framed. Signed. Low $6,000, high $12,000;

"Still life with peaches on branch," 7 1/2" height, 10 1/2" width, in gilt frame

PORTER, G2

Porter

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with label identifying framer as L.B. Warner of Rockville. Signed. Low $4,000, high $8,000;

"Forest landscape," 19 3/4" width, 23 3/4" height, framed. Signed. Low $3,500, high $7,500.

"Floral still life," 23 3/4" height, 19 1/2" width, framed. Not signed, some paint loss. Low $750, high $1,500.

Rhines said that the other three paintings she bought are similar to Porter's style but were determined to probably have been painted by a student of Porter's.

Linda Stamm, president of Winter Associates, the auction house, says the unsigned painting has "C.E.P" scribbled on the back. "We don't know who wrote that there, or when."

Rhines, 68, who did not want her address published, does not remember what she paid for the works.

"They've been here for 30 years in the house, in my family room," Rhines said in a phone interview. "A while back, after my daughter Corinne graduated from the University of Hartford art school, she remarked about the paintings and asked who the artist was.

"Later, when my other daughter, Nadine, visited me, we got to talking about it. She got the name off the painting."

Nadine's boyfriend Googled the name, C.E. Porter, and found information about the artist on the Internet. "I didn't know who he was until then," she said.

Porter (1847-1923), one of the country's foremost African-American painters, was born in Hartford and raised in the Rockville section of Vernon. He studied art in the northeast, and was one of the first black artists to exhibit at the National Academy of Design. He had a studio in Hartford in his early years, and drew the admiration of well-established artists including Frederic Church.

Later, he studied in Paris — Mark Twain wrote him a letter of recommendation — and afterward Porter returned to Hartford and later back to Rockville. He lived at 23 Spruce St. near the top of Fox Hill, and had a studio at the summit of the hill.

In his later years, when his fortunes were down, he sold paintings door-to-door in Vernon, sometimes aided by his friend, Bavarian artist Gustave Hoffman, because many Vernon residents didn't want to buy the work of a black man. At other times, he bartered his work for food or clothes, or offered to do chores for those who didn't want to buy his work.

According to Hildegard Cummings, author of "Charles Ethan Porter: African American Master of Still Life," the catalog to a 2007 exhibit at New Britain Museum of American Art, in those later, lean years, "he was referred to as respectfully as Professor Porter and as disparagingly as Charles the Nigger."

Porter sank into obscurity. After his death, his reputation rebounded. Today he is represented in many museums nationwide, including the Whitney in New York, the Smithsonian in Washington, and in Connecticut at Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Florence Griswold Museum in Old Lyme, Lyman Allyn in New London, Connecticut Historical Society and New Britain Museum of American Art.

Douglas Hyland, director of New Britain Museum of American Art, called Porter "really a pioneer.

"In the 19th century ... very, very few African Americans were admitted to any form of formal artistic training in this country, or went to Paris to receive the instruction he received," Hyland said. "Only two or three other people in the whole country had that kind of early instruction in academic art."

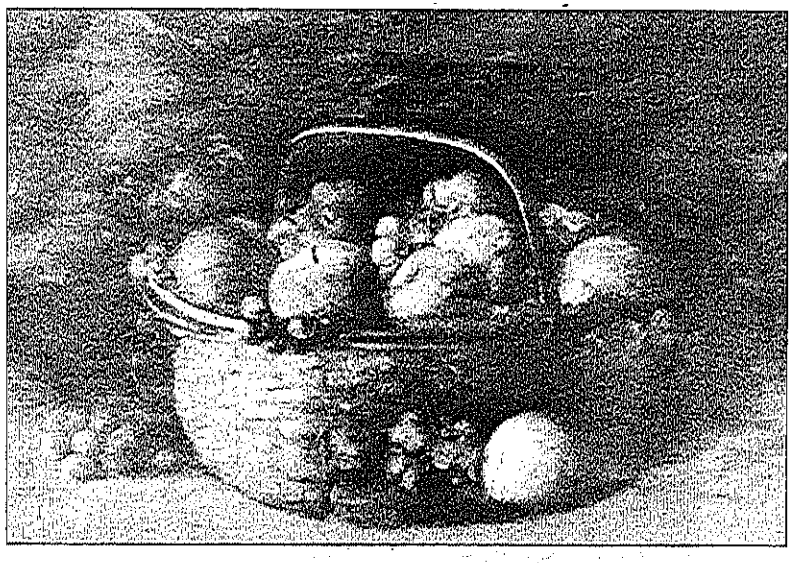
The Plainville lot, Hyland said, is unusual in that it includes a landscape. "That piece does provide a different chapter in his career," he said.

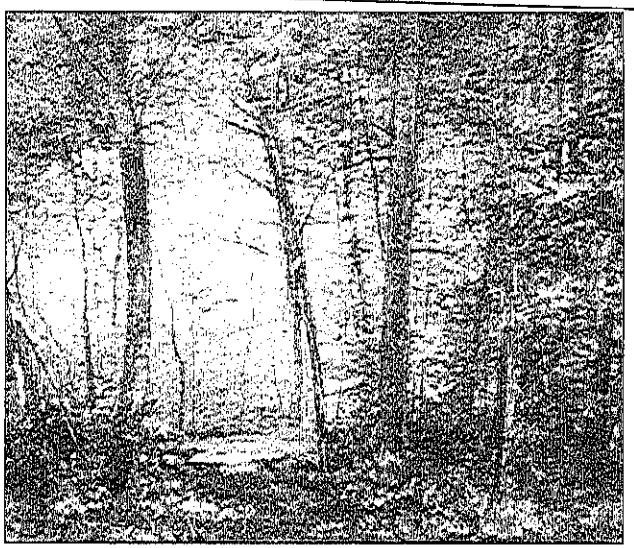
Hyland added that it is not unusual to find a cache of Porters at homes in this area. "When we did our show, eight or 10 people came out of the woodwork, and said 'my grandmother had one' and stories like that," he said. "People from Rockville, from East Hartford."

Stamm hopes that the auction also will bring out Porter owners. She said that in his lifetime, Porter is known to have painted hundreds of paintings.

"Now, there are just over 100 known paintings by him," Stamm said. "Where are the rest of them? Are they hanging in people's houses? Are they in their attics? Have people inherited them and lived with them all these years? People never give any attention to something that's been on grandma's wall for years. Maybe they should."

WORKS BY CHARLES ETHAN PORTER will be auctioned at Winter Associates, 21 Cooke St. in Plainville (behind J. Timothy's restaurant), on Monday, Sept. 10, at 6:30 p.m. Previews of the works for sale will be Sunday, Sept. 9, from 2 to 4 p.m., and Monday, Sept. 10, from 3 to 6:15 p.m. Details: http://www.auctionappraisers.com





"FRUIT in basket" (left) could fetch as much as $12,000 at auction while "Forest landscape" is estimated at between $3,500 and $7,500.

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