AGAIN AND AGAIN

by
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In 1892, the Chicago Society of Artists was just three years old. Founded by the most influential and well known painters and sculptors of the still burgeoning city, the Chicago Society of Artists was the city's most important exhibition venue and channel for patrons to purchase fine art. Wealthy Chicago tycoon Charles Tyson Yerkes wanted the fourth annual exhibition of the Chicago Society of Artists to be the most important in its short history, a fitting precursor to the great art exhibition which would open a year later at the Columbian Exposition. Yerkes offered the Chicago Society of Artists five hundred dollars to be split between first and second prize; in today's terms over seventy thousand dollars. "The culture, refinement and almost the importance of a city is measured by its art," said the *Chicago Tribune*.

In preparation for this important exhibition and a chance at the stupendous prize, the landscape artists searched for their most endearing scenes. Still-life artists concocted their most luscious centerpieces. Figure painters hired the best models, the most beautiful women; or offered attractive prices to the most important men for portraits which would record their stature for all eternity. Each and every artist knew all eyes of Chicago would be upon this fourth annual exhibition, they had to produce their absolute best. The winner of the Yerkes prize would gain instant fame and the prize would insure the artist a lifetime of success, privilege and patronage.

On April 25th, 1892, the highly anticipated *Fourth Annual Exhibition* opened to a packed house at the Chicago Society of Artist's galleries in the old Athenaeum building. It was the event of the year for Chicago's elite. There was great curiosity about who would win the now famous Yerkes prize for the best work of art. In a few days the jury would choose among the works to find that artist who would go down in history as one of Chicago's greatest.

After the gala opening, on the following evening, in the dead of night, disaster struck. The entire exhibition was completely wiped out by fire. A total loss. The paintings were either burned to ashes or smoke damaged beyond recognition.

Twenty years earlier Chicago's motto "I Will," was coined shortly after the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 to symbolize the spirit of a city that could be down but never out. In true local fashion, the trustees of the Chicago Society of Artists met and

strongly supported an idea to follow their fire ruined show with another exhibition the very next month! *I will* was to be the motto of every artist.

And so, on May 30th , the anxiously awaited *Fourth Annual Exhibition* of the Chicago Society of Artists opened..., again. Held in the Stevens Galleries on Adams Street, all of Chicago's elite and enlightened were in attendance..., again. The *Chicago Tribune* proclaimed: "In excellence of quality it is superior to the exhibition of a month ago." The paper continued to account that amazingly the "technical quality of the work was above any former exhibition," despite the limited time the artists had to paint. Sixty-nine artists had contributed one hundred eighteen works including a "great number of superb pictures." The *Daily Inter Ocean* was effusive, "[The Chicago Society of Artists] has effected a marvel. It has done something as great and praiseworthy as anything **ever** placed to Chicago's credit. It has indeed risen from its ashes."

The artists had done their best. With Herculean effort they succeeded in putting forth the most important art exhibition Chicago had ever seen..., again. This time there would be no mistaking the Yerkes prize winning painting, it would be the best of the best. The judges for the prize included Lewis Henry Meakin, the noted art professor from Cincinnati; George Peter Alexander Healy, the nineteenth century's greatest portrait artist, a Chicago resident and Literary Club member and Charles M. Kurtz, second in command of the fine arts exhibition for the World's Columbian Exposition.

On June 4th, 1892, all of the artists gathered for a large dinner in the reception hall of the Art Institute. The decision by the venerable judges was unanimous. To a highly respected Earlville, Illinois man, Oliver Dennett Grover, age thirty-two, was awarded the first Charles T. Yerkes prize of three hundred dollars for his painting *Thy Will Be Done*.

The *Tribune* stated the announcement of the award was met with "tempestuous" applause signifying everyone's wholesale agreement with the selection. Upon receiving the prize the artist gave a brief speech. "I hold the prize in my hand, but I hold another prize in my heart from this night that is a thousand times more valuable." This was followed by several congratulatory speeches and, as the *Tribune* chimed, "jollification, which lasted until a late hour."

The *Daily Inter Ocean* called Grover's *Thy Will Be Done*, the "most imposing" of the exhibition; it was struck with "inspiration." The critic went on to say it was "absolutely simple" in both composition and execution. "There is not a line too much, every single brushstroke has a purpose." The painting was a "tribute" to Mr. Grover's skill.

Grover was greatly appreciative and deserving. He had been one of the influential "Duveneck Boys," named after a group under the leadership of important Cincinnati painter/teacher Frank Duveneck. A decade earlier while in Venice and Florence, Grover was the youngest of a select cadre of painters on the inner circle with America's greatest artist James Abbot McNeill Whistler. For such a young artist, Grover had ably held his own by absorbing the technique and panache of the great master, proving a gifted story teller, a sociable companion and even lending some input to Whistler's noted etchings and lithographs. Upon return from Italy, Grover had married Louise Rolshoven from an important Detroit family of jewelers and together they entered Chicago's fashionable elite. An influential professor at the young Art Institute, he had recently left that post to concentrate on mural work at the upcoming World's fair and his own scenic and decorative art company. A painter with a broad range of skills, his portraits were much in demand and his figurative work was *par excellence.*

Thy Will Be Done was Grover's crowning glory, his most recent and heart rendering painting. Both jury and public were struck by its powerful message. A woman touched by G_d. In full length scale, over six feet in height, Grover had depicted a beautiful, young, expectant mother clad in a high collared black dress of mourning, the crumpled telegram bearing horrible news, the loss of her husband, the father of her soon to be born child. How Grover had shown her face which belayed both the grief of death and the hope of a new life in her womb was masterful. In 1892, there was no television, no radio, no images fast or slow to dull the senses of the modern man or woman, learned or common. Paintings were powerful, full blazing color, life rendering, they struck at every emotion and had an impact which was everlasting.

While Grover basked in the glow of his fabulous prize, the national jury was in Chicago was making preparations for the World's Columbian Exposition which would house the largest art exhibit the country had ever seen. Every major country of the world sent its best art for exhibition in the magnificently large Fine Arts Palace. (You can visit that same palace today for it houses the Museum of Science and Industry). Contemporary artists of the day from across the United States submitted their works to the stringent jury who decided which artists were to be among the honored few.

"Few Western Paintings Taken," blared the *Tribune*. "But Few Are Chosen," was the headline the next day. Chicago and its brethren, St. Louis, Cincinnati, Indianapolis

and Cleveland were no match for the fine art which hailed from the cultural centers of the country: Boston; Philadelphia and New York. Of the 982 paintings submitted by Midwestern artists, only 73 were selected for admittance to the World's Columbian Exposition Fine Arts Palace.

Amidst all this competition, against the Whistlers, the John Singer Sargents, the Winslow Homers, and the Mary Cassatts, *Thy Will Be Done* earned its honored place in this fantastic showing of art. Number 446 in the exhibition, Grover's painting took its place among the best our country had to offer.

We turn now to a Mr. Robert Lansing Mott, great-grandson of the first settler in Champion, New York. Champion lies just east of Lake Ontario at the foot of the Adirondack Mountains. Mr. Mott lived in the family's Georgian limestone mansion and had a bend for culture. Having been raised and educated in England and recently returned from European travel, the great exposition in Chicago was a cultural draw he could not resist.

Upon arrival he headed for the Fine Arts Palace. There he came across Grover's heart rendering painting. Mr. Mott later recounted: "When I visited the World's Fair in Chicago in 1893, I was sitting one day in the picture gallery, studying a painting hanging high on the wall. I could not read the title from the place where I was sitting, but two ladies passed behind me, one of them holding an open catalogue from which she read aloud the title, 'Thy Will Be Done.' Then I understood. The painting pictures a young woman holding a telegram in her hand, the envelope from which it was taken lying on the floor at her feet. Her eyes are upturned, and we learn from the title that she is repeating a portion of The Lord's Prayer, 'thy will be done.' "I tried to obtain a copy of the painting but the artist, Oliver Dennett Grover of Chicago, wrote that there was no copy but he should be glad to sell me the original. I bought it and it now hangs on the wall of my room in the country."

In the depression and panic of 1893, such a sale was crucial for the artist. The work was priced at $1,000. If the country's economic circumstances hadn't been so terribly depressed, Grover would never have sold his most important work. Rather, he would have exhibited it throughout the country for at least a decade garnering publicity from showing the painting again and again. But off his prize piece went, to this little postage stamp of a town, population 2,000, in upstate New York, far, far from its home and a long distance from any cultural center.

And there it remained, year after year. Again and again Mr. Moss' guests would remark on the power of his acquisition. Moss would regale his guests, again and again, in the story of how he absolutely had to have the painting and purchased the work directly from the Chicago artist.

As Mr. Moss grew older, however, the country's sensibilities changed. The roaring twenties had come and gone, with the advent of war the depression was finally over, the phonograph, telephone and automobile were everywhere and this fine painting had, through no fault of its own, lost its power, its magnificence. People now yearned for the modern, America was bursting with a new vision. In Mr. Moss' mansion, the *Thy Will Be Done* had become passé.

In 1961, poor Mr. Moss took a fall in his home which ended his long life at age 92. Having never married, he left the mansion and all its furnishings to his third cousin Mrs. Dorothy Rogers, except the painting, his most prized possession. He willed Grover's masterpiece to the local Trinity Episcopal church. The rector of the church, a man more of post war than turn of the century tastes, didn't really want the painting. Besides, there was no place appropriate to hang it in the small church. He suggested Mrs. Rogers keep it with the house.

Mrs. Rogers was none to pleased to own such an outdated piece of decoration. "Be rid of that thing by the time I return from Europe," she told the housekeeper, "otherwise I'll destroy it when I return." Careful to pay heed to her new employer, the housekeeper sought out a local hair stylist in nearby West Carthage who had a penchant for the extraordinary, however out of style it might be. Kenneth Rawsom purchased the work for next to nothing and moved it into his own fine and stately home.

And there *Thy Will Be Done* remained, in a far off upstate New York home, far from any cultural center again. The country changed while the painting remained true, its message still clear, its execution still masterly but its content lost with modern times. And so passed the Korean War, the Cuban missile crisis, the tragic loss of a president, his brother and a great civil rights leader. The Vietnam conflict turned to war and the war turned to protests and the country unsettled. Saigon turned to Watergate and we lost another president through means which were ever tragic but much less overt. Inflation raged and Wall Street puttered in the mire of a declining dollar and eroding world dominance. A new president promised prosperity through tax cuts and jump started the economy through twelve Republican years and renewed vigor and industrial supremacy. And all the while, the young woman touched by G_d in the long deceased Grover's *Thy Will Be Done* waited, and waited and waited, for another owner to age, for another fate to be counted.

On the centenary of the Columbian Exposition, in 1993, the Smithsonian in Washington, thought it only fitting to locate all the works from the Fine Arts Palace and display them in a large exhibition..., again. Backed by the unlimited resources of the federal government, the country's best scholars went about the task of locating every one of those incredible paintings which had had their day in Chicago. Most

were found in important private collections or in museums across the land. Some were found right here in Chicago at the Art Institute or Union League Club. But try as they might, the best and brightest scholars could not locate the woman who was touched by G_d. While all the other great paintings had thousands and thousands of visitors at hundreds of locations through the years, practically no one had seen the beauty of *Thy Will Be Done* for a hundred years. In the large and profusely illustrated book published to coincide this one hundred year revival the Smithsonian could locate only an artist's etching from an 1893 publication which though meaningfully rendered, could only crudely illustrate the power of Grover's masterpiece. The great exhibition came and went..., again.

The Summer of 1998, having just become the proud yet ever tired parents of two bouncing baby twin boys, my wife and I decided it would be a nice vacation to travel to Connecticut in July and witness in person a painting we had lent to the Griswold Museum. We boarded our plane headed for Hartford, stopped at various sights and slept in quaint inns along our way to the museum in Old Lyme. Next we headed for New London to board the ferry to Long Island. The return ferry some two days later took us to Bridgeport, Connecticut and with some extra time on our hands and two well behaved boys, we bounded for Branford, a short drive up the sound from New Haven.

Branford housed the Blackstone Memorial Library. Timothy Blackstone, born in 1829 and deceased in 1900, was a wealthy railroad man who hailed from Branford. He made his fortune in Chicago as President of the Chicago and Alton Railroad. As a fitting gift for his home town of Branford, he hired Chicago architect, Solon Beman and funded the building of the finest library in New England outside of Boston. Construction began in 1895.

The three story rotunda needed interior decoration. Blackstone chose none other than our famous Chicago painter Oliver Dennett Grover. Just three years earlier, Grover had completed a series of murals at the World's Columbian Exposition to much acclaim. Grover, you may remember, also had a prosperous interior decoration firm. (Blackstone's widow would later hire Grover for the Timothy B. Blackstone Memorial Library, now part of the Chicago Public Library system, located on 49th street.)

My wife Patty and I stood stunned at the center of the rotunda, craning our necks to see the glorious murals executed by Oliver Dennett Grover over one hundred years ago. We both loved his work and owned three small landscape paintings by the artist, but never imagined such a rendering on this grand of a scale. We sought out the director of the library to tell her about my forthcoming book on the history of Illinois artists and to seek any biographical information she might have had on Grover.

The director greeted us cheerfully in her office downstairs. She pulled out a file on Grover which included mostly clippings from the opening of the library in 1895 and a few pieces of commentary about its splendor in later years. We were grateful for such information, chatted a while longer and bid her farewell with mutual promises to keep each other informed should anything else about Grover turn up.

Two months later, I received a short letter from her telling me I might be interested in the stapled attachment. Knapp Family Auctions announced it would be selling the contents of a West Carthage, New York home which would include, among a very long list of antiques and bric-a-brac, one painting by Oliver Dennett Grover, *Thy Will Be Done*. I nearly jumped out of my chair. "Patty, Patty," I exclaimed, "You won't believe this!"

Anna Knapp had done a little research on Grover and found listed in one of the standard Who's Who texts that he had executed murals for the library in Branford. Thinking the library might enjoy having another of Grover's paintings Anna Knapp had sent notice to the library director in Branford who had then thought of me and forwarded it along. Libraries aren't in the habit of purchasing paintings these days, you see, it's no longer their mission to educate the masses through works of art which for years have so easily been obtained in books resplendent with color printing.

The Knapp family is a hard working lot. During the day, two brothers and Anna Knapp, all hold regular jobs, but on the weekends, they run auctions to disperse local estates. When I contacted Anna Knapp that evening, she said they hadn't had such a sizable auction for some years and by the way, wasn't that painting just really "neat." Feigning ignorance not wanting to tip my excitement, "can you give me a little history on it?" I said. She proceeded to recount a somewhat incomplete story of how the painting had arrived in West Carthage. And as she told me how she had sent letters to every museum she could think of, as a collector, my heart sank. Little did I know however, up in West Carthage, she couldn't really think of too many museums and those she could come up with were more interested in Monet than Grover. I asked her if she could send out a photograph of the painting and she thought she could scrounge around and maybe find one. To my benefit, this was Knapp Family Auctions, not Sotheby's or Christies!

She also put me in touch with Donna Hansen, editor, owner and probably sole employee of the *Carthage Republican Tribune*. Hansen told me how the painting was exhibited at the Chicago World's fair in 1893 and how it had won the Yerkes prize there. (Well, "not quite," I thought, as you'll remember it had won the prestigious Yerkes prize at the Chicago Society of Artists annual exhibition the year earlier). She thought the painting and its pending sale made great local news and had written a

feature article accompanied by a photograph of Tom and Anna Knapp pictured aside the life sized painting.

On Monday before the Saturday auction, the much anticipated envelope from Knapp Family Auctions arrived bearing what I expected to be a photograph of the magnificent painting which I now so thoroughly coveted. With great anticipation I opened the envelope. To think, a once in a life time opportunity to bring this important work of art back to Chicago..., again. And there it was, a folded up Xerox photocopy of Anna and Tom Knapp standing next to the painting in full.... black and white. I probably don't need to tell you that black and white photography doesn't do much for a painting which *should* be revealing all its intricacies in color. Undaunted, I tried to reach one of the Knapps over the course of the next several days.

In the meantime, into the newspapers of April and May 1892 I delved for criticism of this prize winning painting. As I read the accolades by notably impressed reviewers of the day, my sense of desire was markedly heightened. This painting **had** to come back to Chicago.

I succeeded in contacting Tom Knapp. "You know," I said in my best slow pitched slightly drawled accent learned in my native Rockford, Illinois, "I could really do with a color picture of that painting. How 'bout, if you don't mind Mr. Knapp, you take a run over to the local drug store and buy one of those disposable cameras with a flash. Then you could go over to the house there in West Carthage and shoot a whole bunch of pictures from different angles. Then all you'd have to do is send along the camera in an express mail envelope and I can develop the film right here. That said, he kind of shook his head and said over the telephone, "Yeah, I could do that, probably run over to the store tonight and shoot those pictures right away."

Thursday morning I stopped off at the P. O. Box on the way to visit my friendly dentist, picked up the camera he had sent and dropped it in the outdoor box of Wolff Camera on Golf Road. Well drilled and sore, I hurried out of the dentist's office and sped over to Wolff where I tore open the envelope to reveal fourteen full color amateur photographs of *Thy Will Be Done.*

I was struck by the beauty of the young woman, torn by the perplexity of her sorrow and joy and yet, I needed reassurance that this was, indeed, a masterpiece. Paintings like these are difficult to read. Immediately I drove to Chicago's most knowledgeable art dealer. I entered the Nickerson Mansion where he houses his gallery and found him sitting in the dining room with an associate. Plop went the photographs in front of him as I dropped them. "You've got to help me, I need a *read* on this painting." He took one look, pondered a moment, and exclaimed, "Ohhhh! it's magnificent!" He went on to recount the masterful technique, the heightened and sensitive composition,

the Whistlerian elements so successfully deployed. He said, "You've got a real winner here."

Off I raced to my conservator who had been trained at the Louvre in Paris. He had worked on many masterpieces and had an eye for the magnificent. "What do you think?" I breathlessly asked him. "This...," he hesitated, "is a *wonderful* painting." We discussed its possible condition from the several photographs as best we could tell without actually examining the painting in person. I knew there were two small tears in the lower part of the canvas, but such repair would be of a very minor nature. More importantly, we wanted to determine if the oil paints and glazes of the painting were in tact. "Where is the painting now?" he asked. Sadly I replied, "in New York." "Are you going to be able to see it in person?" he asked. "No," I said. "It's coming up to auction on Saturday and Sunday is Rosh Hashanah, I couldn't possibly do it." "I'm going to have to buy it without physically seeing it, if I can get it at all. I don't know what the competition is going to be like for the painting." "Well," he said, "it looks to be in pretty good shape, don't worry too much about it."

That evening I sat at my desk pondering the photographs, allowing the painting to sweep my emotions into its spiritual portrayal, again, and again. This was the most deeply emotional paintings I had ever seen.

Friday evening I had no luck reaching any of the Knapps. I left a message with instructions on how to contact me on Saturday as I would definitely be interested in bidding on the painting over the telephone. I had earlier suggested this as a method of participating in the auction and while they hadn't had such experience, they thought they could "arrange something." Later that evening, I returned to find a message from Tom Knapp. They had received my message and I could call them the day of the auction around noon at the following number or they would somehow contact me. At noon, the auction would be stopped and they would bring up the painting to be sold. Normally auctions just number their lots and start the sale at a given time. However, in this instance, they were going to auction the painting at noon, that was the proscribed time. Everyone would be anticipating its sale.

And so it was 10:55 a.m. central standard time and I duly called the number in the 315 upstate New York area. Ring, ring, ring, ring, "You're party is not answering, please hang up and try your call again." Ring, ring, ring, ring. "No use," I thought, "nobody is answering, now what do I do?" At 11:00 a.m. central standard time, I received a phone call in my home office. "This is the AT&T operator, will you accept a collect call?" "Yes, yes," I said in an exasperated tone. "Hello Joel," the voice said. "Yes," I said. "It's Anna Knapp, we tried to reach you earlier but your phone was busy so we had to have the operator call." "Oh hi Anna, thanks for doing that, how's the auction going?" "Well," she said, "its the biggest thing that's happened around here for years.

We have over five hundred people in the audience and all the local papers. Everyone is here." "And how's the weather," I clumsily intoned. "A beauuuutiful day," she said and continued, "the painting is about to come up, are you ready?" "Sure," I said.

"O. K., they're bringing up the painting." "Well, I'll just kind of wait until the bidding settles down," I said, "and wait till then to start bidding. How's that sound to you Anna, will that work?" [pause]. Silence. Hello? Hello?, woe, the phone was dead. Now what do I do?

A minute seemed like a century, "AT&T operator calling collect will you accept the call." "Yes, yes," I said in an exasperated tone..., again. It was Anna..., again. "We seem to have lost you there, Joel, we're on a cellular phone outside and just lost the connection. O. K., here we go, can you hear the auctioneer in the background?" "A painting by Oliver Dennett Grover exhibited at the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893 in Chicago. I'll start the bidding off at $10,000 for this masterpiece, do I hear ten thousand? Ten thousand? O.K. how about $7,000, seven thousand dollars for this magnificent piece. No? How about five, do I hear five thousand?"

My heart was racing. "Could this be? Could this painting really sell at such a low price?" "All right who wants to start the bidding off at one thousand?" "Bid Anna, I'll give a thousand." "I have a thousand on the phone, do I hear fifteen hundred, fifteen hundred, I have fifteen hundred in the back, do I hear two thousand, two thousand." "Bid Anna." "Two thousand on the phone do I have twenty-five hundred, twenty five hundred I have."

At this point I'm thinking I had better just show my cards right away and match every bid with an immediate bid. That way, whoever is bidding against me will know the person on the phone is serious about buying the painting.

"Do I hear three thousand?" "Bid Anna." "Three thousand on the phone, do I hear thirty-five hundred, thirty-five hundred I have." "There's four thousand from a new bidder, do I hear forty-five hundred?" "Bid Anna." "Forty-five hundred, I have on the phone, forty-five hundred, do I hear five thousand, do I hear five thousand, who will bid five thousand for this great work of art?" Anna chimed in, "It's still yours Joel, at forty-five hundred." "Who's bidding against me?" I asked, "Is it someone in the audience." [pause] Silence. "Hello?" "HELLO!" Dead..., the phone was DEAD!.., again! "O.K.," I thought, "calm down, the last bid was yours, as far as you know the painting is yours." Ring. "Hello!" "AT&T operator calling will you accept a collect call," "YES," I yelped..., again. "Whew Joel, I don't know what happened there but we have another cell phone we're trying and the auction is waiting until we reconnect you, in the meantime, someone has bid 5,000 dollars."

"I've got the bidder back on the phone," Anna yelled up to the auctioneer. "I have five thousand, five thousand who'll bid fifty-five hundred," "Bid Anna." "Fifty-five hundred on the phone do I hear six thousand, six thousand, do I hear six thousand? Six thousand I have. Sixty-five hundred." "Bid!" "Sixty-five hundred I have, how about seven thousand where is seven thousand, seven thousand in the back, seventy-five hundred?" "Bid!" "Seventy-five hundred from the phone bidder do I hear eight thousand, eight thousand, eight thousand. We're gonna sell this painting, do I hear eight thousand, eight thousand I have, do I hear eighty-five hundred?" "Bid, Anna, I said again." "Eighty-five hundred on the phone eighty-five hundred do I hear nine thousand, nine thousand." "Who'll bid nine thousand for this masterpiece?" "Who'll bid nine thousand."

My heart was pounding..., again. "Come on, slam the hammer down already," I thought. "Eighty-five hundred once! Eighty-five hundred twice! Fair warning! Sold! To the phone bidder for eighty-five hundred."

"Do you hear the applause in the background?" Anna asked. I did, I did. The painting was ours for the spectacular bargain of eighty-five hundred dollars. "Now people are going to ask, Joel, is it all right if I tell them who bought the painting." "Yes." I said. "Tell them the Illinois Historical Art Project bought the painting and it's coming back home to Chicago..., again!"

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