

Bonham's Rare Sage Ball (again)

Battle cries were heard from across the U.S. to England (and Japan) and back

A war dispatch from the front, by Ralph Finch

If you daily meander through the auctions listed on the internet, you may find a needle in a haystack. Sometimes, twice. Now, try to follow this.

In London, last June 23, 2020:

At London's Bonham's auction house on Montpelier Street, came *TWO* target balls. One was a nice but uncommon yellow amber Bogardus. And the other? A very, very rare Sage ball in a very dark amber.

The estimates were high, yet I would have jumped at it years ago. Bonham's valued the two at £1,500-£2,000 (\$2,124-\$3,398) with an opening bid of £1,500. The pair sold for way over what the Finches were able to muster. Sigh.

Yet months later, I found this auction of "Fine Glass, Paperweights and British Ceramics" closing Dec. 1, 2021, by Bonham's (edited): "A very rare American glass target ball by E E Sage & Co and an A H Bogardus ball, dated 1877. Of moulded globular bottle shape with short narrow necks, the first in deep amber or brown inscribed all-over E.E. SAGE & CO PAT APLYD/ GLASS M'F'R'S CHICAGO ILL, read from bottom to top, the other in golden amber ... the central band inscribed BOGARDUS' GLASS BALL PAT'D APR 10 1877."

But, wait! Weren't these already auctioned, a few months before, and the

Finches bid on them and missed them by an English mile (or an English kilometre)?

The Dec. 1 description continued with this target ball background: "Whilst the sport never fully took off in Britain, it became very popular in the United States, driven most notably by Capt. A.H. Bogardus, who patented his first ball and trap on 10 April 1877. Edwin E. Sage subsequently patented a 'superior' advertising target ball on August 21, 1877, but a successful trademark infringement case filed by Bogardus combined with failing health caused him to close his business and he left Chicago by late 1878."

"Sage target balls are incredibly rare, with only six or so recorded prior to the discovery of the present example, so this represents a remarkable survival."

Now, as a once very serious collector, I must emphasize how rare and how unusual the Sage is. After I had assembled the most complete collection of target balls ever known, featuring 250 different examples (and I admit, a few were only color variations), I retired knowing that there were only a few balls that had escaped my greedy grasp. I admitted that one was the Sage ball — actually, four of maybe five different Sage balls. And once, on eBay, maybe 20-plus years ago, a Sage was offered, but too rich for me, since only about half of the broken ball was



What's in it? A dog house? A very large demijohn? How about ... another box, and in that, two target balls weighing about four ounces total. What a great job of shipping, but for \$500, it should be.

there, and I would hold out for a complete ball. That opportunity came along. Several times.

A little background. In the 2006-2007 auctions of Alex Kerr's collection, a Sage sold for \$6,100, and years later was resold in the Frobouck auction for \$4,600. (I believe I was the winning bidder.) And my example was sold in John Pastor's American Glass Gallery's auction, lot No. 770 in Part 5, for \$14,950.

The "problem" with the Sage, or the frustration, is that not only is it super rare, it comes in perhaps five different and equally rare molds, but in several colors!

I can imagine Edwin Sage, as he placed his order with the glass firm, saying: "145 years from now, this is going to blow some collector's mind!" Well, it did mine.

On Dec. 1, Bonham's Lot 167 was estimated at £3,000-£5,000, with an opening bid of £3,000. It sold for lots more, tons more, plus a hefty buyer's premium. Still, less than my \$14,950 example. And it was added to the Finch Funhouse.

And on December 16, I sent a note to a friend about how my day had been going:

"A VERY GOOD DAY. About an hour ago the doorbell rang. There was a VERY LARGE box sitting on the porch, and in it, a smaller box. And in it, four ounces, maybe five, of glass. Two rare target balls from England arrived and they are U.S.-made balls.

"It cost about \$500 to ship them from England and back to the States, where I believe they began." (And, part of the impressive shipping cost included a \$43 Import Fee.)

FYI1: Rare? Yes, except this is the second time that Bonham's has offered this duo. A year ago the two were offered by Bonham's and sold for an extensive amount of money. And here they are again? (And, later, perhaps they will again appear in one of John Pastor's 2022 glass auctions.)

We were exchanging emails with a Bonham expert, and he admitted that the lot had indeed been won by someone, in Asia, but the high bidder then decided he didn't want it shipped to Asia. So ... here they were again.

We had bid on the pair and despite the auction catalog saying that it would accept credit cards and most any money, they would *NOT* accept *OUR* credit cards, since we had not purchased from them before (which was incorrect, but our previous bid was years before).

Bonham's suggested a bank draft wired to London, but if you have ever done this, *IT IS A HASSLE!*

So Janet wrote to Bonham's glass and British ceramics expert, Dr. Jim Peake, "to please accept our bids, and our credit card, and please take our money!"

Jim, after many emails exchanged, became another of Janet's "pen pals" and said they would be happy take our money, and if we needed to exceed the firm's usual credit card limit of £5,000 to just contact him. So we did bid, in December, and we did win.



These two rare balls were sold last December by Bonham's of London.

FYI2: What also is of interest to me is the amber Bogardus. At first glance, it appears to be a rather common ball, but in my extensive 250 different target ball collection, and despite having seen many thousands of Bogardus balls, the variant shown was only the second Bogardus I've seen with such a tall neck. (The other was in my collection, Lot 555, which sold for \$1,610.)

FYI3: Buying in Europe can be a challenge. Once before (it wasn't Bonham's) we had to wire funds to a London bank. Our local bank teller hadn't done it before and had to research how to do it. Then she couldn't find English "pounds" (look up "Sterling," Janet said). Then she couldn't find "England!" ("Look up Great Britain," Janet said.) We wired the funds, but in the two weeks since we had made the purchase the value of English money had shifted and our amount did not match the original bill, so the auction house wanted another wired fee of about \$12 (with another bank charge). We told that auction house to forget it, and cancel the purchase! They then "kindly" accepted the \$12 charge on our credit card.

Back to the Sage. Much to my surprise, Bonham's had done its homework, describing the lots well and added: "Dur-

ing their short time E E Sage & Co. produced balls in both blue and amber glass with moulding in three variants. Their target balls are incredibly rare, with only six or so recorded prior to the discovery of the present example, so this represents a remarkable survival."

This Sage example has embossing the reverse of the one in my collection. Also, the amber Bogardus was similar to one in my auction, where I said that of all the thousands of Bogardus balls, I had never seen one with such a tall neck. And, now there are two. (Come visit and see them here in Michigan.)

The bottom line is that these two rare balls are back in the U.S., and may perhaps be offered in a future American Glass Gallery auction.

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