WAS GRANT'S INKWELL THE INSPIRATION FOR THE G. O. P. ELEPHANT?
For Americana collectors, January is the big month in New York City. Collectors from all over the country converge on New York to check out the galleries, the Winter Antique Show (held at the 7th Regiment Armory on Park Avenue, where U. S. Grant was a frequent visitor), and take in the auctions. The two largest auction houses in New York, Sotheby’s and Christie’s, always try to gather their finest material for the January auctions, and this year was no exception.

As a curator at The Newark Museum, I usually follow the auctions. If I’m very lucky, I get to buy something for my institution, but even if I can’t, it’s always a good idea to follow the market and see what happens. Records are often broken at the January sales. But this year held particular interest for me, because Sotheby’s auctioned off a sizable collection of material that had belonged to my great-great grandfather, Ulysses S. Grant, consigned by Ulysses S. Grant V, great-grandson of Julia and Ulysses S. Grant. Descended from the Grant’s youngest son, Jesse, this branch of the family settled in San Diego late in the 19th century.

I had a quick lunch at Sotheby’s not-quite-finished new office tower on York Avenue in Manhattan on January 18. I had not had a chance to see the preview exhibition for the Grant collection, but had voraciously studied the catalogue. I had followed the pending sale for over a year, as it was negotiated with Sotheby’s Selby Kiffer.

The Grant material in the Sotheby’s sale was in lots 125-199, with an additional eight lots being added in at the last minute—these last came from a descendant in my branch of the family. The sale was to have begun with a large lot of books, perhaps the only intact collection from General Grant’s library left in private hands, lots 125-160. Some of these were remarkable more for their association with the general, and some were fascinating in themselves. My personal favorite was Cadet Grant’s own copy of The Federalist from 1826. Not only is this a seminal political work in American history, but it is also autographed "Ulysses H. Grant," when my famed namesake was just a student, and had not yet adopted his more famous (if incorrect) middle initial. The other great treasure in the collection was a rare volume of Civil War photographs by Alexander Gardner, published in
1865-66. Such photographs are very much in demand today, and this is an especially famous collection. Knowing that it was Ulysses S. Grant’s personal copy made it a remarkable thing.

Another special piece of this library was Owen Wister’s noted 1900 biography of General Grant. It is not a particularly rare book on its own, but this was the copy that Julia Grant owned and in which she made over 1200 words of notations in the margins. In her margin notes she expresses her own strong opinions about things, in her distinctive handwriting. Other than her memoirs, not much attention has been paid to Julia, perhaps the General’s single most passionate supporter. This book would provide wonderful insight to the great man’s best friend and defender.

However, the first great mystery of the sale was that the entire library collection was withdrawn before the start of the sale. According to Keya Mazhari, a dealer in presidential memorabilia, an individual had stepped up before the sale and made an offer for the entire group of books far in excess of the high estimates given in the catalogue. Both for the family’s advantage, and to keep the collection intact, the books were sold privately. Rumor had it—and while there were some positive assertions of this, I still see it as rumor—that the Forbes family of publishing fame had purchased the collection. However, when I contacted a Forbes family member whom I know, I was told that this was not true. Even more curiously, the entire collection turned up being mentioned in an article in the Berkshire Eagle, Monday, February 5, 2001, and is now in the possession of a rare book dealer named Randy Weinstein, who reported that they were on loan to him for research from a private collector. Perhaps someday we’ll know the true answer to this mystery—but I am just glad that the books were not broken up, and will remain a resource for historians and collectors. I’d love to have the books end up in the Forbes collection, because it is an important, serious collection, and accessible to scholars.

The rest of the Grant memorabilia was a mixed bag of things, much of it very interesting. There was not a great deal in this group of objects that was, from a purely curatorial viewpoint, of great aesthetic importance. Lots of things I wouldn’t have minded owning (and in fact I bid on a carved Chinese nautilus shell, but gave up before it was over)—but it was the Grant provenance that gave these things their special edge. My favorite lots in this were those including the famous rose medallion Chinese export porcelain dinnerwares, ordered by General and Mrs. Grant in 1868. This service, decorated in elaborate green and pink enamel with lots of gilding, has the General’s monogram at the center, surrounded by a hero’s wreath of laurel. Examples of the Grant service are in several museum collections, including the Peabody Essex Museum, the Winterthur Museum, the
Everson Museum, and my own Newark Museum. Rose medallion porcelain is widely collected today, but the Grant pieces sold very strongly, no doubt because of the monogram and provenance. One successful bidder was political memorabilia dealer Rex Stark of Gardner, Massachusetts. He bought a wonderful covered hot water dish for his own collection for $12,000, on an estimate of $5000-$7000. This form is rare in Chinese export, and with the Grant monogram it is all but unique.

Several of the lots in the sale underwent a strange re-selling process that I have only rarely witnessed at a large auction house, and never so frequently as during this sale. The most notable of these was the Victorian inkwell shaped like an elephant. In itself not a particularly wonderful object, the inkwell, used in the White House by President Grant, was suggested to have been the source for the Republican Party symbol of the elephant. It is hard to know how far to credit this, although it is both plausible and compelling. Estimated to bring between 25 and 35 thousand dollars, the first time the elephant inkwell came up (lot 166), it did not make it past $22,000, and was bought in. A short time later, however, it was brought back up, and sold for $26,000 (with the auction house’s premium). Interestingly, the highly touted leather and silver mounted Tiffany & Co. whiskey flask failed to sell. Estimated at 40 to 60 thousand dollars, the flask never got past $37,500 before buying in. Without the Grant provenance, this is the sort of piece that would be worth less than $2000, so clearly Sotheby’s and the family were hoping for history to win out. Perhaps the association with Grant’s supposed drinking habits did not appeal to collectors, who are disinclined to feel warmly toward this persistent negative myth. Most prominent Victorians, unless they were teetotalers, carried spirit flasks, and these were common accessories for men and women in the late 19th century. I also can’t say that the flask didn’t sell privately after the sale, as sometimes happens.

The General’s love of cigars has never been questioned, and his (sadly, rather plain) oak humidor brought $16,800 with premium on a $14,000 hammer price. If I’d had the money, I’d have bought it for my brother, who is a cigar buff himself. Some of the decorative arts did not do very well in the sale, either because they weren’t interesting enough in themselves, or because their provenance with Ulysses and Julia was not airtight enough. Oddly enough, an unusual, but not terribly rare, painted iron parlor safe that would have belonged to Julia, sold far above its $1500-2500 estimate for $13,500 (including the premium) to a West Coast dealer. The several lots of American Indian material, which I would have thought would sell well, did not sell. Especially surprising was a beautiful Plains peace pipe, said to have been smoked in the White House. In another strange resell situation, it seemed to have been hammered down for $19,000, and then was brought up again a few minutes later and was bought in at $16,000.
Smaller, decorative objects that (presumably) could easily be displayed in someone’s house, did sell very well, often above estimate. The wonderful carved Chinese nautilus shell from the 19th century, which the Grants acquired on their post-presidential world tour, was estimated at $600-$800, but brought $1200. No one, sadly, was interested in a group of fake Egyptian tourist souvenirs from the same world trip. Even devout collectors want their memorabilia to be real, I guess.

The final lot of the U. S. Grant V material, a wonderful group of ephemera from various events attended by the Grants, along with some memorial pieces, was estimated between ten and fifteen thousand dollars. It sold, a costly bargain, at $9500 (plus the premium of 15%). Whoever was lucky enough to get it has a wonderful window into the Grant’s social life, and through it the lives of their contemporaries in the Gilded Age. The sale netted $184,150 for the consignors, (not counting the books) which probably eased the sting of letting go of so much of one’s family history.

As an odd finale to this fascinating sale, the group of objects, numbered 199A-199H, consigned by a descendant of Frederick Grant, made a very poor showing. A carved maple walking stick that belonged to the General sold for about its 1000-1500 estimate at $5000 (plus premium). Also, a presentation sword given to Jesse Grant at the time of his presentation to Queen Victoria sold in the middle of its $1500-$2500 estimate for $1800 (plus 15%). None of the other lots sold. Among these was a sofa said to have been used in the White House, but catalogued entirely inaccurately as ebonized and 1870, when it was mahogany and possibly 1830. It had a very high estimate ($8000-$12,000 for a piece that would normally bring less that $5000) and stirred no interest. It struck me as just the sort of thing that would have been in the White House, especially in the days when the furnishings flowed in and out of the President’s Residence with a lot less public attention than in more recent years (or recent months, for that matter).

It is never entirely a happy thing to see an historic family collection sold at auction. On the other hand, it is probably a good thing to have a sale like this, where objects are documented for future collectors and scholars. Auctions have become major centers for the documentation of objects in the two decades I’ve been a curator, and the documentation of Ulysses S. Grant V’s collection of his great-grandfather’s memorabilia is no exception.

If the whereabouts of the library turns up, I’ll keep you all posted. In the meantime, I plan to keep studying the auction catalogues.
The recent auction of Ulysses S. Grant material at Sotheby’s has many people speculating that President Grant’s elephant-shaped inkwell, which was included in the collection, may have been the inspiration for the well-known Republican Party symbol. The elephant first emerged as an icon of the Republican Party in a cartoon by Thomas Nast, which was published in the November 7, 1874 issue of Harper’s Weekly. (See cover.) Nast, an influential political cartoonist and caricaturist who was frequently a guest in the White House during Grant’s presidency, may have seen the inkwell and associated it with the President and his political party.

Nast’s cartoon that launched the elephant symbol arose from two incidents: cries of Caesarism and a hoax perpetrated by The New York Herald. Rumors that Grant was seeking a third term in 1876 led to charges of Caesarism, a threat which the Democrats employed in order to scare Republican voters away from the party in Congressional elections. Nast combined this situation with a whimsical story in The Herald that wild animals had escaped from the Central Park Zoo and were roaming New York City in search of prey. In the cartoon Nast used a donkey disguised in a lion’s skin to scare the other animals, one of which was an elephant labeled “The Republican Vote.”

Nast may have chosen the elephant because it was believed that elephants were intelligent, loyal, and noble, but unmanageable when frightened. After the election Harper’s Weekly published a Nast cartoon showing an elephant falling into a Democratic trap, showing how the Republican vote had been swayed from its normal loyalty. (This cartoon can be seen online at http://www.boondocksnet.com/gallery/nast741121.html) Soon after the elephant caught on as a symbol of the party.

It is intriguing to think that Grant’s inkwell was the source of the popular image, but although the timing was right, there is no definitive proof that this was the inspiration. In fact, it is possible that earlier sources associating the elephant with Republicans may have served as an inspiration to Nast. According to William Safire’s book, New Language of Politics, an 1860 issue of Railsplitter and an 1872 cartoon in Harper’s Weekly first connected elephants with Republicans. Although it is uncertain that the inkwell was the inspiration, the symbol did catch on while Grant was president.
UPCOMING EVENTS

ULYSSES S. GRANT NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

SPECIAL SATURDAYS

MAY 5, 2001

STORIES TO BE TOLD
With storyteller Marie Andel and the park staff

JUNE 2, 2001

CIVIL WAR PERSPECTIVES
A look at this pivotal event from multiple viewpoints

JULY 7, 2001

GRANT, AN AMERICAN HERO
Show your patriotic colors at this interactive program!

GRANT COTTAGE

MAY 26, OPENING DAY

Ulysses S. Grant Cottage State Historic Site will open for the season. The Cottage is reached from Exit 16 of the Northway. Admission is charged for tours and all events. Call 518- 587-8277 for information. Hours are Wednesday-Sunday, 10-4, through Labor Day; Saturdays and Sundays, 10-4, through Columbus Day. Open Monday holidays on Memorial Day, Labor Day, and Columbus Day; and Tuesday, August 21.
RANKING THE PRESIDENTS

By

William A. Grant

History

For me, the threshold of consciousness, with regard to politics, came in 1932 at the age of four. Barely able to understand that something important was going on, I recall hearing words like "New Deal", "Crash", "Hard Times", "Hoover", and above all "FDR". When we visited grandmother's house, the adults seem to get into great arguments. The aunts and uncles would take sides, and I cringed as the tone and volume increased with each new point of contention.

As Americans, we tend to relate history to the onset of our formative years. That is, a person born in the sixties tends to view history as starting with the Vietnam War. Notwithstanding the impact of modern movies, television and now the Internet, it isn't until we are exposed to history as taught in high school or college that we become fully aware of how this great country evolved. As we delve into the history of our country the serious student begins to form opinions, pro and con, with regard to the accomplishments (or failures) of the various presidents. With each new revelation we grow in our knowledge and develop favorites. Characteristically, we begin ranking the president in some kind of order that supports our individual opinions.

On a broader scale, many of us turn to the more formal rankings as presented by individual historians, specific organizations, the media or institutions of higher learning. To lend a measure of credibility to the survey, the more prestigious polls usually include a certain number of historians as well as scholars of law and political science. Other polls may be conducted among the media, journalists and sometimes individual citizens. Usually, the polls are categorized into a systematic ranking by number and/or category of greatness. While each of these polls and resulting rankings contains a measure of validity, to my knowledge, there is no designated or official standard of evaluation on a national level. The interested follower of rankings is left on their own to decide which ranking he or she is willing to accept as accurate and legitimate. In the final analysis, the results of any given survey can be described as: biased, subjective, objective, but never,
absolutely conclusive. In the words of biographer Fred Greenstein, noted presidential scholar: “Presidential greatness is in the eye of the beholder and, therefore, different raters will reach different conclusions.” (1)

Among scholars and historians it is generally agreed that in recent times, the earliest, “scholarly pursuit” (2) at ranking the presidents was conducted by Arthur Schlesinger Sr. In 1948 Schlesinger’s poll asked 55 noted historians to rate presidents from George Washington to Franklin D. Roosevelt. Later, in 1962, Schlesinger conducted a second poll; this time using 75 historians and including presidents Harry S. Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower as subjects in the survey. Schlesinger developed the system of categorizing each president in the now commonly recognized rankings of: “Great”, “Near Great”, “Average”, “Below Average” and “Failure”.

Methodology

A number of schemes have been devised in order to rate presidential performance. Usually, a series of questions are asked and the individual rater applies a number to each question that signifies his rating. In accordance with a more or less sophisticated scale of performance, each president is subsequently evaluated. Once all of the presidents have been individually evaluated by the raters, a mathematical score for each president is computed based on the individual ratings. Typically, the higher the total score achieved by each president, the higher the ranking. At this point, based on the individual scores, the presidents are ranked in sequence with number one being the highest ranking. Categorizing either by individual score or numerical position then takes place by assigning each president to a particular category of greatness.

Logically, the interested viewer is concerned as exactly what questions are asked in order to achieve a comprehensive and legitimate evaluation. This feature depends on the individual poll being conducted, and can range over a broad spectrum of abilities. Not including as a prerequisite, individual intelligence, family history, education, party affiliation and/or the era in which the president served, the following ten questions are typical questions asked in any given survey:

1. Fidelity To Office: Did the president honor the oath of office and work to strengthen the presidency?
2. Fidelity To The Constitution: Did the president honor the rule of law and do all in his power to defend the Constitution?

3. Leadership Qualities: Did the president advance and maintain a high level of leadership? Was the president decisive?

4. Administrative Abilities: Did the president advance and maintain a high level of executive power? Did the president make wise appointments?

5. Working With Congress: Did the president maintain a willingness to cooperate with Congress? Did the president compromise in order to achieve his goals?

6. Domestic Accomplishments: Was the president able to achieve a high level of domestic success? Did the president work to advance a vigorous economy?

7. Foreign Policy Accomplishments: Was the president able to maintain a high level of international successes? Did the president negotiate treaties without compromising national security?

8. Risk Management: Was the president willing to take sensible risks in order to secure and protect vital U.S. interests?

9. Communications: Did the president maintain open lines of communications? Did the president express his intentions honestly with the American people?

10. Moral Authority: Did the president maintain a high standard of personal integrity and unimpaired morality? Was the president able to keep political ambition separate from presidential responsibility?

Conclusion

In the final analysis, interested groups, scholars and institutions have strived to promote a loosely structured community of objective surveys that render a somewhat valid scale with which to measure the success or failure of our past presidents. In my humble opinion, some of these surveys have been excellent, while others have failed in their attempt to present a comprehensive and accurate
measure for ranking presidents. This isn’t to say I necessarily disagree with their conclusions, but rather the method of how the results were achieved, and to some extent the format of their individual presentation. The potential failures of any sincere and valid presidential rating systems are: political bias, emotions, preconceived historical misinformation and revisional effort. Therefore, the objective of any worthwhile survey should be to promote balance and avoid the potential failures that would otherwise invalidate or render the rankings illegitimate.

Today, one of the best places to view presidential rankings is on the internet. Included below are two sites that I have found to be as comprehensive, balanced and legitimate as possible. These sites are presented in the interest of expanding your personal knowledge of the subject of presidential rankings. The author does not necessarily support or defend the individual rankings and/or conclusions of either site:

**Federalist Society--Wall Street Journal** - (surf site as needed)
http://www.opinionjournal.com/hail/

**American Presidents C-SPAN Survey** - (surf site as needed)
http://www.americanpresidents.org

http://www.newstimes.com/archive97/feb0797/nab.htm

---

**NEW GRANT BIOGRAPHY**

A new biography titled *Grant* by Jean Edward Smith is now available at bookstores and online through Amazon and Barnes and Noble. Library Journal considers this "...the best one-volume biography of Grant to date" and states that this book "may help elevate him among his fellow presidents".