

A Park West catalogue, showing one of many versions of Peter Max's Better World.



Victims of a Park West at Sea, Park West Gallery Cruise Line Art Auction Scam Speak Out Dr. Venkatraman Srinivasan and his wife, Jayanthi

by David Phillips

THE FOLLOWING IS, UNFORTUNATELY, A TRUE STORY. IT IS ILLUSTRATIVE OF HOW PARK WEST AT SEA ART AUCTIONS AND AUCTIONEERS WORK TO FLEECE UNSUSPECTING PEOPLE OUT OF LARGE SUMS OF MONEY, UNDER THE FALSE PRETENSE OF PROVIDING GREAT BARGAINS AND SUPERB INVESTMENTS.

HERE IS THE STORY IN DR. SRINIVASAN'S WORDS:

I am a cardiologist in Pittsburgh PA.

In the third week of August this year, from the 17th to 24th, my wife and I and our two daughters took a cruise on Celebrity Cruises from Vancouver to Anchorage. We did a few days of land trip and then flew back home.

I had had no dealings with art before, other than buying a few pieces that were mostly decorative, not collection pieces. We were strolling around on the ship and of course we came into contact with the Park West Gallery exhibit. We walked around and looked at it but we didn't do anything. Subsequently there was an auction that was advertised by the cruise newsletter as an event, so my wife and I attended. We are decorating our house and were looking for some art and we

found something by Krasnyansky. We looked at it, and there was an auction and the lady said, "Well, you have to register and pick out some painting with a sticker," which I did.

The auction came and I asked the lady how much it was; she said the price was \$1,200 so I registered and it came up for \$950; I bid on it and there were no other bids. They said, "Fine, you won that." The auctioneer said, "Meet me at 7 this evening so we can conclude the deal."

When I came back they started talking to me. They said, "You bought this piece, it's not very expensive, but here is this other fantastic piece; it's a collector item and it's going at a 50% discount," and they showed me a Peter Max painting. I said, "How much is it?" and they said, "It's about

\$50,000 but you probably will get it for about \$30,000." This was not an auction, mind you. The auction was over hours earlier.

My wife and I were looking at it. I said, "I never collect art. That looks like an awfully big investment." The auctioneer, Jason Davey, a young man from Canada, said he had been doing this all his life. He told us how much it was worth. He told me that his gallery was the largest gallery in the world. I said, "Why would I buy it on a ship? I would buy it in Pittsburgh." He said, "No, in Pittsburgh they charge tax, we don't charge tax. They all have overheads; we have very low overheads, we're on a ship."

I said, "I really don't know you at all. I am not looking to invest that much money."

He said, "Look, this is an investment piece. You can go back and sell it for twice the amount. And we'll give you a certificate of authenticity. And to allay any fears," he said, "Do you know that the Celebrity Cruise Line is a very reliable, famous line?" I said, "Yes, it's a very reliable line; I've heard good things about it." He said, "If we are fraudulent, do you think the cruise line would let me have a shop here?" He said, "If you trust this ship and the reputation of the cruise line, then you have to trust my reputation."

I said, "That's a very valid argument." I said, "You know, this cruise ship is so reputable, if you're a fraud, why would they have you? That would be a big negative on their reputation."

I know very little about art. He told us all about Peter Max and so forth and he said, "It's an original." I said, "What do you mean it's an original?" "It's one of a kind." He said, "It just came to the market, and he did this painting after Katrina, in memory of Katrina."

I said, "What is it called?" He said, "It's called Better World." He added, "He's a philanthropic man, he's donated a lot of money to a lot of people, and he's such a great man, he's the this generation Picasso." He said, "Picasso was a very bad human being. He was a great painter but he did a lot of bad things. Peter Max on the contrary is a good human being. He gives a lot of money to charity and he's into nature and the environment."

And my wife is a great environmentalist, so she fell for it right away. He said, "This painting

is in commemoration of Katrina," so we felt sympathetic for that. So we said, "Everything is positive. Here is a guy who is selling the painting at near 50% discount, very philanthropic guy, good human being." He said, "He's 70 years old and he may not last long, after he passes away this painting is going to be worth \$100,000. Just like Picasso."

I have no idea why I got drawn in. We thought we were doing a good thing. I said, "Fine, we'll buy it. Can you give me a discount?" He said, "Yes, \$600 discount, and guess what, you're going to apply for our credit card so you don't even have to pay for three months. Plus you'll get 5% discount."

He started writing it up. It was all very fast and very pressured. He didn't give us much time. The woman sitting there, I don't know if she was his equal or his boss, said, "It's only 2 1/2%, not 5%." I said, "Well he just told me 5%." She said, "They changed the rules." (The glossy brochure we were handed specifically said 5%. It also said no interest and no payments for 13 months.) Then he said his computer didn't work for a while. He said, "We're going to close down soon, so we'll take care of it."

I said, "What about the painting?" He said, "Well, it will be all reframed and will arrive at your house in four weeks. And if you don't like it, just send it back."

I said, "Fine, if I don't like it I'll just send it back. What's the big deal? I'll just show it to an expert in Pittsburgh and see if it's really worth it. I have nothing to lose."

And so he gave me the papers. I didn't know there was something on the back to read. He gave me a form to fill out for this credit card. They ask you all these questions to give you a credit. And then he got up and said, "You got a great deal. You must be proud of yourself."

I saw him that night and he said, "Do you know Doctor, after you left there were two people who came asking for that painting and I told them it was sold."

I said, "Fine," I didn't think much of it. I thought I got a great deal.

Then I came back to Pittsburgh and spoke to my golfing buddy, who's a real art collector with a lot of very expensive paintings which he goes to Sotheby's and Christie's to buy.



CORPORATE OFFICES
160 GREENTREE DR.
SUITE 101
DOVER, DE 19904
800.521.9654

PRINTED: 08/23/2007
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BILL AND SHIP IO

DR. VENKATRAMAN SRINIVASAN

COMPANY:
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EMAIL:
HOME PHONE:
WORK PHONE:

USA (REGION: CONTINENTAL USA)

BIDDER NUMBER	CABIN NUMBER	AUCTION NUMBER	INVOICE NUMBER	INVOICE DATE
239	7021	5773	5773-7-2	08/23/2007

LOT NUMBER	REG. SHIP. NUMBER	ARTIST	ART TITLE	HAMMER PRICE	BUYERS PREMIUM	AUCTION PRICE	ART	SHIP UNDL	HL STR	IN TR HANDL	CUSTOM FRM	APPR	COITS
CP670	133166	ANATOLE KRASNIVANSKY	VIOLINIST II	950.00	150.00	1100.00	1030.00	70	0	10.30	0	35	X P
<i>You saved \$80.00 off the hammer price on this piece!</i>													
CP714	212566.0000	PETER MAX	BETTER WORLD VER. XVIII #11	30020.00	4740.00	34760.00	34670.00	90	0	346.70	0	15	X F
<i>You saved \$2,530.00 off the hammer price on this piece!</i>													

ALL ART SOLD UNFRAMED (U), UNLESS NOTED. ALLOW UP TO 10 WEEKS FOR DELIVERY. INVOICE TOTALS

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The Park West at Sea invoice. Note it says "You saved \$2,530 off the hammer price on this piece!", yet the Peter Max piece was never shown to Dr. Srinivasan at auction, rather he was approached regarding this piece after the auction had ended.

I told him I bought a Peter Max. He said, "You are a fool."

I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Where did you buy it? From the cruise ship? You are a fool."

He said, "You should never buy those things. And Peter Max, my god, he's a washed up artist," and he said he was indicted for tax fraud years ago. He said, "They sold you a bill of goods." He said, "What is the name of the painting?"

I said, "Better World." He said, "Give me the invoice. Look, the invoice says Better World serial number, it's Volume XVIII, Number 11." And he said, "There are so many reproductions of this. What does it mean by number 11?" I said, I didn't even know. I'm looking at it for the first time. He said, "Well that means there are a lot of other paintings floating around." He went to the computer – he is registered in some society – and said he would print out the records of all the Peter Max paintings sold in the last few years.

He gave me a big print out sheet. And it was like \$3,000, \$4,000. And everything is called Better World. I said, "What do you mean, Better World? I thought this guy said there's only one Better World."

He said, "No, no, Srini, you fell for it. He has so many Better Worlds. He calls a lot of his paintings Better World. You really got taken in."

So I was really angry. I called the customer service rep, a woman called Leslie. I said, "Look, I think I've been taken in. I didn't understand any of this."

She said, "Too bad, doctor, you signed the contract and that's the end of the story. We cannot return it."

I said, "Look, I really don't want it. When it comes I'm going to return it."

She said, "That's too bad. You signed it and you own it."

I said, "I'll have to go to a lawyer."

She said, "You have to do what you have to do. You go to a lawyer and our lawyer will answer that."

I also told her I was going to write a letter to the editor of my local newspaper and warn people. She said, "Let me warn you that we may sue you for slander."

I said, "Don't worry about it, I'll be checking with my attorney before I do that."

So I went to my attorney, one that I had dealt with before. He couldn't believe it. He said, "This is total misrepresentation." But he said, "You didn't sign this bill of sale. The invoice is unsigned. I will write them a letter."

The auctioneer charged me 15% buyer's premium, shipping and handling, appraisal fee, and the

painting came to over \$35,000. I'm frustrated and I feel we were totally deceived. So the lawyer has written a letter saying this is null and void because I never signed the invoice.

My lawyer told me in any event when UPS delivers the painting, reject it and return it and do not accept it. I've told my wife not to accept delivery. That was my lawyer's advice.

My lawyer said they may keep sending it and you just refuse it. Don't pay it.

It's just a mental harassment and I feel badly for a lot of senior citizens and a lot of people. Apparently Park West have done \$600 million business this year on 60 or so ships. These guys are raking in money like crazy by misrepresenting the value of what they are offering. I'm very angry at the cruise company because they are enabling this activity. I went to the auction only because I trusted the cruise line and would not otherwise have attended at all.

Only subsequently have I researched the internet and found that the cruise ship has a lot to gain by this, financial gain, and therefore they're abetting this activity.

Park West must have gotten away with it all these years because they were probably selling paintings and prints that were \$500, \$600, \$700. Even though people felt cheated, many of them didn't know, because you don't bother about that much.

But when they started getting greedy and going into these \$20,000, \$30,000, \$40,000 paintings, then people go home and they check. I think these people got greedy and now they're in trouble.

Dr. Srinivasan has no intention of going through with a fraudulent deal that he never signed for. In addition, he has contacted AARP, of which he is a member, with a view to warning other passengers, particularly senior citizens, to stay away from fraudulent cruise line art auction deals. He has also contacted 60 Minutes with the details of the story.

It is not only for themselves that the Srinivasans are concerned. It is for all the potential victims who walk unsuspectingly into the cruise line auction, Park West at Sea scams. 📧