

## Dogs Playing Poker: Beyond Art, Behind Coolidge

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C. M. Coolidge, known for his "poker playing dogs", was a brilliant man with innovative ideas and an entrepreneurial instinct about art. Born in a small town in upstate New York to Quaker parents, he didn't receive a formal college education, but did take some college business classes later in his life. By the time he was 18 or 19, he took a few lessons in portrait painting, along with a course in bookkeeping a few years later. His love for reading resulted in a solid self education. At the age of 19, he started doing cartoons for newspapers in surrounding neighborhoods. A few years later, while living in Rochester, NY, he wrote and illustrated a weekly newspaper column.

Coolidge loved people and was quite social. At around the age of 20 or 21, he was elected Superintendent for one of the local school districts. Later, he was elected Town Clerk. Around the same time, he became active in the Masonic Lodge. Coolidge had lofty plans for himself, although most of his pursuits didn't work out or were short-lived. When he was 27 or 28, he started the first bank in the town of Antwerp, NY. He worked there for a short time, and then became a druggist. That; however; did not hold his interest for long. And, a year later he founded his hometown's first newspaper. Unfortunately, that failed a short time later.

Between jobs and in his free time, he would draw cartoons for area newspapers and would do caricatures of people. One of his many elaborate projects was the writing of a comic opera concerning the elimination of mosquitoes. Interestingly, it was produced but made no real money. He also applied for a patent for collecting fares on street cars. Although, again, nothing became of it.

The one consistent endeavor he held onto was his love of comics and art. He began to do dog paintings around the turn of the century. Mainly, they were purchased by cigar companies and used as giveaways. Coolidge's big break came when the advertising firm Brown & Bigelow approached him to do a series of paintings that would be used on calendars and other memorabilia. That was in 1903. Around this time is when his infamous poker dog paintings got underway.

Over the next ten years, Coolidge created 16 paintings of dogs - seven that portrayed dogs playing pool. The other nine were dogs surrounding a poker table. By putting dogs in art, yet in a situation familiar to middle class Americans, he not only anthropomorphized them, but created an instant kitsch fad. It certainly helped the cigar and calendar businesses for which he worked. A few of his original dog paintings sold for US 2,000 to US 10,000 dollars - an astonishing amount for the time period.

For years his images of dogs playing poker while drinking, smoking, and basically getting into trouble graced bachelor pads, bars, and taverns around the country. The scenes always evoked feelings of something American and something modern. Recently, a pair of his poker dog paintings entitled *A Bold Bluff* and *Waterloo*, expected to go for US 30,000 to US 60,000, surprised the art world by selling for 590,00 for the pair.

More meaning for *A Friend In Need*:

A few theories about his art give more meaning than what initially meets the eye. One theory states that the painting *A Friend In Need* has great significance. "Coolidge's painting was used in the Second World War to boost the moral of Dutch citizens. The dog with the cigar being Churchill giving America help (on his left hand side), which goes unnoticed. Russia (the most left dog) tries to attract USA's attention, while Hitler (the dog with the pipe and the 'big ears' in front of the clock) watches anxiously."(1)

Poker enthusiast Jim McManus has stated, " In *A Friend in Need*, the blatant cheating refers back to the early nineteenth century, Mississippi riverboat days, when poker was mainly a series of opportunities to fleece the suckers."

A specialist for Sotheby's Auction House, Alison Cooney, says that people who dismiss the painting as simply "kitsch art" are missing the deeper meaning of his work. "It's a humorous, ironic take; she continues, a jab at middle-class America; another way of poking fun at ourselves."(2)

Another theory suggests that the dogs were all aspects of C.M. Coolidge himself. Known to his friends as "Cash", he loved a good bet and was something of a hustler.(3) He wore a hat and often held a cigar, just as his paintings of dogs did. Other sources hint that he looked like the bulldogs he painted.

In a recent tongue-in-cheek article by Steven J. Rolfes, he writes "In this iconic work, we see a masterly representation of the Last Supper, with Christ (on the left) sitting conveying His wisdom to His followers. We see Judas to His right, with the bag of silver coins at his pawside." He asserts that the painting A Friend in Need has deep arcane roots in a very secret society that even precedes the Illuminati called the "Prior of Dogbone."(4) This important insight is one that Coolidge himself would appreciate.

After his success with painting dogs, a new idea provided him a profitable income. He started the invention of "Comic Foregrounds", which are wooden life-size cartoon stand-ups with the face cut out so that one can place their head for funny photos. He completed hundreds of them, including the famous Man Riding a Donkey and Fat Man in a Bathing Suit. Some of these comic foregrounds had hand lettering at the bottom. He would often hire students to do them.

C.M. Coolidge was a bachelor for most of his life. When he was 64, he met Gertrude Kimmel, an art student who was doing some lettering work for him at the time. They were married in 1909 and had a daughter a year later.

A few years later, when Coolidge was about 70 years old, he fell and hurt his knee. According to an account written by his daughter Marcella Coolidge, he didn't visit a doctor and was lame the rest of his life.(5) He tried his hand at writing, but it didn't take off. Still, Coolidge remained in good spirits. His wife went to work and he was strong enough to do work around the house.

Coolidge's daughter has also said that his dog paintings were not taken seriously at home by herself or her mother. She said that she never liked them - that it was simply commercial. Furthermore, she relayed that they never had a dog, but that her dad was fond of them.(6) This is clear as seen in the widespread influence they had in his art.

Andy Warhol was influenced by Coolidge's work. Coolidge set a precedent for the weimaraner photos of William Wegman. Today, we find Coolidge's canine images on posters everywhere. If you have US 590,000 or more to spend, contact Doyle Auction House in New York to see when they will have another original Coolidge dog painting to auction.

Sources: 1. [http://gaming.unlv.edu/gallery/a\\_friend\\_in\\_need.htm](http://gaming.unlv.edu/gallery/a_friend_in_need.htm) 2. Barry, Dan. "Artist's Fame Is Fleeting, but Dog Poker Is Forever" New York Times. 6/14/2002 3. <http://www.tenbyten.net/luckydog.html> 4. <http://www.wittenburgdoor.com/archives/dogs.html> 5. <http://www.dogsplayingpoker.org> 6. <http://archives.stupidquestion.net/sq52500dogsplayingpoker.html>

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Melanie Light is an artist and art educator. She is the site owner of Pet Lovers Art at <http://www.artzpet.com> and Classic Pet Art at <http://www.cafepress.com/petz>. You will find more pet artwork, gifts, and information on these web sites.

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