

A friend and landlordâ??s passing reveals a â??shockingâ?? bequest â?? 801 of them.

Description

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Dexter Garnier was in the habit of checking on his friend and former landlord, 76-year-old Frank Brown. So when he didnâ??t return his calls, Garnier went to Brownâ??s Dolores Heights home and knocked on the door. When there was no answer, he let himself in with the key Brown had given him and looked around.

Brown was lying face down on the kitchen floor. â??I shuddered, called his name and knelt beside him. I touched his forehead with the back of my fingers. He was cold,â?• Garnier later wrote. Brown was dead, apparently of natural causes, a paramedic soon confirmed.

That sad incident was the precursor of a much happier series of events that changed the lives of Garnier and his then-wife, Judith. Brown, Garnier soon discovered, had left him his $2 million home and a collection of more than 800 paintings by Brown and his longtime partner, William Campbell.



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Dexter Garnier in the living room of his apartment, where he has hung many of the artworks of his former landlords. The rest are in a garage near the building. (Photo by Bill Snyder)

Although Garnier had been on good terms with Brown and Campbell, it was hardly a close friendship. â??Iâ??d say it was basically a landlord-tenant relationship,â?• Garnier said. Over the years, the Garniers had visited the gay coupleâ??s Victorian just three times or so and would housesit for them when they traveled.

Brown and Campbell sold Garnier the home where he leased a flat, â??for an accommodatingâ?• price, in 1983. Campbell also told Garnier heâ??d advised Brown that eventually their estate should go to them the Garniers**.** Brown died 15 years before his partner. So, Garnier didnâ??t expect the windfall. â??I wouldnâ??t let myself build my expectations,â?• he said. Getting the bequest was â??shocking. I

have no idea why they did it.â?•

A â??couple of hippiesâ??

Dexter and Judith lived in the menâ??s grand home for 10 years before selling it â?? quite a change â??for a couple of Mission District hippies,â?• said the 76-year-old Garnier, a better description of whom might be blue-collar bohemian, self-taught scholar.

Until he began to clear Brownâ??s house of decades of accumulated furniture, antiques, and paintings, Garnier didnâ??t know that the two men were serious artists. In an introduction to the catalog of the coupleâ??s work, he described what he found: â??In their Victorian home with its tall ceilings, there were paintings on the walls â?? mostly landscapes â?? but not many, and they fought for space and notice with everything from antique tapestries to wild-life taxidermy.â?• Hundreds more were stored in the attic and closets.

Preserving the paintings became something of an avocation for Garnier. A sampling of the collection, about a dozen paintings, is displayed in the living room of his small apartment on Chula Lane, a one-block street in the Mission District, and there are hundreds more in the buildingâ??s garage. He has sold about 100, but says â??Iâ??m not much of a salesman,â?• and does little to build sales.

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Just a small sampling of the artworks Garner inherited from his former artist landlords. (Photo by Bill Snyder)

But thatâ??s not to say the collection sits forgotten. As a tribute and gesture of gratitude for the bequest, Garnier wrote and paid to publish an extensive catalog of the collection. And he spent years building a database of the paintings, complete with thumbnail photos and a careful description of where each painting â?? most are stored in numbered racks â?? can be found.

Son of a fight promoter

Garnier was born in Hawaii. His father was a fight promoter and the family moved to San Francisco when he was 11. The elder Garnier had managed Carl â??Boboâ?• Olson, a boxer who became the middleweight champion of the world. But Olson deserted Garnier for another manager, a blow to the familyâ??s income.

Garnier has lived most of his life in San Franciscoâ??s Mission District. He went to Everett Junior High on Church Street and nearby Mission High School. The flat he rented and later bought from Campbell and Brown is just up the street from his apartment; his former wife and one of his two sons now live there.

As a young man, Garnier worked for a while repairing guitars, a job he loved. But when he met and then married Judith, he realized he couldnâ??t support a family on his meager earnings. He got a part-time job with the Postal Service, a position he kept until he retired in 2000.


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Dexter Garnier has worked repairing guitars and for the post office. He also studied to become a pharmacist. (Photo by Bill Snyder)

He was ambitious, though. Although he only had a high school education, he decided to become a pharmacist and spent two years at City College of San Francisco completing prerequisites. To his surprise, he was admitted to a program at the University of California-San Francisco and worked hard at it while keeping his job at the Postal Service.

But he dropped out when he and Judith split up; the separation killed his motivation, he said. â?•The work was too hard to get through when I didnâ??t have a reason to keep at it.â?•

According to Garnier, Campbell and Brown met at the California College of Arts and Crafts in the 1940s. Campbell had some success in the early years of his career with three, one-man shows at what became the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

When the painting stopped

But for reasons Garnier doesnâ??t understand, Campbell stopped painting around 1950. â??My own impression was that Frank painted as a hobby and was pretty darned good at it, but he never talked about it â?? at all,â?• Garnier wrote in the catalog.

There were hints that a dispute with a critic led the two men to break ties with San Franciscoâ??s artistic community. The rupture may have related to homophobia, said Garnier, â??but thatâ??s speculation.â?•

Campbell resumed painting around 1980 and completed at least 16 before his death in 1985.

â??Over the years, both painters worked in a diversity of styles,â?• according to Garnierâ??s catalogue. Brown did illustrations, paintings in the Diego Rivera style, traditional still lifes, landscapes and figuratives, as well as cubist, abstract, fantasy, and surreal works.

Campbellâ??s work â??ranged from early muted-palette still lifes, to vibrant Mexican landscapes; from traditional figuratives and nudes, both male and female, to surreal/abstract forms and renderings, some as social commentary.â?•

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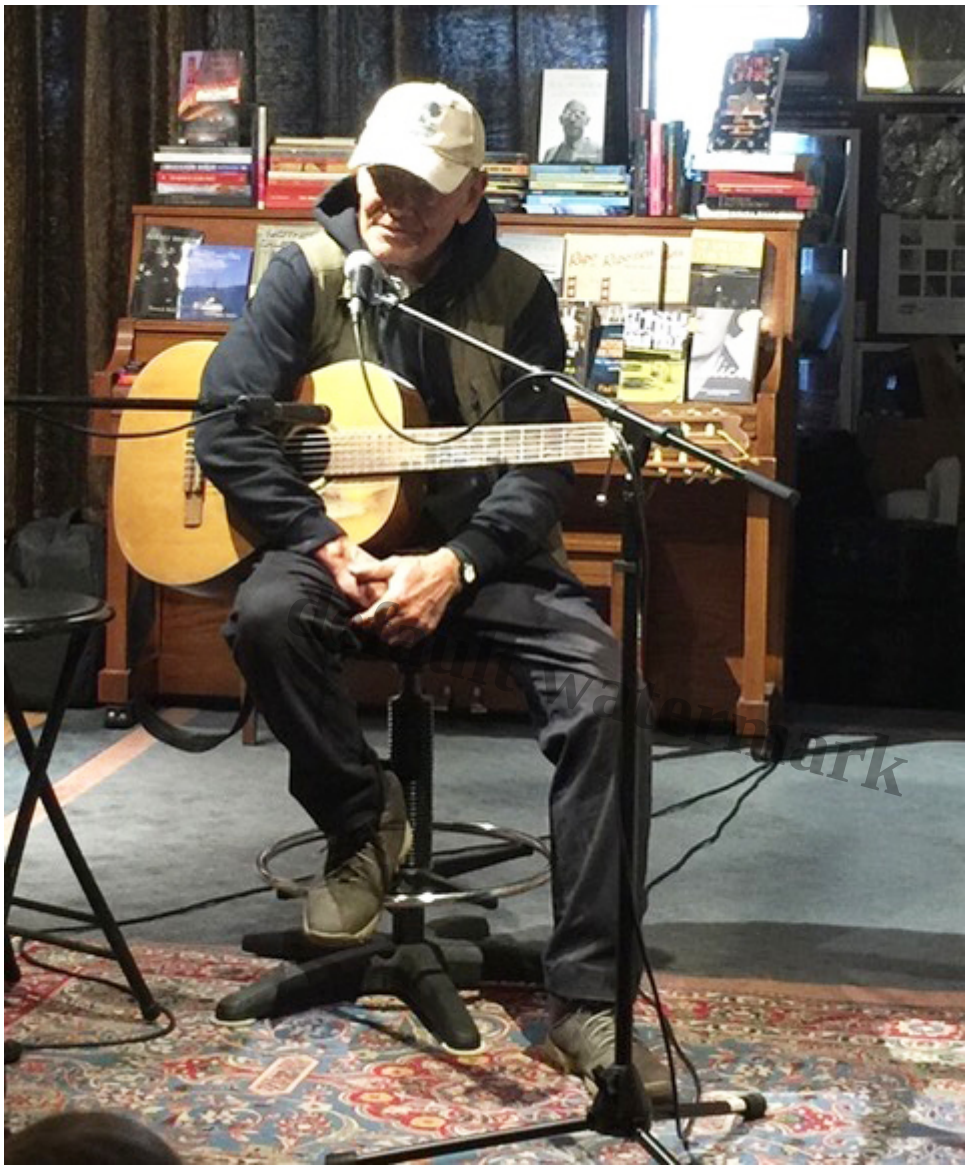
An established art dealer once tried to buy the entire collection, but he and Garnier couldnâ??t agree on terms, and the deal fell through.

An autodidact



Dexter Garnier performing at the Bird and Beckett bookstore in Glen Park. (Photo courtesy of Dexter Garnier)

Although itâ??s been decades since he repaired guitars, Garnier still loves to play. Most mornings he heads to Buena Vista Park in the Haight and plays the guitar in a style he characterizes as somewhere â??between James Taylor and Johnny Cash.â?• He once performed with Ted Oâ??Connell, also known as Moonshine Maybelline, at Bird and Beckett, a bookstore in Glen Park. â??Got a standing ovation,â?• he says with a bit of amused pride.

Garnier is slim, with a head of black hair shot with white. During a chat at a neighborhood cafÃ©, he was wearing hiking shoes, a vest over a green hoody and a black baseball cap.

Heâ??s interested in Near Eastern studies and has a large collection of books on the regionâ??s history and religions. Some are in Hebrew and Greek, languages he taught himself well enough to read those volumes, he said.

What did he hope to learn? Garnier thought for a beat, and answered: â??Where did everything come from, and what happens when you die.â?•

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