

Basquiat Sale Suit Lays Bare Family Strife

By COLIN MOYNIHAN

A daughter sued her father, a major art collector, Thursday, saying he had intentionally depressed the price of a major Basquiat sold at auction last month with a failed and frivolous lawsuit to stop the sale.

The painting sold for \$30.7 million, but Belinda Neumann-Donnelly, representing the estate of her mother, Dolores O. Neumann, had hoped the work would fetch much more and in court papers accused her father of sabotage.

"This action arises from a greedy, malevolent, fraudulent, bad-faith and (unfortunately) successful scheme to financially devastate the Estate and, indirectly, Belinda, by destroying the value of the Estate's most valuable asset — Jean-Michel Basquiat's masterpiece, 'Flesh and Spirit,'" the suit, filed in New York State Supreme Court, states. A lawyer for Mr. Neumann, Andrew G. Celli, did not immediately provide a comment.

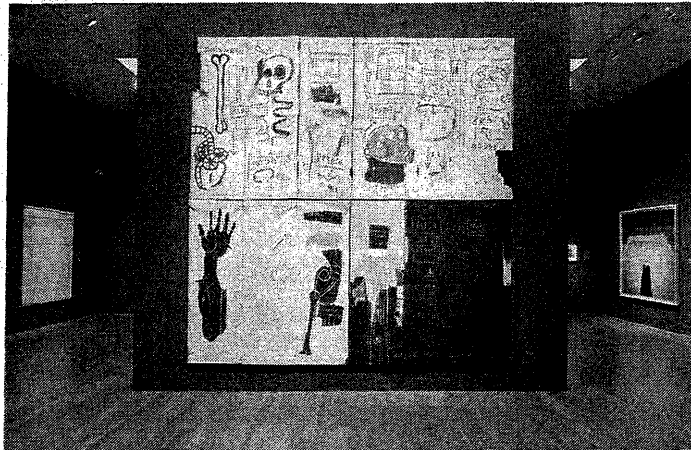
Ms. Neumann-Donnelly's father, Hubert Neumann, whose family amassed a world-class collection of 20th-century art, had sued to block the sale of the 12-by-12-foot painting, saying the sale violated an agreement he had with Sotheby's that gave him the right to approve "all matters" concerning the marketing of works from the "Family Collection."

But a judge rejected Mr. Neumann's request to stop the sale, and the daughter and her lawyers pointed to the fact that the Basquiat had been owned by Dolores Neumann alone.

Still, Ms. Neumann-Donnelly says in her suit, her father's legal effort had the effect of raising concerns about the estate's right to sell the work and scared away potential buyers from the May 16 sale at Sotheby's.

Each of the lawsuits is laced with evidence of a bitter family dispute, as the parties cited competing complaints of deception and fraud and excerpts from secretly recorded conversations. Ms. Neumann-Donnelly's two sisters supported the father's lawsuit, according to the court papers.

Ms. Neumann-Donnelly, whose suit says her mother had been



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"Flesh and Spirit" by Jean-Michel Basquiat fetched \$30.7 million last month. The woman who sold it was not pleased.

separated from her husband for the last 29 years of her life, charges in the court papers that her mother had been subject to years of repeated "emotional and physical abuse" by Mr. Neumann, an accusation he has denied. Dolores Neumann died in 2016. Her will explicitly expressed her wish to disinherit Mr. Neumann, her daughter's lawsuit said.

Sotheby's declined to comment beyond a statement saying, "Our announcement release for the

A daughter claims her father tried to sabotage a painting's auction.

work (sent in March 2018) provided an estimate in the region of \$30 million."

In one conversation with her father, secretly taped by Ms. Donnelly-Neumann, according to the court papers, the suit says Mr. Neumann agrees the painting should have sold for at least as much as another Basquiat that sold the next day for \$45 million.

Ms. Neumann-Donnelly's lawyer, Judd Burstein, said that was a reference to Basquiat's "Flexible," sold by Phillips auction house on May 17.

Mr. Neumann's father, Morton G. Neumann, a Chicagoan who

made his fortune in the mail-order business, began a collection that eventually blossomed into one of the finest in the United States, including works by Picasso, Picabia and Warhol. He died in 1985.

Most of those artworks, valued at more than a billion dollars, are now owned by two family trusts, both overseen by Hubert Neumann. Ms. Neumann-Donnelly's suit challenged his right to run one of the trusts, saying that a review of court files showed that he had never been granted the Surrogate's Court documents that would allow him to serve as trustee. As a result, the suit says, he was not authorized to approve the sales of art that the trust has made over the years.

"In other words, Hubert has been buying and selling art for years based upon the utterly false representation that he had the authority to do so," the suit says.

Ms. Neumann bought "Flesh and Spirit" in 1983 for \$15,000 shortly after it was completed and exhibited at the Tony Shafrazi gallery, Sotheby's said.

The work, divided into quadrants, features elements of a skeleton, a brain and a disembodied hand, along with words like "potato" and "peso" in addition to "flesh" and "spirit."

The Sotheby's catalog quoted Ms. Neumann as calling the skeleton in the painting "alive, insightful, and militant" and saying that the work was Basquiat's "personal Rosetta Stone."

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