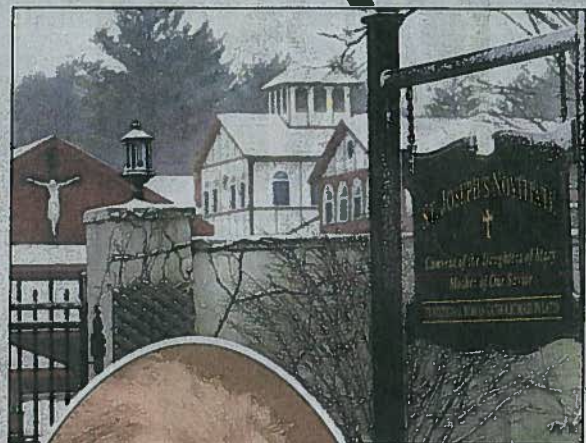


CON(VENT) ARTIST



Andy Uzile



Nuns at this convent (above) in upstate Round Top say they were underpaid by \$1.7 million for Notre Dame Ange (right), painted in 1889 by William-Adolphe Bouguereau (left).



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Sisters: Dealer Scammed us in sale of painting

EXCLUSIVE

By DAREH GREGORIAN

An upstate art appraiser better watch his knuckles — a convent says he conned its nuns out of \$1.7 million.

The Daughters of Mary Mother of Our Savior say appraiser Mark Lasalle intentionally defrauded them by convincing them a painting they had was worth \$450,000, and then promptly reselling it with a co-conspirator for \$2 million.

Lasalle and art dealer Mark Zaplin "intentionally, deliberately, wantonly, maliciously [and] with evil motive ... perpetrated fraud against the Daughters of Mary Mother of Our Savior," the nuns charge in court papers.

The suspected scam was re-

vealed to the sisters by another alleged co-conspirator who turned whistleblower.

"Mr. Lasalle said we could 'screw' the sisters and make a handsome profit," art dealer Paul Dumont said in an affidavit filed on the nuns' behalf.

Now the convent is looking for much more than Hail Marys from Lasalle and Zaplin — it's suing for \$51 million, charging fraud and unjust enrichment.

"They'd trusted [Lasalle] completely," said the sisters' lawyer, Bruce Goldstone.

Lasalle's lawyer, Dan Sleasman, said the allegations are "false" and the lawsuit is "filled with one falsehood after another." Zaplin referred comment to his lawyer, who didn't immediately return a call.

The order was given the painting by a parishioner in 2002, and hung the work in its chapel on

Hearts Content Road in Round Top, which is outside of Albany.

One of the nuns thought the deteriorating painting might be valuable, and it turned out it was — it was Notre Dame Ange, an 1889 painting by William-Adolphe Bouguereau.

The convent turned to Lasalle, "who held himself out as an expert appraiser of art with more than 20 years of experience," to assess the painting for them, the suit says.

He told them the work was worth between \$150,000 and \$250,000, and could be worth even more if it was restored, the suit claims. Dumont, meanwhile, said Lasalle told him it was actually worth "between \$700,000 and \$800,000."

The nuns, at Lasalle's urging and "at substantial cost to themselves, contracted to have the painting restored" in late 2004,

the suit says, which is when Lasalle allegedly hatched his plan.

He had Dumont line up Zaplin as a "straw buyer," the filings say. When the restoration was completed in February 2006, Lasalle allegedly told the sisters it now had "a fair-market value of \$350,000 to \$450,000," and he had a "good-faith buyer" ready to take it off their hands: Zaplin.

When the nuns balked at Zaplin's initial offer of \$350,000, Lasalle talked them out of putting the painting up for auction, and had Zaplin cut a check for \$450,000, the suit says.

Lasalle encouraged the nuns to take the deal, the suit says, which they did. It wasn't until much later that Dumont came forward and told them Lasalle and Zaplin had flipped the painting for more than \$2 million. It has since sold for more than \$5 million.

dareh.gregorian@nypost.com