

## **A New Angle**

### **Episode 57**

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**Justin Angle:** This is A New Angle, a show about cool people doing awesome things in and around Montana. I'm your host, Justin Angle. This show is supported by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business.

**Justin Angle:** Hey, folks, welcome back and thanks for tuning in. Today, I'm speaking with Tim Gordon, master appraiser of art and antiques.

**Tim Gordon:** It's usually just off to the races. It's like it's an exciting project comes up we just buy the airplane tickets and go.

**Justin Angle:** Tim has been a leading authority in the appraisal business for over 25 years, working on projects like Princess Diana's gown collection, the Jim Morrison estate, the Al Capone family collection, and the collections of Yellowstone National Park. He's got some cool stories to share, and we're excited to hear them. Tim, thanks for coming on the show.

**Tim Gordon:** Yeah, you're welcome. Great to be here.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah. So, tell us, where did you grow up and what did your parents do?

**Tim Gordon:** Well, you know, I grew up in Missoula, Montana.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah, right here.

**Tim Gordon:** Yeah. One of those guys too stupid to leave, I think. But, no, it's the best place in the world. Yeah, you can imagine how deep my roots are here. And so, my family, they had Gordon Construction here. My father is Matt Gordon, and that company was started in the 1940s with their father. Yeah, that's my background. And, you know, I've traveled around the world, I've toured around the world, and my business is about half here and about a half around the planet.

**Justin Angle:** Okay. Give us the brief version of how you got into this line of work.

**Tim Gordon:** It started when I was a kid, cause as I grew up, my mother, she had grown up in a tar paper shack in the oil fields. And then her father struck oil, husky oil.

And so, all of a sudden, she's back east in a finishing school. And so, this girl who grew up in oil Montana, all of a sudden is learning classical piano and etiquette and everything. So, anyway, fast forward to my life. She has six children, and she didn't have that wealth anymore. But we had her painting and we had her playing the piano. And I think that that kind of instilled a lot of art and a lot of curiosity and interest in the arts in me. And so, then all of a sudden, I started encountering through arts, treasure and stuff and cool things from the past. I began my career, this sounds really goofy, but I began my career at age 11 as a business venture. I went to Butte, Montana, and they were bulldozing the old Butte dump for a golf course. And my older brother and I filled up a truck of antique bottles, that was during the bottle craze, drove them to Seattle, and I made 800 bucks.

**Justin Angle:** Oh, my gosh.

**Tim Gordon:** Man. I was hooked.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah. I mean, that's a nice payout.

**Tim Gordon:** Yeah. And so, all of a sudden, I became this little freak who's a dealer all over the state at shows and I, you know, go to antique sales and that led more into as I

went through my teens collecting, and then in my twenties, I became kind of a full-fledged dealer where I would find more rare things and I put out a catalog. I would type it out on a typewriter and mail it around to about 200 collectors who collected a certain genre of treasure. And that became, you know, a kind of start of being an expert and then later an appraiser and later on TV shows like Antiques Roadshow, etc. So...

**Justin Angle:** And so, did you have formal training in the arts? Did you get to study at university or what was your kind of formal education?

**Tim Gordon:** I always laugh about this. I was thrown out of Catholic school and then I went to University of Montana. I had to take summer courses, grabbed a G.E.D. and would do that. But there is no formal training for this. You know, I have appraised millions of things and I've, you have to see millions of things and deal with millions of things to really have the knowledge. It's kind of, the main question these days that I get, one of the main ones, is because people do watch that program I mentioned is, what's your specialty? I say I have a Ph.D. on everything made in the world. My company will appraise full museums, and so it'll be super eclectic. It'll be moon rocks through dinosaurs, through Native American collections, through decorative arts. And so consequently, yeah, there's no education for it. There really isn't.

**Justin Angle:** And other than just doing it over and over again and then being seen as an expert and being trusted as an expert.

**Tim Gordon:** Well, there's that. I mean, certainly I study I've read thousands of books. I have a giant library about it all. But, you know, I am an expert on art. And so, I've appraised major art museums front to back, all genres, all eras. But you know with caveat. Sometimes you need to call in a consultant on a tricky one. Yeah. So, I'm smart enough to get help when I feel like I need help, but, gosh, I sound like a super egomaniac here, but I just think I can, you know, I've appraised so many kinds of things.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah. I mean, maybe let's talk some specifics. I mean, you've been on so many big projects that are well-known, but you said you just sort of finished up the Al Capone estate, worked on the Jim Morrison collection. You have talk about some of the highlights from your illustrious career.

**Tim Gordon:** Sometimes I just have to kind of pinch myself, you know, like we'll go back to 2010 and I'm on an airplane to London and I go to work in the morning. I get up at my hotel and I take a black cab across town, and I go to Kensington Palace, and they put a worker's lanyard on me and I escort it up into a room and I praised Princess

Diana's gowns. So, like that, you know, that's one thing that I'll always kind of hold to my heart was...

**Justin Angle:** How does that opportunity come to pass? Like when do you get to the point in your career where you're sort of like, oh, yeah, we need to bring in Tim Gordon to do this.

**Tim Gordon:** Yeah. You know, it's pretty cool because I don't really advertise. I have a website and so people come at me through my website, but it's reputation and word of mouth. Yeah. You know, you brought up the Al Capone estate, and so the family reached out to me through my reputation. And their grandfather was Al Capone, it was two granddaughters, and when he died in 1947, everything that he had died with just kind of got assimilated into their houses. And so that was from reputation. Or another interesting one is when Jim Morrison died in a bathtub in Paris in 1972, he had quit the working with the band The Doors, and also, he was in trouble down in Miami Dade County. And there was a stage incident, and he was being prosecuted for indecent exposure or whatever. But he just kind of got the hell out of Dodge. He went to Paris, and so he walked around Paris. And he was friends with Michael McClure, who is a well-known poet of the sixties, and he'd been a mentor, and so Jim just started writing poems and started writing songs. And so, the rights to Jim's work had gone with the

Courson Family, who was Jim's common law wife and Pamela Courson had actually died of a heroin overdose. But before she did, she was talking to Michael McClure about editing all this material. And Michael McClure said, you know, you're living with people who aren't good. You know, there's people hanging around who are going to steal this. And he goes, put this in a vault somewhere. And then recently he said, and sadly, that's what she did. And so, I get a call from the family four or five years ago and they want me to break open that vault. And so, what's cool is in January of this year, finally, Jim Morrison's written legacy from Paris was published by Harcourt and Brace.

**Justin Angle:** So, talk about that experience of like when they say break open the vault, you're not, you know, with a crowbar back cracking the safe, but you're the first person to lay eyes and hands on this stuff and yeah. And introduce it to the world in a way.

**Tim Gordon:** Yeah. Here's how the process looks, I flew with my crew down to Santa Barbara and there's a bank vault. And so, we met with the people who represent Jim Morrison and his family and some of the Courson family. And so, you know, what that looks like is they finally brought it out to have me evaluate it. So, I spent several days photographing everything, took those photos and my notes back to Montana and then spent months just kind of compiling the appraisal of that. But to appraise it, you have to read it and assimilated into your head. And so, I was the only guy for a couple of

years who was really going around with all that magic in my head. I had read all those songs and poems.

**Justin Angle:** Wow. So, you had a jump start on history in many ways. So, Tim, one thing that listeners might be curious about is where do you make money in this process? A lot of the dollar values you're talking about are very high. But like, where's, what's your role?

**Tim Gordon:** As an appraiser, you know, I work hourly, like your local plumber. And you know what's neat is that keeps it fair. It's like there's no undue influence on you.

**Justin Angle:** You have no perverse incentives.

**Tim Gordon:** Yep. You got it. And then when people come to me and they have something really great to sell and I get them off to an auction house, and that's small commissions, you know, like working on a commission basis.

**Justin Angle:** Sure. And then you're representing somebody else's interests and you can advocate for them. That makes a lot of sense.

**Tim Gordon:** Everybody's on the same team. Yeah, yeah. It's like Go Auction.

**Justin Angle:** Everybody wins.

**Tim Gordon:** Yeah.

**Justin Angle:** So, talk about maybe the process of putting a number on a piece of art. I mean, there has to be like a philosophical value judgment that you're making just in terms of valuing art in general. And then specifically, how do you approach applying that philosophy to a piece?

**Tim Gordon:** You look at a work of art, and so there are several parameters that dictate whether or not it's a great piece of art by the artist and at the very beginning there are databases that record just about every sale of art by any artist of note and so there's always that to fall back on, at this auction that piece sold for X, but you know it takes years to, this sounds kind of strange and I don't mean to say it in the wrong way, it takes you years to tell a crappy piece of art from a good piece of art. And then once you get that gut instinct, you can walk in and immediately, go out of the artist's spectrum of work, that's a nine out of a ten or, you know maybe that's too early for his career. Or it's atypical as a painting. You know, this guy, like Joseph Henry Sharp in Billings, you

know, he was a plein air artist who hung out with Maynard Dixon and Georgia O'Keeffe and those guys. And so Sharp paintings have gone up around seven figures. But for every nice tipi scene on the Yellowstone River, he also painted a pot of flowers. And so, some are much more desirable than others.

**Justin Angle:** When you start getting into some of these more obscure pieces, like I shouldn't say obscure, but like Princess Diana's gown that's more of a collectible in a way, less of a less of a liquid asset than a painting, I would assume. Or like some obscure, like the empty whiskey bottle in Al Capone's vault or whatever. Like, how do you kind of start to approach valuing these items that that maybe don't have the intrinsic value that other works of art have, but have sort of story value attached to them?

**Tim Gordon:** Sure. There are collectors who think that those are art. And so Princess Diana's gowns were made by the world's best dressed designers, of the finest materials for the greatest princess of the last 200 years. Let's go to the empty whiskey bottle. So, I actually didn't finish that story when I went to the granddaughter's house, it flowed forth with plenty. We found Al Capone's historic photographs from his youth. We found, you know, like an Italian Madonna, a Carrara marble Madonna that he used to say the rosary to with his granddaughters. You know, we found his pistol, which

was, he called it Sweetheart, is a 45 automatic pistol that set some records for the sale price. So, let's say that you collect fine firearms. They call it steel canvas. And so, you know, what I liked about his gun is it wasn't beautiful. And, you know, it conjured up all the history of what may or may not have happened with that. He never was really arrested for a violent crime. He went to prison for tax evasion, but yet some guns are works of art, the way they're engraved or, you know, how they're put together. But what I liked about his was the patina of the staghorn grips. You could just see where his hand oil had seeped into it when he owned it, you know? So, there's a beauty to that that collectors see. And going back to when I was a kid and I pulled a bottle out of a dump in Butte, there's a huge, beautiful aspect to an antique bottle that's hand-blown by an artist. Everything made in the world is designed by an artist. Industrial designers, they're great artists. The technicians that create the materials, you know, bottles or whether it be engraving or it's like a fine painting.

**Justin Angle:** We'll be back to my conversation with Tim Gordon after this short break.

**Justin Angle:** Welcome back to A New Angle. I'm speaking with Tim Gordon about his many adventures in appraising art and antiques.

**Justin Angle:** And so, when you're approaching this work, I mean, you have an understanding of the market. Do you often have prospective collectors out there that you know of that are looking for this sort of thing? Are you an intermediary in some ways in this market?

**Tim Gordon:** Yes, I do. And, you know, I do that in particular with Montana history. There's one guy here in Montana who is from Chicago, and he's a younger guy. You know, he's a, I guess he's a Gen Xer. And so, he came to Montana and fell into a slobbering love affair with Montana history. And so, what's neat is I'd like to see him get things and he's willing to pay the market value. However, when I represent Montana clients across the entire state, if somebody has something rare, what I do is, is I take it to the auction venue. I have set, you know, world records for clients with paintings or, you know, whatever treasure they had. And so, what's nice is then it's fair for everybody. It's like a museum can bid on it. A high-end collector can bid on it. My client gets the most money that they can because you get bidding wars that can kind of sometimes be fun. But I'm watching out, I'm brokering for my people. And so, if you're my client, and most of my clients become friends over the year.

**Justin Angle:** It's a pretty intimate level of work. I would assume.

**Tim Gordon:** You take care of them and also, you're entrusted. I have you know, I have lots of things I can't talk about. You're entrusted with their entire lives and their family's lives and their futures. And so, yeah, that's why it's nice to be a Montana guy and just kind of help out Montanans at that level. I do it all over the country and all over the world, but I have a soft spot.

**Justin Angle:** A special place in your heart for Montana projects.

**Tim Gordon:** And people.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah. And so maybe talk about that kind of phase of your work. I mean, you have become this public facing authority for this type of work. I mean, you mentioned Antiques Roadshow. You've done other public high-profile engagements. I mean, there is this sort of an anonymity to what you do. Like you said, you go, you take pictures, then you get spend hours in your office thinking about them and analyzing them. But you're also, in terms of the space, like a very prominent personality in this space. Talk about that.

**Tim Gordon:** Well, for instance, an independent source just named me in the top five list of appraisers. And on that list, you know, a couple of my heroes, the Keno brothers,

who are really sweet friends of mine and Lee and Leslie Keno of the you know, they're in the east.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah, do they count as two of the top five or one of the top five?

**Tim Gordon:** You know what they have in their head, they count for 20 of the top five.

**Justin Angle:** Okay.

**Tim Gordon:** Yeah. Yeah. So, no they're cool guys but I'm sort of be, let's get serious here, to be an expert and have people come to you, that's really something that it's, my God, that feels good. And I live up to it, you know, and when I used to, you know, have a crowd come in to an appraisal event, being in Montanan, and I always stood high and smiled for 12 hours. It wears you out, you know, these events. But I wanted everybody who came in there to see a Montanan with a friendly face, you know. And so, I apply that to being a, you know, a national expert and sometimes an international expert. You know, I'm getting, I'm blushing here, I'm just some dude from Missoula, Montana, you know. But seriously, I tried to try to be sterling of all aspects.

**Justin Angle:** Well, I mean that then that's admirable, Tim, in the sense that you got to be really good at the fundamentals to achieve the level of success you've achieved. At your level, you have to be able to, whoever hires you, to deliver. And it sounds like that's your approach and you can tell that in your web materials as well. No client too big, no client too small. We're going to serve everybody with the same level of excellence.

**Tim Gordon:** I love my web inquiries. I had a guy call me, he was down south recently, and it was in the morning, I have my coffee and I'm sitting there, and I pick up the phone and I go, hi. He goes, I have something sir. I go, what have you got? He goes, the Holy Grail and I go, I go, Pardon me? And he goes, you know, Jesus' cup.

**Justin Angle:** Oh, jeez, the real Holy Grail. He had it.

**Tim Gordon:** I go, where did you find it? And he goes, I just stumbled upon it, and I go, I go, I'm sorry, I don't have any expertise in that one. And but on the other hand, you know, I did recently have a client call and her father is in his nineties and he was in California. And so, during the war, his grandmother had been an art collector and she and the family were taken off to the camps and murdered by the Nazis. And so, he was luckily at a boarding school in the Netherlands, and the painting came to him after the

war. But recently they decided that he had to move out of his home. And the artist was an Austrian artist, a secessionist from around the turn of the century. In this painting, through research, it was found it hung next to the Kiss by Gustav Klimt. And anyway, what was neat was through the process of doing my work and working with some folks in the industry who helped to market it, that thing went ten times world record and brought that whole story to fruition. You know it, you know, his grandmother collected this work and then he held on to it and then his family benefits with it. But it also brought it into the public eye. And that one, I probably won't, you know, mention the name of the artist, or which it was. But it just felt so rewarding to kind of help deliver, to shoot that free through at the end of the 20th century of horror that that family went through. But the painting made it, and. And he made it.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah. Talk about Tim, if you would, I don't necessarily want to frame this as the other side of this conversation, but I would assume that at times you've had individuals and families approach you and they have emotional attachment to family memorabilia, inheritance, etc., that you have to navigate. But also, sometimes I would assume people come to you thinking something is special and very valuable and you have to say, you know, this actually isn't all that valuable or maybe it's a fake or whatever. Talk about maybe some, how you approach those conversations?

**Tim Gordon:** Yeah, you just do it with compassion, you know, you know that their hopes are up. I was doing an appraisal event over in Coeur d'Alene and a couple sat and waited. It was quite a long line, and I was watching them out there and they had a work of art that I couldn't see it when they were holding it. But they came up and, and they go, we have been told this is very, very valuable. And I looked at it and I said, it is valuable because it was given to you by your dear friend, and you've had it all these years. And, you know, they kept pressing me for a monetary value. And, and finally I did give them one and they cried because it was way lower than they thought. And it's like that's hard to deal with. But I tried every avenue I could to just say it truly is valuable, which it was, it was a gift from their departed friends who wanted them to have it.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah. I mean, that opener shows that compassion. It is valuable because it was given to you by somebody special.

**Tim Gordon:** Yeah, but sometimes, you know, you can't sell it for a lot of money. But hey, you know, I'm a big advocate that anything old is cool. It doesn't have to have a big price tag on it.

**Justin Angle:** So, in our remaining time, Tim, talk about, you know, kind of what's next for you, I mean, you're continuing this appraisal work, but other ways to engage the public and tell your story, what are you cooking up?

**Tim Gordon:** So, we are continuously just waiting for the, I'm a junkie. I'm waiting for the next call all the time. We have a couple of good collections coming up. It's funny, I, you know, I did the Al Capone collection this year and all of a sudden then I get contacted about the John Dillinger collections. So instead of being Mr. Fancy Schmancy art appraiser, I'm a gangster guy.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah, you're avoiding the specialty, right?

**Tim Gordon:** Yeah. Right, my new specialty. You know, we have one major art museum, which I am so honored, I won't say what that is yet, till the contract happens, but it actually will benefit Montana and so that's coming up. And then continuously, you know, day by day, I'm representing, you know, estates and clients and people with fine things across the state. And you can always just Google my name and put appraiser at the end. Timothy Gordon, appraiser, and you'll find me.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah, lots of stuff pops up. And how do you then make choices? You got a lot of inbound coming in. I'm sure you have your own sort of priorities and ambitions, how do you balance that? How do you make choices about where you allocate your time and effort?

**Tim Gordon:** Yeah, that's always tough, especially when you want to help the Montana people who sometimes are a time soak. It's usually just off to the races. It's like if an exciting project comes up, we just buy the airplane tickets and go. With everything, you know, there's meat and potatoes time, too. And so, I actually do, you know, finer estates around Montana too, meaning, you know, if somebody passes away and the family is in need of somebody to represent them, we even hit it at that level.

**Justin Angle:** Okay. Curious to get your thoughts on this sort of emergent form of art in the digital space. And some of these, I mean, the market's craze around NFT's and cryptocurrencies and these digital assets has come off a little bit, but at the same time some of the valuations on some of this digital art is eye catching for sure. Talk about your attitude toward that.

**Tim Gordon:** What's interesting is there, who was doing the first created collectible? I mean, it sounds weird, but Warhol was, you know, and then you look at pop culture

things that weren't meant to be collectibles, that are almost like an NFT, like a Pokémon card that will sell for \$100,000, you know? So, I remember my daughter, who's in her late twenties, we sprung for a really rare I think it was a Jigglypuff card when she was a kid and we paid like a hundred bucks for it. A little bit like an NFT. So, moving forward into this, you know, I don't quite understand how it's all melding with cryptocurrency and investment, but I do think that some of these things might down the road just be, you know, people paid so much money for them that people will get hooked on the whole concept of how they exist.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah.

**Tim Gordon:** And I don't know, we're in an interesting world, like when you see a Banksy painting sell in London for millions of dollars and then it shreds automatically after the sale, you know, I mean, yeah. People are playing games with collectibles, and I like that. It's a creativity that adds value and it becomes legend and story and collector juju.

**Justin Angle:** I'm fascinated by the way some of these NFTs, nonfungible tokens for the listener, can be kind of integrated with an experience, right? Like, so you can buy a digital asset that the contract, the smart contract, carries with it access to certain

experiences that others might not have. So that's sort of this opportunity for creators to sort of expand their canvas and a bunch of their new dimensions.

**Tim Gordon:** Yeah, true. It's kind of like chess in Star Trek where it's three dimensional. It's an idea behind an idea. And, and once again, going back to how does that equate to my world, the world of dead people's things, you know, collectors who like fascinating things, it's kind of fascinating that people are playing with all of this. And yet it does provide that experience you're talking about. And it's got a price tag to it that is supposed to be investable. I'm not going to talk to that.

**Justin Angle:** Sure. Well, at the same time, like you mentioned, dead people's things, I'm sure they'll come a time where you're going to have a dead person and there's going to be some digital asset that you have to track down. It won't be the sort of actual cracking of the safe that you referenced earlier, but it will be tracking down some chain of code and cracking that code.

**Tim Gordon:** Then we'll do it at that time.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah, I'm sure you will. Tim, this has been a pleasure. If people want to learn more about you and your work, where would you direct them online?

**Tim Gordon:** Yeah, my website is G Appraisals with an "s." G Appraisals dot com. And I'm just a Missoula guy. You can find me.

**Justin Angle:** Absolutely. Tim, thanks so much.

**Tim Gordon:** All right. Thanks a lot. Had a lot of fun.

**Justin Angle:** Thanks for listening to A New Angle. We really appreciate it. And we're coming to you from Studio 49, a generous gift from UM Alums, Michele and Loren Hansen.

**Justin Angle:** A New Angle is presented by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business, with additional support from Consolidated Electrical Distributors, Drum Coffee and Montana Public Radio. Keely Larson is our producer. VTO, Jeff Ament and John Wicks made our music. Editing by Nick Mott, social media by Aj Williams, and Jeff Meese is our master of all things sound. Thanks a lot and see you next time.