

Swann Galleries, New York City

# Crystal Bridges Buys Top Lot at Sale of Maya Angelou's Art Collection

by Jeanne Schinto  
Photos courtesy Swann

Forty-four artworks from the personal collection of Maya Angelou (1928-2014), poet, playwright, autobiographer, essayist, and performing artist, were auctioned before a joyful, jam-packed audience at Swann Galleries in New York City on September 15 for a total of nearly \$1.3 million. Fourteen of the lots brought new auction records for artists. One of the records was for the top lot, a work by Faith Ringgold—*Maya's Quilt of Life*—that sold to a mystery proxy bidder in the room for \$461,000 (with buyer's premium). It was estimated at \$150,000/250,000. Even Swann didn't know who the buyer was until two days later when a press release revealed that the quilt's new owner was the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas.

"It's very exciting to see them acquire a piece by a contemporary African American artist," said Nigel Freeman, African American fine art specialist for Swann Galleries.

others balance jars and baskets of goods on their heads. They all wear the finely patterned, handwoven cloth of the region. The painting is as much about shapes and colors and textures as it is a celebration of the powerful place that women occupy in African culture.

Both collectors and museums were after this one, Freeman said of the work by Biggers; an unidentified collector got it.

The sale's cover lot was a photograph, a headshot of Angelou by Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe. The silver print with extensive hand coloring was signed and dated in 1993, the year Angelou delivered her poem "On the Pulse of Morning" at Bill Clinton's first U.S. presidential inauguration.

"We'd never had a work by Moutoussamy-Ashe before," said Freeman. "There were incredible amounts of interest in it. More than twenty people registered to bid on that lot. It was off the charts." Estimated at \$1000/1500, the portrait sold for \$17,500, another new record. The buyer on the phone, Freeman said, was the

## *Maya's Quilt of Life* sold to a mystery proxy bidder in the room for \$461,000.

Ringgold (b. Oct. 1930) sat in the auction gallery's front row. She is a painter, mixed-media sculptor, performance artist, writer, teacher, and lecturer well known for her quilts, which combine images and words. This one, composed with acrylic on canvas and painted, dyed, and pieced-together fabrics, was commissioned by Oprah Winfrey for Angelou's 61st birthday, April 4, 1989. It was displayed in Angelou's home in Harlem along with some other artworks.

At the quilt's center is a full-length likeness of Angelou wearing a patterned African dress, head wrap, and big hoop earrings. The portrait is surrounded by flowers and trees and flanked by excerpts from a few of her many books. These include *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'Fore I Diiie* (1971), *Gather Together in My Name* (1974), *The Heart of a Woman* (1981), and her first and best-known work, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), which depicts her life growing up in Stamps, Arkansas, with her brother and grandmother.

Margaret "Margi" Conrads, director of curatorial affairs for Crystal Bridges, said in a prepared statement that the museum was "honored to share this American treasure on a broader scale." Noting that the museum has recently welcomed its two millionth visitor, she added, "Reflecting on this milestone, we recognize our continuing responsibility to engage diverse audiences and expand the American story within our collection." She also expressed the belief that "the work will resonate deeply with our local audiences because of Angelou's Arkansas roots and the culture of the Ozarks, which boasts a long tradition of quilt-making."

The audience in the gallery applauded with frequency. It was a standing-room-only crowd. Literally, once the seats were filled, people lined up against the walls or sat on the floor. A few were offered chairs rolled into the gallery area from Swann's back offices. The previews were crowded too.

"We haven't had as many previewers for African American fine art at Swann since the first couple of sales that inaugurated this department back in 2007," said Freeman. "Many people wanted to come and see firsthand her personal collection, and then—what was terrific—many of those people decided to bid." He added, "One measure of how much interest there was, we ran out of people to man the phones. Anyone who wanted something at this sale really had to fight for it."

While the quilt was the high earner, not far behind was another record breaker, *Kumasi Market* by John Biggers, which sold on the phone for \$389,000. The 1962 oil and acrylic on canvas is a panoramic depiction of market women in Ghana, which Biggers traveled to on a UNESCO fellowship in the late 1950s. Some of the women wear golden broad-brimmed straw hats;

Muscarella Museum of Art at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia.

Angelou owned over 500 artworks, according to her son, Guy Johnson, who wrote an introduction to the catalog. The selections for the auction were made by Freeman in consultation with her family. "I picked works that I hoped would do well, that were representative of her collection and of her connections to artists," he said. Indeed, most were acquired directly from the artists, and many of the best-selling lots bore personal inscriptions to her. For example, among the five other works by Biggers that also did extremely well, there was *Ethiopian Women*, a 1969 drawing in conté crayon on heavy wove paper. Signed, titled, dated, and inscribed "Best Wishes Maya," it sold on the phone for \$37,500 on an estimate of \$15,000/25,000.

*Mankala* by Tom Feelings, a gouache, ink, and pencil drawing on thin wove paper, was inscribed, "To Maya with Black Love, tom feelings [sic]." It depicts children playing a bead game popular across West Africa, including Ghana, where Feelings and Angelou met in the early 1960s while Feelings was employed by the Ghanaian government magazine the *African Review*. The circa 1970 work realized \$5750, nearly quadrupling its high estimate.

"To say that we are honored to handle this collection is an understatement," Nicholas "Nicho" Lowry, Swann's president and principal auctioneer, remarked from the podium. As the lots went up, he frequently quoted Angelou.

"Find some beautiful art and admire it and realize that it was created by human beings, no more, no less," he intoned at one point in his smooth baritone. The sentence came from a letter Angelou wrote to her imagined 15-year-old self in 2012, he said. At another point, he delivered this line of hers, "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." And before selling an Elizabeth Catlett print, his prelude was, "Women should be tough, tender, laugh as much as possible, and live long lives." The advice comes from a prose piece by Angelou titled "In All Ways a Woman." The print sold on the phone for \$5750 (est. \$2000/3000).

"This was a special auction," Freeman said. "To have so much energy in the room and so much bidding—we were thrilled. It was a great mix. Our regular crowd—a very knowledgeable group of collectors—and some people who were participating in a Swann auction for the first time. It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience for me."

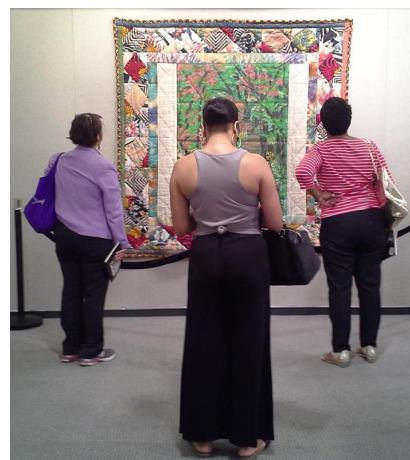
For more information, phone Swann at (212) 254-4710 or see the website ([www.swann galleries.com](http://www.swann galleries.com)).



*Maya's Quilt of Life* by Faith Ringgold (b. 1930) sold to the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art for a record auction price for the artist, \$461,000 (est. \$150,000/250,000). The acrylic on canvas with painted, dyed, and pieced fabrics measures 73" x 73". Ringgold's gallery representative, Dorian Bergen, president of ACA Galleries in New York City, was in the audience for the sale. "We have sold a lot of her quilts both to museums and to private collectors over the last twenty years," said Bergen. Among the most recent sales, she said, was one that went to the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C., for "a comparable price." Another Ringgold quilt, *Tar Beach*, is in the collection of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City. More information about Ringgold's quilts and the rest of her huge body of work in many other media can be found on the gallery's website ([www.acagalleries.com](http://www.acagalleries.com)). Not yet up on the site is the latest news that a Ringgold work will be part of *The Color Line*, an exhibition of African American art to be on view at the Musée du quai Branly in Paris from October 4, 2016, through January 22, 2017. "Her reputation is now growing internationally," said Bergen.



Faith Ringgold is shown signing an auction-goer's catalog after the sale. Schinto photo.



Previewers and the quilt. Schinto photo.



# - AUCTION -



Nigel Freeman. Schinto photo.



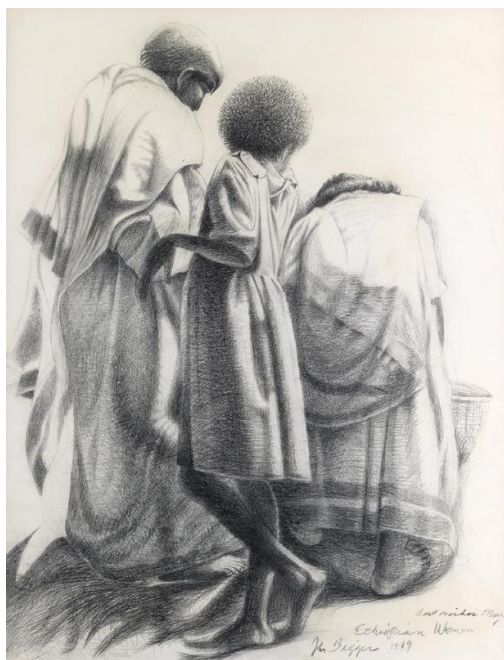
*Maya Angelou* by Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe (b. 1951) sold to the Muscarelle Museum of Art at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, for \$17,500 (est. \$1000/1500). The 10" x 10½" silver print with extensive hand coloring is signed and dated "11/93."



Young previewers. On the wall, *Pensive* by Elizabeth Catlett (1915-2012) sold for \$5750 (est. \$1500/2500). The 1985 lithograph is 10¼" x 8". Schinto photo.



*Falling Star* by Romare Bearden (1911-1988) went to a collector for \$15,000 (est. \$3000/5000). From an edition of 175 plus an artist's proof, the 1980 color lithograph is 23¼" x 18". It is inscribed "For Maya."



*Ethiopian Women* by John Biggers sold to a collector on the phone for \$37,500 (est. \$15,000/25,000). The 37½" x 29" drawing in conté crayon on heavy wove paper mounted to illustration board depicts women in Ethiopia's Gondor Market. It is inscribed in crayon, "Best Wishes Maya."



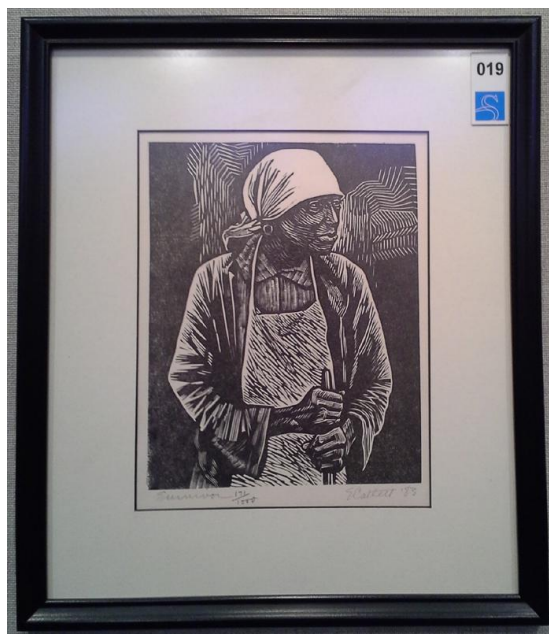
*Mother and Child* by Herman "Kofi" Bailey (1931-1981) sold to a bidder in the room for \$5000 (est. \$1000/1500). The 1973 lithograph on cream wove paper is 22" x 15". The inscription says, "from Jane and Howard to Maya and Paul 1/24/74."



*Mankala* by Tom Feelings (1933-2003) fetched \$5750 (est. \$1000/1500). The 11¼" x 21¼" gouache, ink, and pencil drawing on thin wove paper mounted on illustration board is inscribed, "To Maya with Black Love, tom feelings [sic]." The drawing dates from circa 1970.



This 18" x 24" oil on canvasboard was created by Angelou in 1969. Titled *The Protector of Home and Family*, it is the first known piece of visual art by Angelou to be publicly exhibited or offered for sale. She painted it shortly after completing *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. It was the lone work in the sale that went unsold (est. \$15,000/25,000). Schinto photo.



*Survivor* by Elizabeth Catlett (1915-2012) sold to a phone bidder for \$5750 (est. \$2000/3000). The 1993 linoleum cut is 9½" x 7⅞". It is signed, titled, dated, and numbered 171/1000. Schinto photo.



*Catnap* by Phoebe Beasley (b. 1943) sold to a collector for a record auction price for the artist, \$11,875 (est. \$4000/6000). The 1980 collage of various papers and dyed media on cotton canvas is a 36" x 36".



A portion of the crowd on sale day. Schinto photo.

This was the last lot offered, and as the auction wound down, one could imagine a palpable tension in the room as a chance to buy something at this sale diminished. "I do believe there was extra bidding for that reason towards the end," said Nigel Freeman. Estimated at \$8000/12,000, *OWWAMaya* by Melvin Edwards (b. 1937) sold to a dealer on the phone for \$40,000. Yes, another new record. The 2011 welded steel sculpture is 10" x 7" x 4". The acronym of the title stands for Organization of Women Writers of Africa. The sculpture, made by Edwards expressly for Angelou, was presented to her when she was honored at OWWA's 20th anniversary.





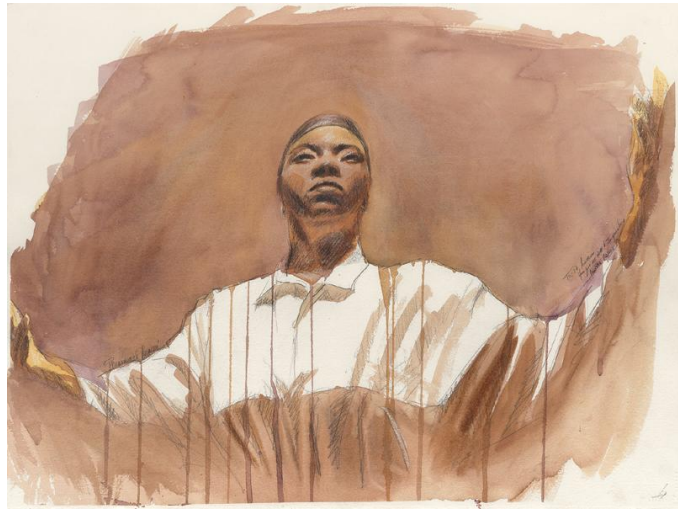
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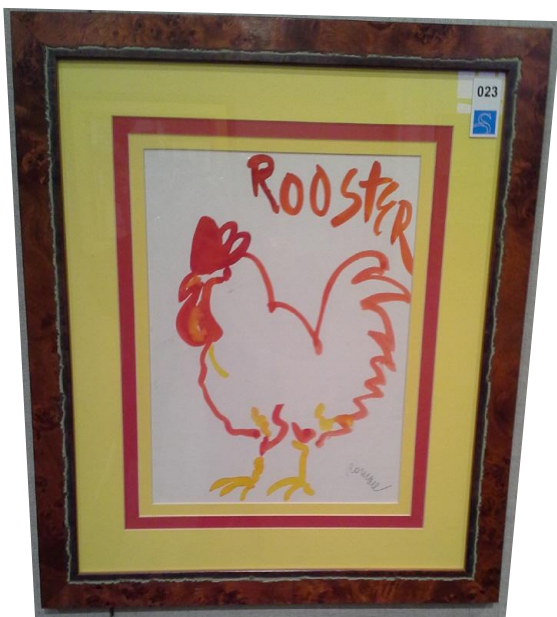
*Wading in the Surf* by Jonathan Green (b. 1955) sold to a collector for \$13,750 (est. \$8000/12,000). The 14" x 11" acrylic on board from 1989 is signed and inscribed "To Maya, Warmly." Schinto photo.



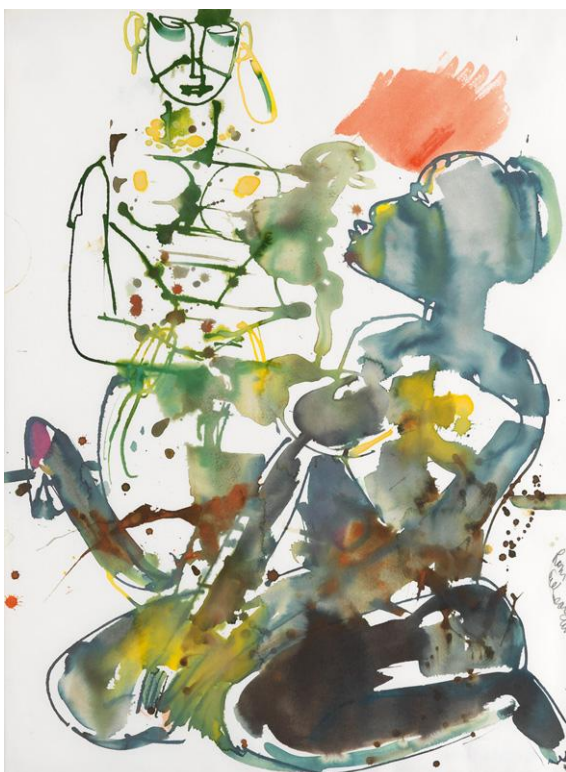
This portrait of James Baldwin (1924-1987) by James McKissic (b. 1972) realized \$9375 (est. \$1000/1500), another new record. The 20" x 16" oil on cotton canvas is titled *Jimmy's Blues*, from the title of a book that Baldwin published in 1985. The painting had been given to Angelou on behalf of McKissic by Clarence Nero. It is inscribed "To Maya Angelou: / Thanks for the inspiration." Schinto photo.



*Phenomenal Woman* by Alonzo Adams (b. 1961) sold to a collector for \$10,000 (est. \$3000/5000), a new auction record for the artist. The 1993 watercolor and pencil is 22¼" x 29¾". It is signed, titled, dated, and inscribed "To: Dr. Angelou— / You give me hope and inspiration."



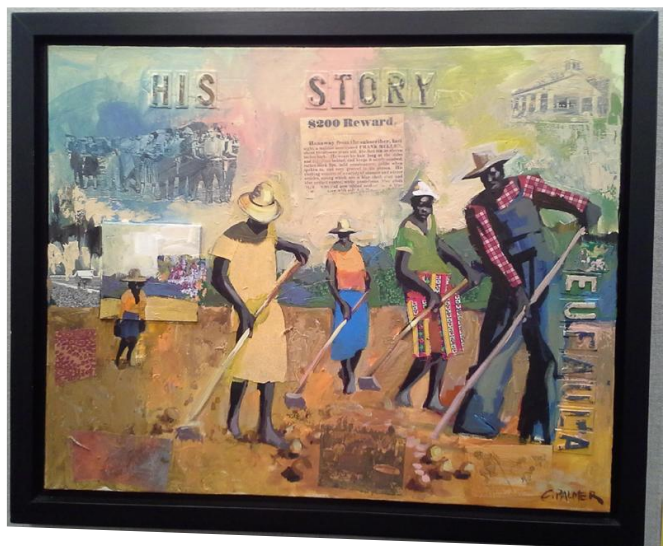
*The Rooster* by Romare Bearden sold to a collector for \$21,250 (est. \$6000/9000). The circa 1985 watercolor on illustration board is 17" x 13". The same bidder bought two other Bearden watercolors in the same media and style that, like this one, were acquired by Angelou directly from the artist. Schinto photo.



*The Obeah's Choice (Le Choix de la Sorcière; Choua Manbo-A)* by Romare Bearden (1911-1988) went on the phone to a collector for \$87,599 (est. \$20,000/30,000). Maya Angelou had bought this 30½" x 22½" watercolor at Cordier & Ekstrom Gallery in New York City, where it was exhibited in Bearden's show *Rituals of the Obeah* in late 1984.



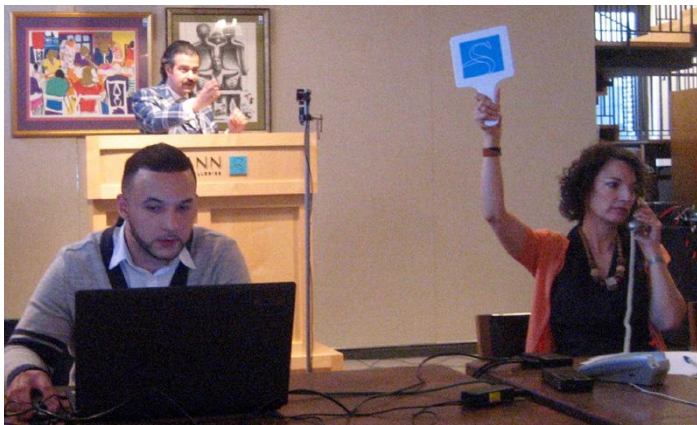
*Kumasi Market* by John Biggers (1924-2001) sold to a collector on the phone for a record-breaking \$389,000 (est. \$100,000/150,000). The price was a big leap. (The previous record for a work by Biggers, made at Swann Galleries on October 8, 2009, was \$216,000.) This 34" x 60" oil and acrylic on masonite board is signed and dated 1962. As with most of the works in this sale, it was acquired by Angelou directly from the artist. Schinto photo.



*His Story* by Charly "Carlos" Palmer (b. 1960) realized yet another new record price when it sold for \$7500 (est. \$2000/3000). The circa 2008 acrylic and collage on canvas is 24" x 30". Schinto photo.



Nicholas "Nicho" Lowry, Swann's president and principal auctioneer, spoke to previewers before the sale and selling at the podium. On the wall behind him are (on right) Phoebe Beasley's *Fine China* and (on left) *Twins of Spring* by John Biggers. The 1993 color screen print by Beasley sold on the phone for \$4000 (est. \$1000/1500). The lithograph on cream wove paper by Biggers went to an online bidder for \$6200 (est. \$2000/3000). Taking a bid, Stephen Figueroa is shown on the left; Christine von der Linn, a senior specialist in art, press, and illustrated books, is shown on the right. Schinto photos.



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