

Skinner, Inc., Boston, Massachusetts

# Agnes Martin's *Blue Flower* Makes a Cool \$1.5 Million

by Jeanne Schinto  
Photos courtesy Skinner

The little, unassuming pale blue collage did not appear to be the most probable candidate for million-dollar baby at Skinner's paintings and sculpture sale on May 29 at its Boston gallery. Nonetheless, Agnes Martin's 1962 *Blue Flower* in oil, glue, nails, and canvas stretched over an 11 5/8" x 11 3/8" panel was the evening's unchallenged headliner. It sold to a dealer on the phone at just above its low estimate for \$1,539,000 (all prices include buyers' premiums).

Significantly, it was the first time that Skinner's art department had sold a million-dollar-plus work that was not a Fitz Henry Lane. Even though the buyer was from New York City, it still registered as a milestone for the auction house—in fact

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for Boston itself, which has been notoriously reluctant to embrace the current, raging trend for 20th-century art.

"Not that I don't like Fitz Henry Lane," said department head Robin S.R. Starr. "I loved the run we had with Fitz, but we were so thrilled to get to present something modern. We and the market as a whole are moving to post-World War Two. Fifteen years ago, we couldn't give away modern works. Boston was a conservative city." Granted, Starr continued, many of Skinner's postwar offerings go to buyers farther afield than Boston. "But some stay right here, and the market is just champing at the bit for more. Modern and contemporary—that's what [buyers] want. So we were very, very happy to have something that was much more timely."

Titled, signed, and dated on the reverse, *Blue Flower* came fresh from a private New England collection at precisely the right moment. In the last couple of years, there has been buzz galore about Agnes Martin (Canadian/American, 1912-2004) in anticipation of the artist's retrospective that opened at London's Tate Modern on June 3, less than a week after the Skinner sale. On view at the Tate through October 11, the show includes, among some 100 items in all, dozens of small grid-like works in muted tones like the one sold by Skinner. It will then travel to the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Düsseldorf; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City. Coinciding with the retrospective, a literary event took place two weeks after the Tate Modern

opening. Nancy Princenthal's *Agnes Martin: Her Life and Art*, the first biography of the artist, had its publication launch.

On the morning after the Skinner sale, art-minded readers who opened the *Wall Street Journal* would likely have noticed yet another media report about Martin, this one making an easy prediction that the retrospective will help raise the artist's profile even higher. If history is a guide, it will also give her prices even more lift than they have had of late. On November 13, 2013, at Sotheby's in New York, a very large (75" x 75") Martin work from 1964, *The Beach*, sold for \$6,549,000—a new auction record for the artist.

Skinner itself, of course, created some of the Martin buzz as part of its marketing strategy. On May 1 in the arts section of the *New York Times* the auction house ran an ad for *Blue Flower*. Potential bidders were encouraged to pre-

view it in the auction house's new regional office at 415 Madison Avenue in Midtown Manhattan. The eventual buyer had done exactly that.

*Coast of Monterey*, the given title for a 1912 California landscape by Thomas Moran, was another of the evening's high points. Like the Martin, the 25 1/8" x 30" oil on canvas came fresh from a New England collection. Owned by the same family for three generations and in excellent condition, the painting sold on the phone for \$723,000 (est. \$250,000/350,000). At least five other active phone bidders were on this one, but the underbidder was that rarest of the rare at auctions these days, someone bidding by paddle in the room.

Moran, who was born in England and grew up in Pennsylvania, loved the American West. Well known for having been part of Ferdinand V. Hayden's 1871 geological survey expedition to what is now Yellowstone, he was hired along with photographer William Henry Jackson to document the geysers, hot springs, canyons, and cliffs of the territory. The images would be instrumental in persuading Congress to set the land aside as a national park. Through the years, Moran also painted in the Yosemite Valley, Sierra Nevada, and Lake Tahoe areas, and in the Teton Mountains of Wyoming, where Mount Moran was named in his honor. He moved permanently to Santa Barbara in 1922, four years before his death.

The second and last six-figure lot of the night was 20th-century Russian artist Pavel Tchelitchev's religious picture *Annunciation*—a modern interpretation of the angel Gabriel

announcing to the Virgin Mary her pregnancy with Jesus Christ. Estimated at \$70,000/90,000, the painting sold for \$315,000. Once again a fresh work from a private New England collection, the large (51 3/4" x 35 1/2") oil on canvas was signed and dated "P. Tchelitchev 31."

Together these three images achieved \$2,577,000. The auction as a whole, including the afternoon's session of fine prints and photographs, brought a total of \$3,927,602. Notable buy-ins seemed to include a 1908 Cape Cod beach scene by William Glackens with expectations of \$250,000/350,000. "It was fresh to the market, but it was not a conservative estimate—to say the least," said Starr. As of early July it was listed as having sold for \$200,000 after the auction closed. Other lots that failed to sell (and haven't sold yet) were a Martin Johnson Heade floral (est. \$50,000/70,000), an

Aristide Maillol bronze (est. \$120,000/180,000), and a Jane Peterson seascape of an unidentified place on Boston's North Shore (est. \$70,000/90,000).

"As you know from covering these sales for so many years, we do better when we can be conservative," said Starr. "Sometimes a big heady estimate scares people off. Obviously, you want to protect your consignor, but it's a balancing act."

An example among many conservative estimates that paid off was the one set for a Navajo woman's portrait by Walter Ufer, who worked in New Mexico in the early part of the 20th century. On expectations of \$8000/12,000, the oil on canvas sold for \$25,830. According to the catalog, the painting had come from a private Florida collection. Asked if it happened to be consigned as a result of Skinner's establishment of another new regional office, in the Sunshine State, Starr said,

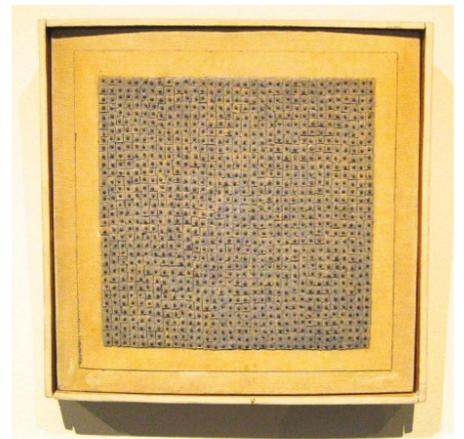
"That walked into an appraisal day at the Coral Gables Museum, which is about a block and a half from our Florida office."

All auction houses depend a little on pieces of luck like that, but having the appraisal day in the first place at a location nearly 1500 miles from Skinner's home base wasn't luck. It was market savvy from a once strictly regional auction house whose clientele of buyers and sellers increasingly isn't regional at all.

In sum, said Starr, "We were thrilled with the quality of what we put together for this sale. There were great pieces from all periods from so many different private sources. The market right now is sort of capricious. The good news is, if people want it, they go gangbusters. So we couldn't have been happier with the majority of the results."

For more information, phone Skinner at (617) 350-5400 or see the website ([www.skinnerinc.com](http://www.skinnerinc.com)).

***Blue Flower* by Agnes Martin (1912-2004) sold to a New York dealer for \$1,539,000 (est. \$1,500,000/2,000,000). Dated 1962, the collage of oil, glue, nails, and canvas is on canvas stretched over an 11 5/8" x 11 3/8" panel. Many of the artist's works look minimalist, but she considered herself to be an Abstract Expressionist. Schinto photo.**



**The Agnes Martin collage shared a column at the preview with one of the oldest pictures on offer at the sale, a portrait of Katharina von Bora. Cataloged as school of Lucas Cranach the Elder (circa 1472-1553), the 12 7/8" x 10" oil on panel sold on the phone for \$7380 (est. \$7000/9000). Schinto photos.**





Thomas Moran (1837-1926), *Coast of Monterey*, 25 1/8" x 30", oil on canvas, 1912, \$723,000. Schinto photo.



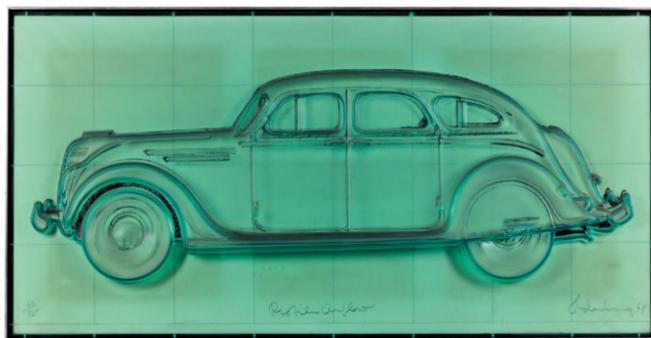
Pavel Tchelitchew (1898-1957), *Annunciation*, 51 3/4" x 35 1/2", oil on canvas, 1931, \$315,000.



*Pembroke Studio Interior* by David Hockney (b. 1937) sold for \$23,370 (est. \$15,000/25,000). The 1984 color lithograph on paper, sheet size 41" x 49 1/4", was the top lot of the fine prints and photographs portion of the sale. From a 1984 edition of 70 plus proofs, the image was in its original frame hand painted by the artist.



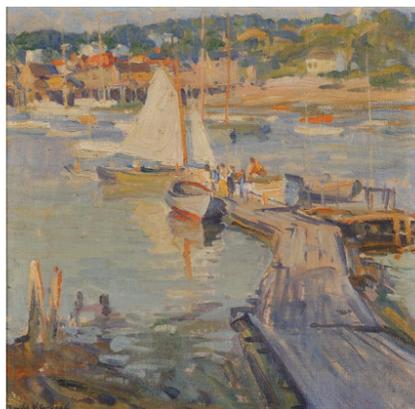
*Gretchen* by Richard Longo (b. 1953) brought \$23,370 (est. \$5000/7000). The lithograph on paper, sheet size 67" x 39", is from a 1984 edition of 38 plus proofs.



*Profile Airflow* by Claes Oldenburg (b. 1929) fetched \$13,530 (est. \$15,000/20,000). The work is cast green polyurethane relief over lithography in black and gray on paper. The image/sheet size is 32 3/4" x 65". From a 1969 edition of 75 plus proofs, it was numbered 60/75 and in the artist's original aluminum frame.



Gunnar M. Widforss (1879-1934), *Grand Canyon*, watercolor on paper, sight size 14 1/4" x 24 1/2", \$22,140 (est. \$6000/8000). The Swedish-American artist specialized in wilderness watercolors such as this one, and the Grand Canyon was his quintessential subject.



Bidders judged *Boat Landing* to be the best of six by Emile Gruppé (1896-1978) on offer at this sale; it achieved \$15,990 (est. \$3000/5000). In addition to this 16" x 16" oil on canvas, three of the other Gruppé oils (not shown) fetched \$7380, \$6765, and \$5658; two others were unsold.



*Hudson River Marshes, a Study* by Sanford R. Gifford (1823-1880) went to a phone bidder for \$33,210 (est. \$8000/12,000). The unsigned 5" x 10 3/16" oil on canvas was stamped "S.R. Gifford SALE" in red on the reverse—an indication that it had come from the artist's estate. From a private California collection, the painting is almost certainly related to Gifford's 1878 *Marshes of the Hudson*, a privately owned picture lent to the Metropolitan Museum of Art for a Gifford exhibition in 2003.



William Aiken Walker (1839-1921), *Couple with Ox Cart*, 6" x 10", oil on board, \$23,370 (est. \$4000/6000).



The last lot of the evening was *Scumak* by Roxy Paine (b. 1966). The 17 1/2" x 26" x 19" orange polyethylene sculpture was created by the artist by means of a computer-controlled plastic extruder. Some previewers weren't sure whether to look at it or run from it. *Scumak* went unsold during the sale but as of July was listed as having sold for \$1845. Schinto photo.



*Lauren Street, Charleston* by Thomas Adrian Fransioli (1906-1997) is subject matter of the South with a Modernist edge. The 22 1/4" x 26" oil on canvas, initialed and dated "T.F. 1951," sold to a phone bidder for \$41,820 (est. \$3000/4000).



After Boston's record-breaking (and sometimes heart-breaking) snowfalls of last winter, one could legitimately wonder how well this painting would do. In fact, *Trinity Church, Copley Square in Winter* by John Whorf (1903-1959) did just fine, selling for \$13,530 (est. \$3500/5500). The watercolor and gouache on paper has a sight size of 21" x 29 1/2".



This is not a relief. It is a 30" x 25" oil on canvas trompe l'oeil by Joseph Lindon Smith (1863-1950). An artist based in Boston and Dublin, New Hampshire, Smith was primarily known for his ability to depict with uncanny illusory effect the murals and tomb sculpture of Egypt and other ancient cultures. A depiction of the pharaoh Seti and the deity Horus, *Seti Offering Ceremonial Garments to Horus*, went to a phone bidder for \$14,760 (est. \$6000/8000).



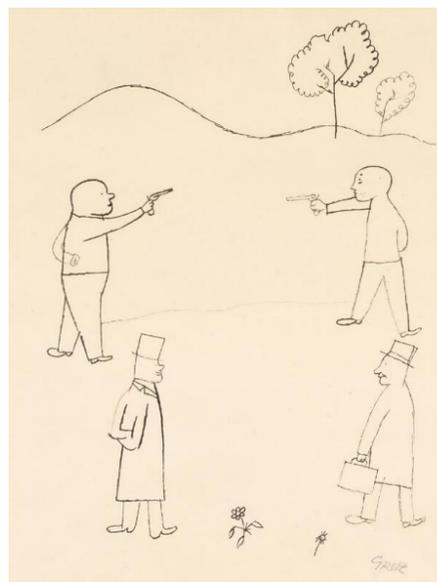
Walter Ufer (1876-1936), *Navajo Woman*, 28" x 22 3/4", oil on canvas, \$25,830.



This was a fun one. From the "Wallflower" series of Laura Ann Jacobs (b. 1960), *Under the C Cup* sold for \$1599 (est. \$1000/1500). Dated, titled, and signed "2012-103ACCM / ... LAURA A JACOBS" on the reverse, the mixed-media work is 21" x 12 1/2" x 8".



This untitled work by Carlos Merida (Guatemalan, 1891-1984) brought \$30,750 (est. \$25,000/35,000). The 17 1/4" x 16 1/2" oil on masonite was acquired by the consignor circa 1971 in Mexico City.



12 3/4" x 9 3/4". Three other works by Grosz in the same medium fetched \$11,070, \$7995, and \$5535.

*Duel* by George Grosz (1893-1959) sold for \$15,990 (est. \$3000/5000). The image is ink on paper with a sight size of

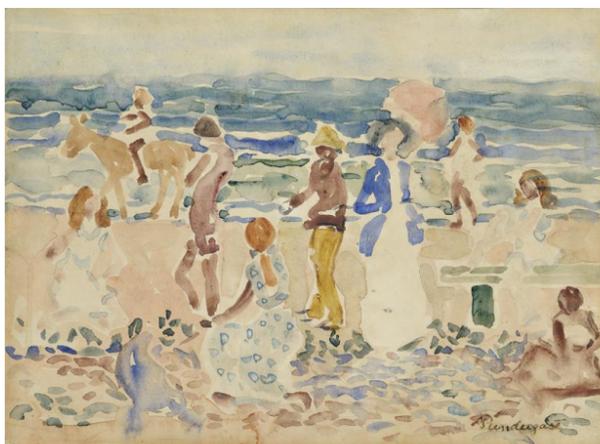


*Study for Girl Sick in Bed* by Norman Rockwell (1894-1978) sold to a phone bidder for \$73,800 (est. \$60,000/80,000). The circa 1936 charcoal on paper/board, sight size 22 1/4" x 17 3/4", is the original of an image that appeared on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* on January 23, 1937. Another Rockwell (not shown), a study for *Tom Sawyer (Schoolmaster Flogging Tom Sawyer)*, 18 1/2" x 14 3/8", in the same medium, went to a different phone bidder for \$36,900 (est. \$30,000/50,000). Each of these was inscribed to a cousin of Rockwell; he referred to her as "Mary Amy" in one case and "Mary-Amy" in the other.



*Petit Carré Rouge* by Jesús Rafael Soto (1923-2005) made \$52,275 (est. \$22,000/28,000). Signed and dated "SOTO/1965," the Venezuelan artist's sculpture is in oil, metal, and wood, and measures 18 5/16" x 13 3/16" x 4 1/4". On June 23, 2005, the same piece had sold at Sotheby's in London for £18,000 (\$32,677)—not a bad return on investment, if that's what it was.

*Portrait Head of a Man* by George Tooker (1920-2011) brought \$18,450 (est. \$15,000/20,000). The subject of the 20" x 14" oil on canvas is believed to be artist/illustrator Jaro Fabry (1912-1953). The buyer was an absentee bidder. Schinto photo.



*Donkey Rider*, alternately titled *On the Beach*, by Maurice Brazil Prendergast (1858-1924) sold for \$28,290 (est. \$25,000/35,000). The 1920-23 watercolor on paper is 9" x 12".



*Flower Girl* by Charles Webster Hawthorne (1872-1930) sold for \$18,450 (est. \$18,000/22,000). The portrait is 22" x 18" in oil on canvas laid down on panel. Schinto photo.



*A Cape Cod Shore* by William Glackens (1870-1938) is a 25 1/4" x 30 1/4" oil on canvas. Estimated at \$250,000/350,000, the 1908 picture did not sell during the sale but is now listed as having sold for \$200,000. Schinto photo.