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"Fresh" Never Gets Stale

by Jeanne Schinto

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**Skinner, Inc., Boston,
Massachusetts**

by Jeanne Schinto

Photos courtesy Skinner

Skinner's American and European paintings and prints auction on May 20 at its Boston gallery featured four dozen mid-to late 20th-century works from the New York estate of an arts benefactor that had been warehoused for two decades. "Some were strange, quirky, and unknown; others were just great finds," said department head Robin S.R. Starr. "They really helped make the sale."

One of the finds was British artist Peter Lanyon's 1961 oil on canvas *Deep Blue Coast*. Causing for the auction's phone lines to be fully subscribed, it sold to a dealer in the United Kingdom for \$201,450 (including buyer's premium). The estimate on the abstract composition in blue, white, black, and yellow with several strong slashes of red was \$3000/5000.

His paintings are "all about landscape," seascape specifically, said Starr. Lanyon worked in St. Ives, Cornwall, the most southwesterly pinpoint of England's coastline. "He would experience [a designated spot] over the course of several weeks or months. He'd walk it, drive it, swim in it, in good weather and bad." He bought himself a red glider and would even fly over the top of it. Then he'd put down on the canvas the way it made him feel.

"Art is not a Rorschach test," Starr cautioned. "However, knowing that all his images were coming from landscape, it is hard not to see beach, waves, and that red glider in this one."

Among the collection's more traditional contemporary works was an acrylic on paperboard by Richard Anuszkiewicz (b. 1930) that went to a New York dealer on the phone for \$11,850 after fierce competition from six other phone bidders and several absentees. The untitled red, pink, and green Op Art composition was unsigned but authenticated by the artist and will be included in his upcoming revised catalogue raisonné. A more obscure piece was an oil on canvas by Shanti Dave (Indian, b. 1931) that fetched \$5629 from a Pennsylvania-based collector on the phone.

The consigned estate paintings were the collection of a woman who had lived in Manhattan for many years and planned one day to open a gallery. She "chose well," although those choices were "the secondary rather than the primary, most blue-chip names," said Starr. The woman did, however, have some prints by Georges Braque, Alexander Calder, Max Ernst, Alex Katz, Man Ray, Joan Miró, Henry Moore, and Kenneth Noland. She had some pieces of sculpture too.

One sculpture was a 1963-65 painted-wood and acrylic kinetic construction, *Instabilitie* by Jean-Pierre ("Yaral") Vasarely (1934-2002), that sold for \$7703. Another three-dimensional work in the group shows that its collector had a sense of humor, since the 1981 bronze by Lester Wiese (b. 1928) resembles a smooth and shiny, shall we say, coco de mer? Titled *Little Dolly*, it's from Wiese's "Bikini" series and made \$2133.

There were also four ceramic works by the playful David Gilhooly (b. 1943). *Erotic Frogs on Roll, Frog on Roll, Frog Taco, and Chocolate Dip Ice Cream Cone* from the artist's "FrogFood" series of the 1970's—they are accurately described by their titles—sold in one lot for \$4740.

"As a group, the collection had a personality," Starr said, "and although her rationale was that someday she was going to have a shop, clearly she was buying with her own taste in mind. She was not picking out obviously commercial work. She wasn't thinking in terms of the market," which is generally "an absolute disaster." She bought the things she loved. "She may have used the idea of opening a shop as a way to rationalize the same compulsive [collecting] behavior that many of us display."

The top lot of the evening session of the all-day sale came from a different source, a private Cincinnati, Ohio, collection. It was a circa 1870 oil on canvas genre painting by Carl Spitzweg (German, 1808-1885). Titled *Der Briefträger* (*The Postman*), it shows a woman in a town square wiping one hand on her apron and reaching expectantly for a letter from a postman with the other. The setting is just as expressive as the figures. The architecture literally soars above them—a metaphor for the woman's excitement. Four phone bidders wrote "Return to Sender" on the painting's \$70,000/90,000 estimate. One, calling from Germany, took it for \$248,000.

"The work was not listed in the artist's catalogue raisonné; it's a new discovery," said Starr. "You and I talk about this after every auction, but it's those great, fresh-to-the-market, largely undocumented objects that just take off." Yes, it's the same old news: "Fresh" never gets stale.

Another fresh work that did well was a print by Frank Weston Benson. His etchings are common at Skinner art auctions, but this one, consigned by the family of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Morse of Boston, was a rarity. The 1915 image depicts three of the artist's four children—Elisabeth, George, and Eleanor—fishing just off shore of North Haven, the island in Maine where the Bensons summered.

Titled *The Fishermen*, tongue in cheek no doubt, it is based on Benson's 1904 painting *Calm Morning*, owned by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. "It was an intended edition of fifty, but he only did eighteen," said Starr. "Plus, there's the subject matter. This is one he didn't do much in printmaking. It was too hard to resist, and obviously people didn't." On a \$3000/5000 estimate, it brought \$16,590.

Robert Spear Dunning's *Still Life with Root Vegetables*, consigned by a private New England collection after being on loan to a New England institution, attracted serious institutional interest. Whether it was an institution that bought it for \$88,875, Starr could only surmise. "It went to an agent that I suspect was working for an institution," she said. "At least one other phone bidder was an institution straight out."

The oil on canvas in a period frame isn't Dunning's usual subject matter. The cofounder of the Fall River Evening Drawing School favored fuzzy peaches, reflections in glassware, polished silver, lush cut-flower arrangements, and other symbols of the opulent Victorian life that was being enjoyed by owners of that city's textile mills of the period. Starr said, "He was known for his absolute showpieces, demonstrating every painting trick he knew. This one is different. It shows the ingredients before the meal is prepared. A turnip is not generally considered to be a thing of beauty. Here it is. If you're going to have only one, you want a quintessential one, but this painting broke the rules. It's a subtle masterpiece."

An unsigned oil on canvas of a harbor in long shadows (est. \$30,000/50,000) was a bit of a conundrum. In 1992 it was sold for \$2475 by Butterfields as the work of California artist Selden Gile (1877-1947) with the subject as Belvedere, a fishing village in Marin County.

Subsequently, it sold to a private collector on Massachusetts' Cape Ann. At Skinner it was cataloged as being attributed to Jane Peterson with the subject as the famous Cape Ann fishing shack in Rockport known as "Motif #1."

During the First World War, Peterson visited Cape Ann, where she painted street and harbor scenes in the Gloucester area. She is not known to have painted Motif #1. If she had, Starr argued, she would have chosen this painting's "quirky, strange angle" and its palette. No matter whose hand painted it, Starr declared it to be "a great picture, and in some ways that's almost more what counts." Its buyer, on one opening bid, was a dealer in the room who paid \$11,850.

A signed and verified Peterson was consigned by a Massachusetts couple who bought it circa 1970. Lotus Flower is a gorgeous portrait of a woman in a long dress of white fabric printed with pink flowers and with a blue sash seated in a garden. Between 1916 and 1920, Peterson did a series of garden paintings while touring the United States. The scene of this one has been identified as Laurelton Hall in Laurel Hollow, Long Island, New York, built by and for Louis Comfort Tiffany, where Peterson stayed as a guest for several months. Peterson's flower "portraits" are regularly offered by Skinner. This "foreshadows" those, said Starr, but saddled with a grandiose \$100,000/150,000 estimate, the painting did not sell.

"I think it deserved the estimate, but it was not conservative," said Starr. "If the world were mine to command, I would have suggested a lower one. On a great picture you take a chance, and sometimes it pays off. Unfortunately, this time it didn't, but I still think it was worth taking the chance."

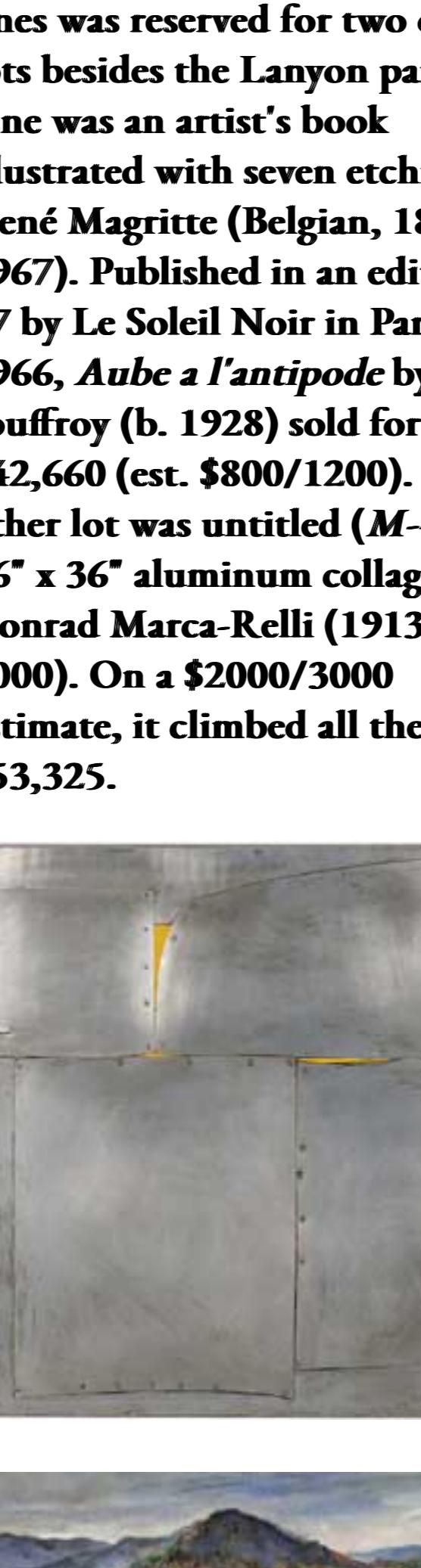
Coastal Surf, a boldly expressive oil on canvas by William Henry Johnson, had the opposite kind of estimate and produced a very different marketplace dynamic as a result. The painting was a consignment from a picker who got it from a Huntington, Long Island, New York, estate, said Starr. "He didn't have much in it so was happy enough to go with a casual estimate"—i.e., just \$5000/7000. It opened with an Internet bid of \$5500, then several more-than-eager phone bidders took over, one of whom got it for \$82,950.

The fresh work with a lowball estimate was rare to boot. "There aren't many of his pictures out there because he wasn't painting for what would have been the most productive years of his life," said Starr. Things were apparently going OK for the African-American South Carolina native, but then his spirit was broken by his wife's early death, and he was hospitalized with mental illness from 1947 until his own death 23 years later.

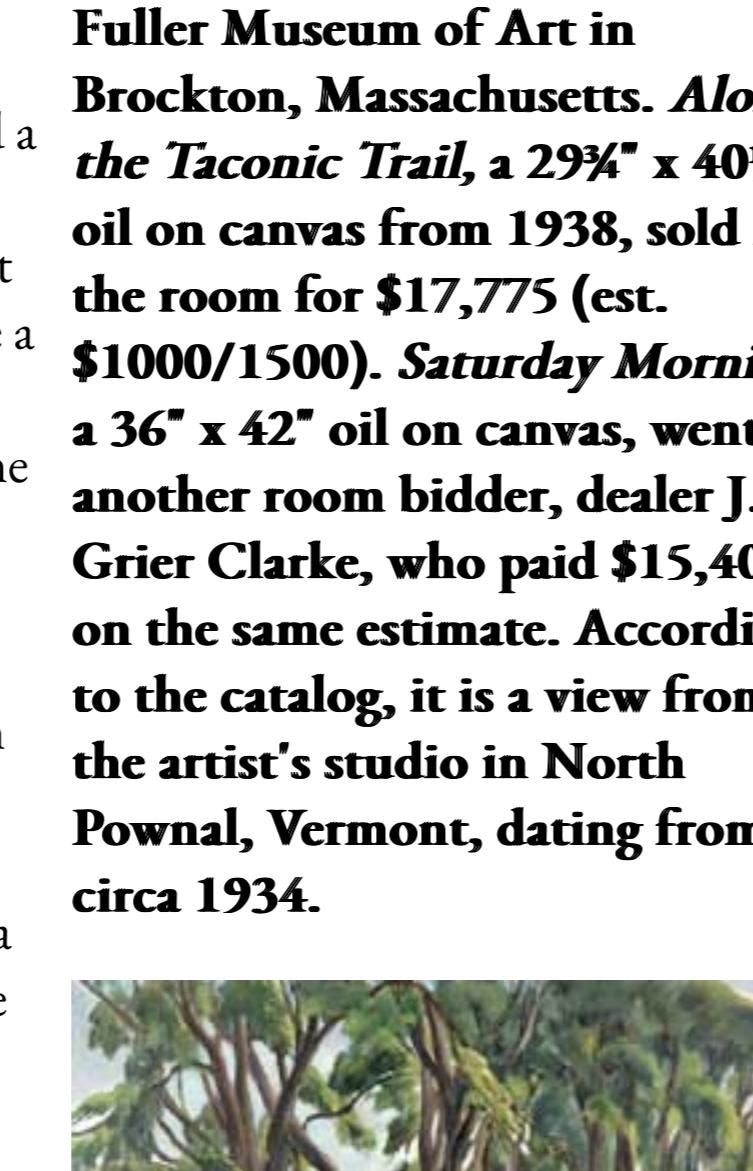
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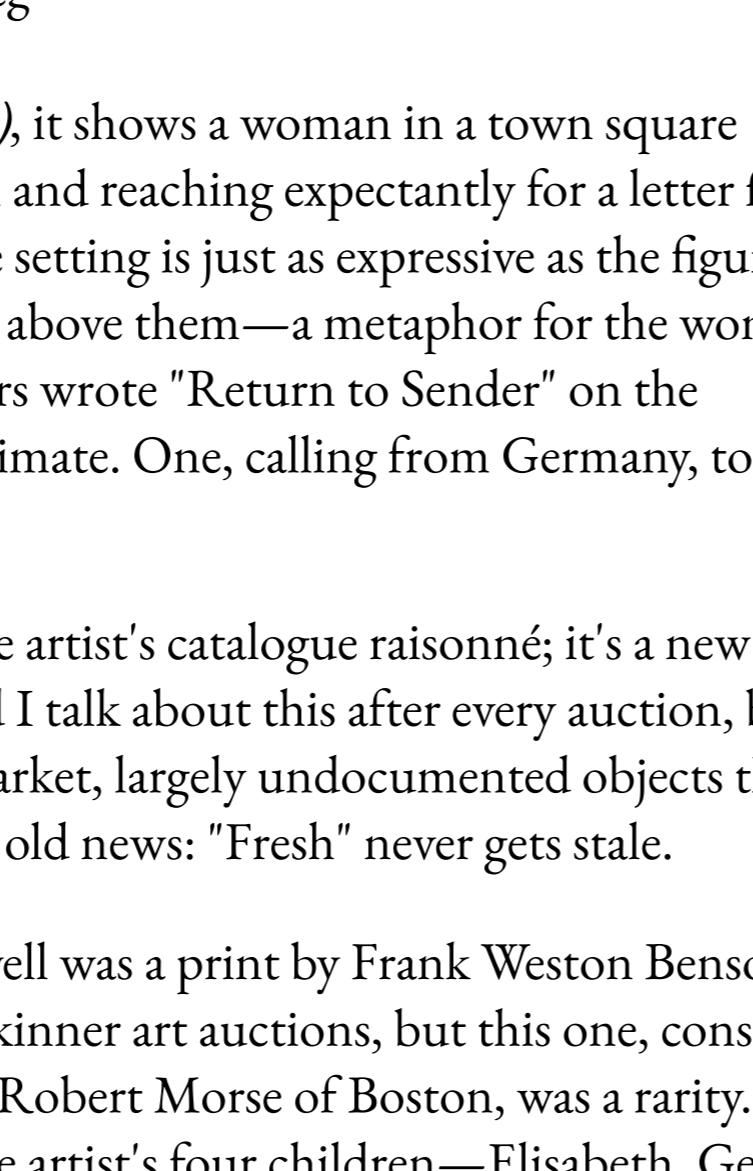
***The Fishermen* by Frank Weston Benson (1862-1951) sold for \$16,590 (est. \$3000/5000). The 7 7/8" x 6" (plate size) etching on Shogun paper with watermark is dated 1915 and numbered 1/50. Only 18 of the intended 50 were printed.**



***Der Briefträger* by Carl Spitzweg (German, 1808-1885) sold for \$248,000 (est. \$70,000/90,000). The circa 1870 21 1/4" x 12" oil on canvas went back to Germany.**

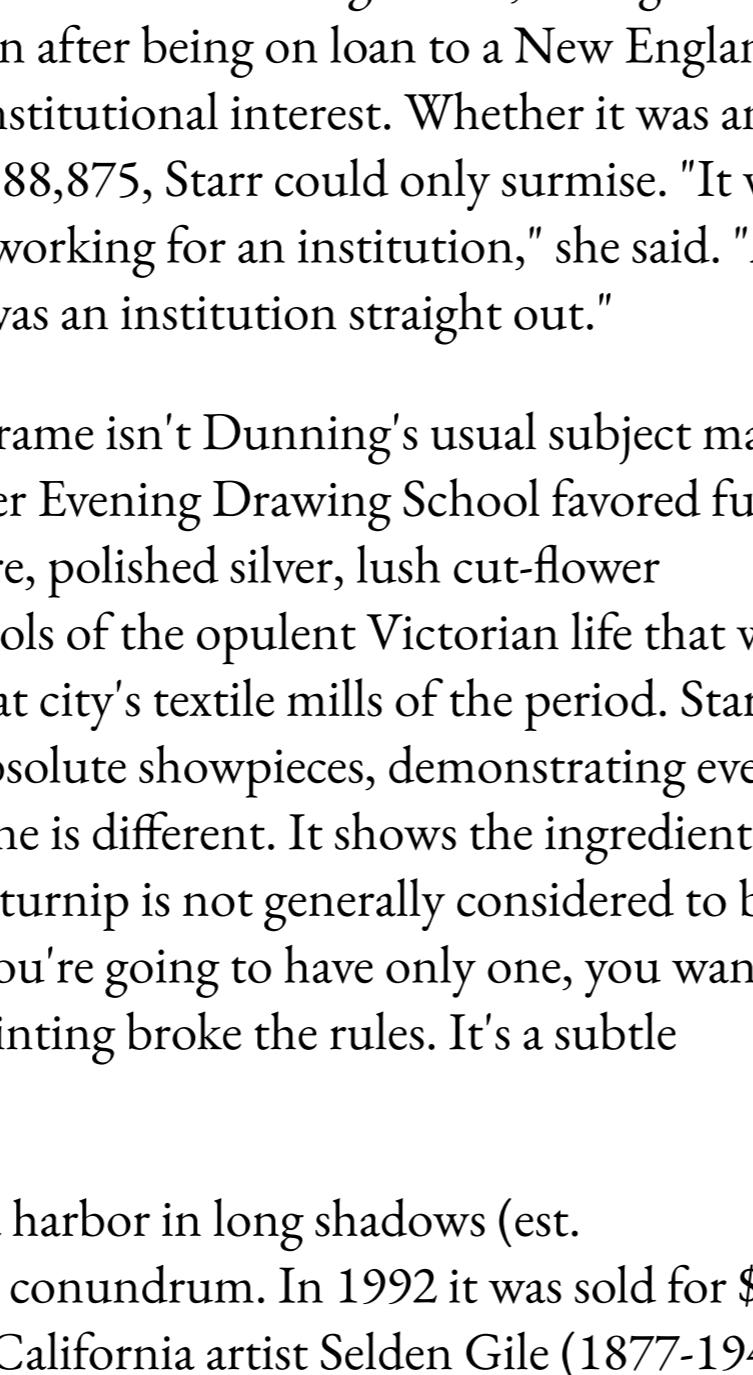


***Coastal Surf* by William Henry Johnson (1901-1970), a 23 1/4" x 31 1/2" oil on canvas, went to a phone bidder at \$82,950 (est. \$5000/7000).**

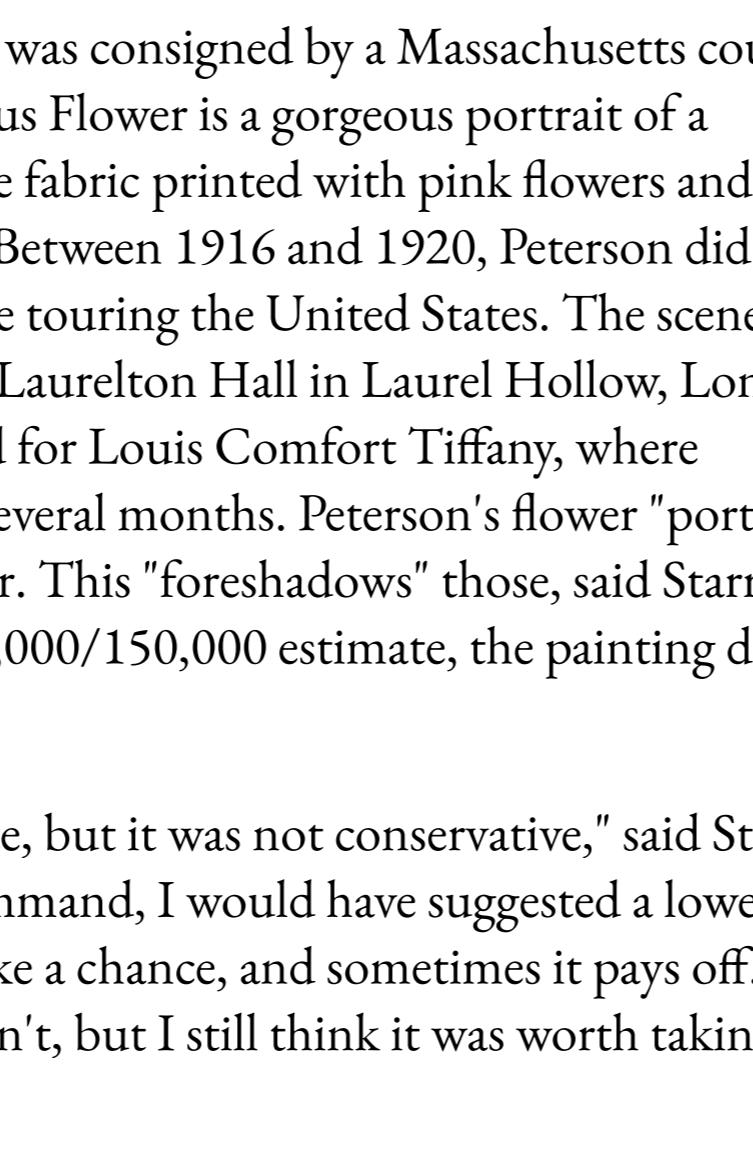


The maximum number of phone lines was reserved for two other lots besides the Lanyon painting. One was an artist's book

illustrated with seven etchings by René Magritte (Belgian, 1898-1967). Published in an edition of 17 by Le Soleil Noir in Paris in 1966, *Aube à l'antipode* by Alain Jouffroy (b. 1928) sold for \$42,660 (est. \$800/1200). The other lot was untitled (M-4-63), a 36" x 36" aluminum collage by Conrad Marca-Relli (1913-2000). On a \$2000/3000 estimate, it climbed all the way to \$53,325.



The sale offered two paintings by Marion Husé (1896-1967) that brought strong prices. Each came from the same source, the New Britain Museum of American Art in Connecticut by way of the Fuller Museum of Art in Brockton, Massachusetts. *Along the Taconic Trail*, a 29 1/2" x 40 1/2" oil on canvas from 1938, sold in the room for \$17,775 (est. \$1000/1500). *Saturday Morning*, a 36" x 42" oil on canvas, went to another room bidder, dealer J. Grier Clarke, who paid \$15,405 on the same estimate. According to the catalog, it is a view from the artist's studio in North Pownal, Vermont, dating from circa 1934.



A painting by British sculptor Barbara Hepworth (1903-1975) was the sale's cover lot. *Rock Forms*, a 23 1/4" x 12" oil and pencil on masonite, inscribed, titled, and dated 1961, sold on the phone for \$59,250 (est. \$20,000/30,000) to a New York modern and contemporary gallery owner.

***Deep Blue Coast* by Peter Lanyon (British, 1918-1964), a 48" x 30" oil on canvas, signed and dated Lanyon '61, fetched \$201,450 (est. \$3000/5000).**

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