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A "Rainy Night" and Then a Rainbow

by Jeanne Schinto

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Skinner, Inc., Boston, Massachusetts

Photos courtesy Skinner

“Trust me. It doesn’t ‘go’ in the very Modernist house of the present owners,” Robin S.R. Starr said of Lesser Ury’s *Rainy Night, Berlin*. Starr is head of Skinner’s department of American and European paintings and prints. Maybe with a Modernist frame it could work, but the 1920’s painting, shipped out of Germany as the Nazis rose to power and in the consignors’ family ever since, went on the block as the cover lot of the sale on May 17 in the auction house’s Boston gallery.

Estimated at \$80,000/120,000, the oil on canvas now belongs to someone else. That buyer, a phone bidder from Germany, paid \$264,000 (including buyer’s premium) for the picture showing period cars, with big golden-eyed headlights, and a couple crossing a golden-puddled street under a black umbrella.

“Ury loved that sort of night life, of Berlin in particular,” said Starr. “He was a German Expressionist, but instead of showing the seedy side, he embraced the joyful side of modern life. The woman under the umbrella has fur cuffs and collar on her coat. This is a night on the town.”

A mid-19th-century Hudson River school landscape, complete with a rainbow, by American expatriate Louis Rémy Mignot was the only other piece in the 514-lot sale that achieved six figures. Estimated at \$30,000/50,000, the painting came fresh from the estate of Elizabeth A. Straus of New York and Maine, and fetched \$120,000. According to research for Skinner, the oil on canvas is “probably” *Close of a Showery Day, Lake George*, sold by Snedcor’s Gallery in New York on June 2, 1862. The new owner is a private collector in the Northeast, said Starr.

Estimated at the six-figure level, John Leslie Breck’s *The River Epte, Giverny* did not find a buyer, although its \$100,000/150,000 expectations were not out of line. On November 16, 2007, Skinner had gotten \$160,000 for another Giverny landscape by Breck of grain stacks. The river scene, painted right in Claude Monet’s neighborhood, wasn’t fresh, however. An Internet search showed that it had been offered unsuccessfully at Barridoff Galleries, Portland, Maine, on August 1, 2008 (est. \$200,000/300,000).

“You know us. We don’t give up. We’re working it still, but at this point, it has not yet sold,” said Starr. “The consignor has a certain level invested in it, monetarily and emotionally, so I think it’s going to be hard for him to let it go at what someone might see as a bargain price.”

The top lot of the print sale was Andy Warhol’s color screenprint image of Muhammad Ali, who famously floated like a butterfly but stung like a bee. From a 1978 edition of 175, the portrait of the boxer against a bubble-gum pink background sold to an Internet bidder for a just-above-estimate \$20,910.

It was hard to get away from Warhol for a while, because besides an “after” Warhol limited-edition plate featuring Marilyn Monroe (that did not sell) and two other prints, there were two other “afters.” One was a circa 1965 dress with a Campbell’s soup-can pattern, examples of which I’ve seen a few other times, and a three-item lot of “after” Warhol skate decks (the top part of a skateboard). The dress sold to an Internet bidder for \$1845, while the skate decks went to an absentee at \$780.

Twentieth-century prints by Paul Cadmus, Rockwell Kent, Roy Lichtenstein, Joan Miró, Picasso, Alexander Calder, and Richard Anuszkiewicz also did well. Slightly older but thematically youthful was Alphonse Mucha’s 1898 color lithographic poster for Job rolling papers that sold to a phone bidder for a top-of-the-estimate \$9000. At the center of the Czech’s Art Nouveau vision is a beautiful woman with long black tresses and bare shoulders who isn’t actually smoking—that’s why her skin is so smooth. She’s holding a lighted cigarette, butt-end out, flame end toward her, and she’s looking at it askance.

“Let’s face it, the focus for so many buyers right now is on modern and contemporary,” said Starr. That’s one of the few predictable trends we have in the market right now.”

Following that trend, the best-selling sculpture of the sale, for which an Internet bidder paid \$73,800—nearly twice the high estimate—was a circa 1990 work made of crocheted oxidized copper wire by Ruth Lanier Asawa (b. 1926). The form resembles a series of nested wire egg-baskets, each of the smaller ones visible through the lacy mesh of the others. But the baskets are not separate. The untitled work, known by its number, S.069/90, is one continuous shaped copper wire.

“She learned this technique while on a trip to Mexico in 1947,” Starr said of the copper crocheting. “She had studied at Black Mountain College with Josef Albers and Buckminster Fuller, so she was thinking about materials that were common but unusual for an artist to use. When she saw some women weaving egg baskets out of wire, that was her aha moment.”

If the name Asawa isn’t familiar to some readers, perhaps it should be. Two days before this sale, the artist’s untitled wire sculpture numbered S.108 fetched \$1,443,750 (est. \$250,000/350,000) at Christie’s in New York City. Why such a price difference between the artwork by Asawa sold at Skinner and at Christie’s? The major difference was size. Skinner sold a “little guy,” in Starr’s phrase, 6¼” tall with a 13½” diameter. The record-setting Asawa elongated form is 137” x 23” x 23”, and she is better known for her large-scale works.

By design, this was a relatively modest sale for the department (it achieved a total of \$1.884 million on 406 lots, 80% of the total offered), but it was noteworthy for another reason—its pace, an applaudable average of 80 lots an hour. Skinner’s press office credited a new and improved SkinnerLive! bidding platform, which has replaced its use of LiveAuctioneers.

“We had concerns with LiveAuctioneers,” said Starr. “They had control over everything” including checking into people’s credit. “And I respect that—they’re their clients—but it’s problematic to have bidders who don’t come through, and we had very little recourse. The new setup is really terrific,” said Starr, whose department calculated no drop in Internet participation.

Skinner’s attention to Internet participation is one more indication that the nature of auctions is changing, and for Starr and others, it’s a tradeoff. “It’s good and bad news that we have made it so much easier to participate from great distances,” she reflected. “It can bid from China; they can bid from Timbuktu. But as an auctioneer I find it more fun having a packed house. You’re still getting people in the room, but we don’t worry about breaking the fire code anymore. It can make you a little nostalgic for the old days. But this is the way the market is going, so I’m pleased that we’re keeping right up with it.”

For more information, phone (617) 350-5400 or see the Web site (www.skinnerinc.com).



Alexander Calder (1898-1976), untitled, signed and dated “Calder 75,” 23” x 50”, gouache on paper, \$45,000 (est. \$25,000/35,000). Schinto photo.



Edmund Darch Lewis (1835-1910), *Conway Meadows*, signed and dated “Edmund D. Lewis 1877,” 30” x 50”, oil on canvas, \$8400 (est. \$3000/5000).



Ruth Lanier Asawa (b. 1926), untitled, a 6¼” x 13½” diameter, five-layer, continuous form within a form, made circa 1990 of crocheted oxidized copper wire, stamped and numbered “S. 069/90,” \$73,800 to an Internet bidder (est. \$30,000/40,000). Schinto photo.

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