

A Bradford and a Cache of Maine Silhouettes

by Jeanne Schinto

"We're awfully glad to have found out about this in time," said Joseph Phillips, director of the Maine State Museum in Augusta. He was referring to an unprecedented collection of 240 mid-19th-century hollow-cut bust silhouettes by Galen Jerome Brewer (1819-1894) of Brewer, Maine. Bidding by phone, the museum paid \$37,950 (includes buyer's premium) for the silhouettes at an auction conducted by Royka's Auctioneers & Appraisers of Lunenburg, Massachusetts, on March 24.

"This is a new company, and we had not done business with them before," said Phillips. "We were totally unaware of them before this auction. This is important to both of us, I guess."

Yes, it was, said the company's owner and auctioneer, 34-year-old Paul Royka. Founded just two years ago, Royka's has had only four other live auctions to date, with the next one slated for June.

The silhouettes weren't even the biggest news of the small, elegantly staged sale at the Best Western Royal Plaza Hotel in Fitchburg, Massachusetts, about 50 miles west of Boston. A William Bradford oil on canvas of a ship waiting for a breeze in the Bay of Fundy at sunrise sold on the phone to a private collector for \$241,500. The unsigned painting in its original frame was accompanied by a letter of authentication from Richard Kluger, director emeritus of the New Bedford (Massachusetts) Whaling Museum, where a study for the painting in sepia wash resides. Kluger is coauthor of William Bradford: Sailing Ships & Arctic Seas, the catalog for last year's magnificent Bradford exhibit at the museum.

Royka obviously took great care in selecting some 170 other items for a wide range of wallet sizes. They included a 500-piece lot of early 19th-century Massachusetts ephemera, paintings by R. Swain Gifford and Thomas Hewes Hinckley, a huge gilt Arts and Crafts picture frame fitted with a mirror, a Weller swan, an appealing rooster-form weathervane, a George Ohr vase, books, toys, dolls, stoneware, barrister bookcases, wicker furniture, lamps, and a harp.

"I went to my first auction when I was seven," Royka said to make the point that he is young but not green. "I consigned my first piece to Skinner's when I was twelve. I remember bringing them things in my Little League outfit."

In college he bought and sold antiques to pay his bills. After graduate school, he worked for a Boston gallery that specializes in Arts and Crafts. For three years in the mid-1990's he was part of Skinner's 20th-century department. From there he went to Amazon's LiveBid.com and other dot-coms of the era. He also has lots of Antiques Roadshow experience. "I did the Roadshow from the beginning. I went to twenty cities and appeared on air fourteen times," he said, sounding a little world-weary because of it.

He said he has given up traveling with the television show in order to build the company and to raise a family with his wife, Deborah. But he conducts his own free weekly appraisals at the gallery in Lunenburg and at charity events. He also does "thousands" of appraisals on line. The effort has apparently paid off. The silhouette collection, the Bradford, and about 20% of the sale's balance were consigned to him after appraisals.

"Actually, at first the consignors of the Bradford brought in the Gifford," said Royka. It sold one lot ahead of the Bradford to a dealer for \$10,637.50. "I put four to six thousand dollars on it, and [the consignors] said, 'Oh, we have another marine painting at home.'" They brought it to the gallery the following week, and I said, 'Okay. Either someone had the greatest day of his life as an artist or that's a William Bradford.' It takes a lot more work to make sure everybody's confident about a piece without a signature. The painting spoke for itself, but we can't thank Richard Kluger enough. He went over it with a fine-tooth comb."

The hotel was a new venue for Royka's. The previous sales were held at a parish hall in Lunenburg, five miles from Fitchburg. It was also Royka's first evening sale and his first on a weekday instead of a weekend.

The results "exceeded our expectations," Royka said. "We have a certain vision of where we want to be." This vision manifested itself in the details of the well-organized sale. There was classical music at the preview and complimentary coffee, cookies, fruit, and candy at the sale itself. The Royka's runners and other staffers wore professional business dress, not matching tee shirts. Fitchburg is an old mill city, but it's surrounded by semirural communities, so it did seem that the aim was to stage a city auction in a country setting.

Asked why some promotional materials call Royka's "one of the leading auction houses in the United States" and "the leading auction house in New England," its namesake said the claims aren't based on any particular measure. "That's in terms of service. We're really focused on a lot of handholding with clients. And we want to be able to handhold a lot with the items too."

The two top lots in this auction evidently were. Royka took the silhouettes to a meeting of the New England Museum Association last fall and showed them all around. He issued a separate 50-page catalog for them, picturing each one accompanied by its inscription. Just days before the sale he was pounding the pavement in Manhattan, promoting the Bradford.

Royka seems intent on picking his customers as carefully as he picks his merchandise. He said he was pleased to see "half the New York crowd" among the audience that numbered about 150 at its peak, almost exclusively members of the trade. Other dealers came from Connecticut, Pennsylvania, and New Hampshire, as well as from many parts of Massachusetts.

In addition to getting consignments from appraisals, Royka estimated that as many as 60% of the items in his sales have come to him from trust attorneys and estates. These are sold without reserves. ("Only a handful" of other items in this sale had reserves, he said.) "That stuff has to go. So there are also plenty of good buys."

This seemed especially true at this sale, which few if any retail customers attended. One dealer bought a French 34 inches diameter bronze table signed Levillain for \$833.75. Another bought a 35 1/2 inches x 14 inches Victorian white marble pedestal for \$201.25. A 2 1/2 inches x 7 1/2 inches majolica basket with frogs and strawberries went at \$172.50.

"No one's here for smalls," Royka remarked to his audience after nine pieces of Belleek went at \$57.50 and 15 pieces of Wedgwood sold for \$143.75.

Toward the end of the sale, Royka offered a 23 inches x 34 3/4 inches lithographed map of a bird's-eye view of Fitchburg. "For the local folks," said Royka. It sold to someone in the room for \$322.

For more information, call (978) 582-8207 or visit the Web site (www.Roykas.com).