

Skinner, Inc., Boston, Massachusetts

A Nakashima Table Sold for \$204,000

by Jeanne Schinto

There is a new record holder for the most expensive George Nakashima piece bought at public auction. A large, free-edge table, made of English burl oak in 1973, brought \$204,000 (including buyer's premium) at a Skinner 20th-century furniture and decorative arts sale in Boston on June 24. The previous Nakashima record stood at \$192,000 for exactly 35 days. That mark had been set by the sale of another large table, made of American black walnut and rosewood, that was auctioned on May 21 in Chicago by Richard Wright. Previously, the record was held by another large Nakashima table, made of burl walnut, that sold at Christie's in New York City on December 7, 2005, for \$168,000.

The climb is steady, and so is the demand. The number of phone-bid takers ready to compete for the Skinner Nakashima table was in the double digits. Most of them never had a chance. Bidding opened at \$65,000 from the absentee book bid, already \$5000 above the high estimate. After that, four bid takers raised their increments in unison, like a chant, into the low \$100,000's. In the end, a fifth one, joining the action late, claimed the piece for a private collector.

Jane D. Prentiss, Skinner's 20th-century furniture expert, said the table was made expressly for Reverend Thomas W. Phelan (1925-2006), a well-loved chaplain, professor, and dean at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Rensselaer, New York, who was a friend of the artist. The table was kept at the university, never used as a dining table. "We took it out of his office," said Prentiss.

Prentiss was commended by longtime collectors not only for selling the piece for a record but for getting it as a Skinner consignment in the first place. The competition for such material is formidable. It consists not only of Wright and Christie's but Sotheby's, Bonhams, Phillips de Pury, and David Rago of Lambertville, New Jersey, whose base of operations is just across the Delaware River from the Nakashima Studios in New Hope, Pennsylvania.

The Skinner sale offered nine other Nakashima lots, two of the pieces signed by Mira Nakashima. (George's only daughter worked with her father for 20 years before his death in 1990, after which she became the studio's sole designer, a position she maintains today.) Most of those lots came with a copy of the original receipt or order form for the piece. One that didn't was accompanied by a letter from the family of the original owner, who was, like Phelan, a friend of George Nakashima. "I'm beginning to realize that he had friendships with most of his clients," said Prentiss.

A walnut Conoid chair, made by the elder Nakashima in 1982, realized \$11,162.50 at this sale. One had sold in a Skinner sale on December 11, 2005, for \$8812.50. A few days earlier, on December 9, 2005, Sotheby's had sold four of them for \$42,000, or \$10,500 apiece. This latest price seems to show that the Conoid seating is staying very strong, especially considering the fact that single chairs usually bring less money than sets of them.

All told, the ten Nakashima lots at Skinner brought \$283,550, accounting for nearly a third of the sale's gross on the 507 items (70% of those offered) that sold.

Like Nakashima, furniture designer Paul R. Evans II (1931-1987) lived and worked in Bucks County, Pennsylvania—in New Hope for a time—and the best of his major works are increasingly in demand. Rather than using rare wood, however, Evans used patinated metal as his primary medium.

This sale offered four works by Evans. The one that bidders clamored for was a huge (72" diameter) circular, wall-mounted cabinet with two semicircular doors with a gray-bronze finish. The impression was that of a huge, shiny ancient coin. Those doors open to reveal three shelves over a single drawer with a sculpted front panel. Prentiss said she pictured the piece being used as a bar in a large conference room, one that James Bond might frequent. That metallic disc would also make a statement in a white-walled, high-tech, high-end condo. Although unsigned, the cabinet came with a copy of the original order. A private collector on the phone was its winner at \$8225 (est. \$3000/5000).

An Evans bench in patinated metal with an upholstered seat, by contrast, sold for a little more than half of its high estimate at \$1527.50. An Evans mirror (est. \$3000/4000) was passed, and a console (est. \$4000/6000) reached only \$2300 before it was bought in. These two unsold pieces did find buyers in post-auction deals, said Prentiss. (The record for an Evans piece remains at \$96,000 for a cabinet sold by Wright on May 21, 2006, the same day he briefly made Nakashima history.)

A fresh-to-the-market Grueby tile was one of the highlights of the Arts and Crafts portion of this sale that took place on a thoroughly rainy Saturday, conditions that may have had nothing to do with its outcome, since many of Prentiss's longtime clients live in California. The tile, oversized at 9" square, had come to Skinner from an Arts and Crafts house in Massachusetts. Never part of a fireplace surround (so it didn't need to be gouged out of one), it depicts St. George and the Dragon in five strong colors—green, ocher, cream, and two shades of blue. Collectors competed, again on the phones, and one paid \$7637.50.

From the same family that consigned the Grueby tile came some early Gustav Stickley furniture in good condition with original ammonia-fumed finish. There was an oak hall bench, a settle, and an armchair, all of which went for strong prices, and an Arts and Crafts inlaid oak upright piano. The piano works were made by the Everett Piano Company of Boston, circa 1905. The case was not signed, but Prentiss said, "Most people in the field believe this to be a Gustav Stickley piano." The bidders proved they thought so too. Absentees opened it at \$15,000, the low estimate; a phone bid took it at \$39,950. The new owner, like almost all of the sale's successful phone bidders, was a private collector, said Prentiss.

Tiffany lamps offered at the two previous Skinner 20th-century sales were large, unusual, and brought strong prices—well over \$100,000. This sale, by contrast, served a clientele looking for good, usable lamps by the maker in a moderate price range, the best of them just under \$12,000.

A double-nude figural table light, whose design was attributed to Arthur von Frankenberg, circa 1925, dumfounded the live audience when it was hammered down at almost as much as the Tiffany, \$10,575. (Even Stuart Whitehurst, the auctioneer at that moment, expressed disbelief. Whitehurst is head of the European furniture and decorative arts department for Skinner; he also serves as the books and manuscripts expert. "It's got to be the first sign of the apocalypse," he muttered when his imaginary hammer fell.) The estimate on the so-called Frankart (whose purchaser defaulted on its payment and had not taken possession of it as this story goes to press) was \$300/500. One other piece of Frankart, with the same estimate, brought only \$1292.50. Three others failed to sell.

We called on Prentiss for an explanation. "Actually, I'm getting phone calls from people who tell me that the double one should have gone for fifteen thousand," she said. "A lot of Frankart is restored. That one wasn't. It came out of a home, fresh, and retains its original gray finish. If its glass were original too, it would warrant the even higher price." Whether it was or wasn't original, Skinner could not say, according to Prentiss, who let bidders come to their own conclusions about it.

The one thing by Kem Weber in the sale, a chrome and black-upholstered lounge chair, circa 1935, did well, going to a phone bidder at \$3818.75. Aficionados of Weber want unpitted metal. They also want the clips that connect the seating to the structure to be the originals. This one's good condition and intact clips justified its price.

European material enticed bidders from across the Atlantic. They were particularly interested in five things from the atelier founded in Milan by Piero Fornasetti (1913-1988) and now run by his son, Barnaba. The most expensive of those lots, going on the phone at \$9400, was a late 20th-century hinged bifold screen of decorated laminate finish. One side was a tromp l'oeil of colorful books on shelving; a collage of everyday objects was on the other. A Fornasetti laminated tabletop chest from the same period sold for \$2350 to another bidder on the phone. A gilded ceramic sandal over a caramel-colored 3 5/8" x 8 1/2" foot went to an Internet bidder, who paid \$588.

A couple of whole categories flopped, it is true, accounting for the high number of unsold lots mentioned earlier. They included 12 lots of Bakelite boxes, only four of which sold, and 17 lots of black-and-white photographs featuring details of courthouses, only one of which found a buyer. "I advertised those photos extensively to law firms," Prentiss said. "I learned that lawyers don't want to see any more courthouses."

Other passed or bought-in lots were a pair of armchairs designed by Frank Gehry for Knoll that looked as if they were made of giant wood shavings; a striped black and olive green Fendi sofa; a round wall mirror, framed by blue-mirrored glass, attributed to Walter Dorwin Teague; and an Eero Aarnio ball chair in orange and chartreuse.

"I've been criticized for trying things that don't take off the first time around," Prentiss said. "But my experience has been that, after I introduce them to the market, the people who weren't yet ready for them are hungry for them a year or two down the road."

Certainly that's the way of this whole category, where values are still being sorted out by the marketplace. For that reason, it's a good place for new collectors to start, particularly those who live in Boston proper and may not be able to trek out to the Skinner discovery sales at its facility in Bolton, Massachusetts. There is a sense of discovery here too, and the prices are often comparable.

"I want first-time collectors to feel that they can approach the auction process and not be intimidated, and leave with something that they didn't have to mortgage their house for," said Prentiss. "I want them to go away feeling excited and happy. And we are a city of colleges. Students should come in, furnish their dorms, then turn around and sell those items when their four years are up and make some money. That's what I did. I went to Skinner and bought. Later, whenever I needed money, it was like a little bank account."

Asked for an example of one of her purchases, she said, "I had a Gustav Stickley music stand that I used as a magazine rack." She bought it for \$175 and sold it for \$5000, she recalled. "We still have things at that level today. Not Stickley, of course. But somebody else might do well with some of the post-modern material."

We found good values ourselves at this sale, going home with an Arts and Crafts three-shelf bookcase with faux mullions, labeled Macey (\$763.75); 22 stereoviews and a viewer in their original box, a souvenir from the 1925 Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes in Paris (\$52.88); and a double-sided square-dial brass-trimmed desk clock, circa 1935 (\$146.88).

For more information, contact Skinner on Boston at (617) 350-5400, in Bolton at (978) 779-6241, or via the Web site (www.skinnerinc.com).