February 14th, 2013 African-American Art: Landscapes, Cityscapes, Dreamscapes

Swann Galleries, New York City Photos courtesy Swann

"Nothing says 'I love you' more than some beautiful pieces of African-American art," he told the large crowd before him. They were assembled for the start of the auction house's sale of works by African-American artists on February 14. Two and a half hours later there was more to celebrate. Bidders had spent \$1,355,950 (including buyers' premiums) on 124 lots, a hair above 84% of the total offered, and set new auction records for prints by Elizabeth Catlett and Charles White and for paintings by Sam Gilliam, Albert

Swann Galleries' president and

auctioneer Nicholas D. Lowry

wore a scarlet jacket and tie to

celebrate St. Valentine's Day.

Alexander Smith, and Frank Bowling. Many collectors, institutions, and dealers who came out strong this time must have had their attentions elsewhere when the department, which is headed

2012. Held less than three weeks before the reelection of our nation's first African-American president, it was only 69% sold, and multiple major lots did not find buyers. With the election behind us all, and the economy slowly recovering, bidders seemed ready to compete again. An unnamed institution paid a mid-estimate \$120,000 for the sale's cover lot, Hughie Lee-Smith's Poet #4. The 1954 oil on masonite is a classic dreamscape of the artist's mid-1950's style, incorporating many of his quintessential

motifs. These include a desolate

shoreline, often an urban one;

by Nigel Freeman, had its

previous sale on October 18,

strange, almost surreal light; a pole with ribbons streaming from it; and enigmatic, reedthin figures—in this case, a white woman and black man posed as if onstage. Art historians say the man in Poet #4 represents Lee-Smith, so it could technically be called a self-portrait. At the February 2012 sale, Swann sold Lee-Smith's untitled (Self-Portrait) from the same period, when the artist was in his 30's, for \$13,200. Sotheby's had sold his Poet on March 6, 2008, for \$12,500. An Internet search did not turn up *Poet #2* or *Poet #3*. Poet #4 had been exhibited at the artist's 1955 solo show at

Howard University in

Washington, D.C. It sold there

and wasn't exhibited publicly

again until it was consigned to

this sale by a private collection.

The same institutional bidder bought William T. Williams's Up Balls for the same price as the Lee-Smith, \$120,000 (est. \$75,000/100,000). That ties Williams's current record price, set by Eastern Star, the only other painting of his that has come to auction so far. (Eastern Star sold at Swann to a collector on February 16, 2012.) Both paintings are very large (7' x 5') and colorful geometric compositions that Williams painted in 1971 during the early part of his career. Both came from his first solo show, held that year at the Reese Palley Gallery in New York City. (Also that year, Williams [b. 1942] began teaching art at Brooklyn College, the City University of New York, where he remains.) One wonders if the institution

together. Up Balls is a joyful

the moody realism of Lee-

have produced, and will

landscapes, dreamscapes,

just as white artists do.

People often argue about

cityscapes, and all manner of

nonrepresentational art too—

whether museums should point

out in their signage that works

continue to produce,

abstraction, and set alongside

Smith, it seems even more so.

between them. Artists of color

are by African-American artists, especially works that don't have African-American figures in them. Some say it should be done, to promote racial pride. Others say it shouldn't be, because it's ghettoization. Still others wait for the day when such arguments no longer need to take place. A collector, bidding by phone, was the buyer of three other important lots in the sale. The first was a life-size three-quarter portrait by Barkley L. Hendricks, The Hawk, Blah, Blah, Blah, which sold for an above-estimate \$132,000. The

subject, posed against a canary

a Philadelphia deejay whose

nickname was "The Hawk."

The title incorporates a phrase

that The Hawk often used to

punctuate his on-air commentary. "Blah, blah, blah," said Nicho Lowry during the phone-against-phone bidding battle. The consignors had purchased the painting at the artist's first solo exhibition at Philadelphia's Kenmore Galleries in 1971, the year it was painted. In 2009, it was exhibited at Barkley L. Hendricks: Birth of the Cool at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Swann has sold other Barkley portraits very successfully. On October 8, 2009, his Bid 'Em In/Slave (Angie) sold to the Sheldon Museum of Art in Lincoln,

Nebraska, for what remains the

The collector's second and third

notable buys came during the

sale's Elizabeth Catlett section,

presented by Swann as a tribute

to the artist, who died at age 97

purchases, at \$114,000, was her

1971 green Mexican marble

sculpture Sister. The other, at

\$90,000, was a complete set of

"I am the Black Woman."

in 2012. One of those

artist's record, \$144,000.

Catlett created the series of 14 linoleum cuts in 1946-47 as narratives of African-American women's lives. They are shown housecleaning, hoeing, sweeping, and riding a bus in the "Colored Only" section, as well as playing music and witnessing violence. Throughout, they are strong; they endure. The images also depict heroines Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and Phillis Wheatley. Signed, titled, dated, and numbered 13/20, these images were printed at Robert Blackburn's

Printmaking Workshop in New

there had been 15 prints and the

reflective of the terminology of

Woman." Swann has located

only one other complete 14-

print set with all impressions

number. It's in the collection of

the Miami-Dade Public Library.

This is the first time such a set

As these auctions prove time

in high demand. The seven

and again, art by Catlett remains

York City in 1989. Originally,

group had a different title,

that time—"The Negro

having the same edition

has come to auction.

color linoleum cut from circa 1952, Sharecropper. From an edition Generating some presale buzz, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston consigned a number of items from the John P. Axelrod collection of African-American art that had been bought by the institution in 2011. These pieces, never accessioned, were being sold "for the benefit of the collection," Swann's press release said. Axelrod told M.A.D. that selling off some of the collection was always part of the museum's plan. (The museum did not respond to a request for a comment.) Among the MFA consignments was a painting appropriate for a St. Valentine's Day sale. It was the circa 1935 oil-on-board portrait of a Girl in a Red Dress by Harlem Renaissance figure Laura Wheeler Waring that sold to a phone bidder for \$19,200 (est. \$10,000/15,000). Although Waring was known for painting African-American celebrity figures during her career, the identity of this lovely woman is unknown. Swann said the buyer was another institution, so the painting remains available for viewing by the public. A dealer paid \$43,200 for another piece formerly in the Axelrod

for \$24,000. No one, however, was willing to meet the reserves of the two most aggressively estimated pieces from the MFA. Meeting Place by Norman Lewis, one of the artist's WPA-era oils, did not sell (est. \$150,000/200,000), nor did Trumpet Player, a 1959-60 charcoal and gouache drawing by Charles White (est. \$100,000/150,000). White's untitled (Unfinished Painting No. 6), 1965-66, oil on canvas, from a different consignor, also failed to find a buyer (est. \$50,000/75,000). But these disappointing moments in the sale were few. Lewis's untitled (Vertical Abstraction), a circa 1952 oil and graphite on canvas, sold to a dealer in the room for \$40,800 (est. \$25,000/35,000). And White's circa

1972 etching Missouri C, whose central compositional features are a

bosom, sold to a collector for a new record for that print, \$26,400.

large black woman's face in profile and her ample upper arm and wide

Records and high prices never tell the whole story, of course. Items in the

For more information, phone (212) 254-4710 or see the Web site (www.swanngalleries.com). A new record price was set for **Sharecropper** by Elizabeth Catlett (1915-2012) when it sold for \$43,200 (est. \$15,000/25,000). The circa 1952 print is a 17 5/8" x 161/2"

31/60.



color linoleum cut on smooth wove paper. From an edition printed in 1970, it is signed, titled, dated, and numbered

Axelrod collection.

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(www.anyonecanflyfoundation.org/pdf/Vendryes_on_Barthe.pdf). Ex-Boo Hoo by Kara Walker (b. 1969) brought \$9600 (est. \$5000/7000). The linoleum-cut

print on Arches paper was signed, titled,

dated 2000, and numbered 44/70. It was

by Jeanne Schinto .com American Furniture, Folk and Decorative Arts

Join

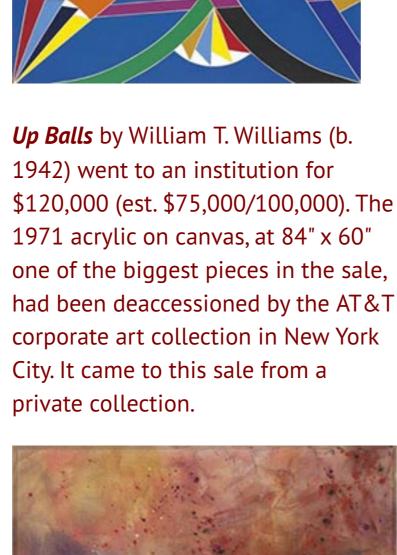
Ruby

Lane











The Hawk, Blah, Blah by Barkley L. Hendricks (b. 1945) sold to a collector for \$132,000 (est. \$75,000/100,000). The 50" x 48" oil and DayGlo on linen is signed and dated 1970.

bidders consistently respond to the best works by Edward Bannister (1828-1901). At this sale, the artist's 1882 untitled (Rhode Island Landscape), a 12" x 14" oil on linen, sold for \$13,200 (est. \$5000/7000).

A collector in the room paid \$24,000

Alexander Smith (1896-1940). The

1930 oil on canvas is 19¾" x 25½".

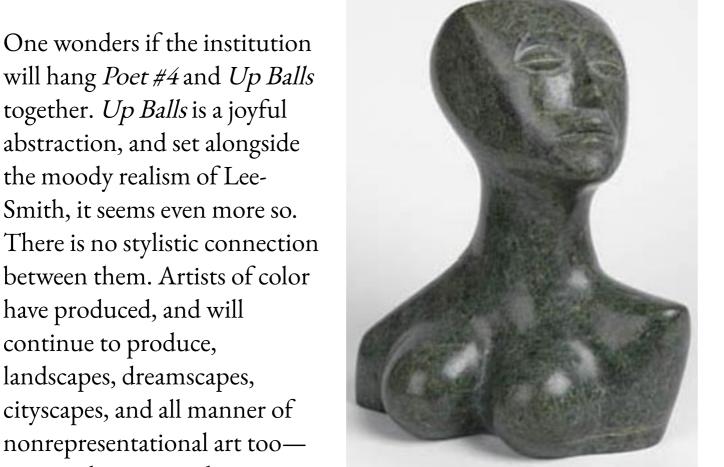
The price sets a new record for the

for *Spinning a Yarn* by Albert

artist. Ex-Axelrod collection.

Although 20th-century works are

usually the mainstay of these sales,

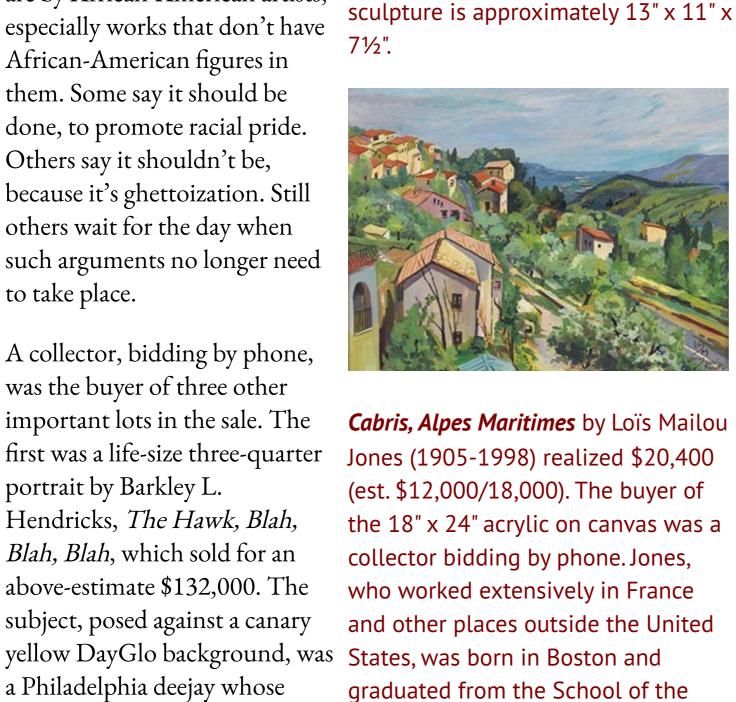


Sister by Elizabeth Catlett (1915-

\$114,000 (est. \$75,000/100,000). The

2012) went to a collector for

1971 green Mexican marble



Museum of Fine Arts. In a tribute to

mounted a small (ten paintings, 11

works on paper) exhibit. Lois Mailou

Jones will be up through October 14.

museum's Web site (www.mfa.org).

her career, the MFA, Boston has

For more information, see the

We noted that *Rising Up: Hale* Woodruff's Murals at Talladega **College** was one of just a dozen museum shows chosen by critic Karen Wilkin to highlight in the Wall Street Journal at the end of 2012. It was the only show of American art in the lineup. Newly restored (in collaboration between the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, Georgia, and Talladega College in Talladega, Alabama), Woodruff's mural masterworks comprise six

monumental canvases commissioned

by Talladega College in 1938. They

Amistad, as seen here; the

depict the uprising on the slave ship

subsequent trial and freed slaves' trip

celebratory images of the founding

and building of the college, one of

after the Civil War. Besides the

the first to be established for blacks

Talladega murals and studies, *Rising*

Up features examples of Woodruff's

other mural commissions as well as

smaller paintings he made while in

Rivera. The show began its travels at

the High Museum of Art and is at the

Chicago Cultural Center through June

16. From there it goes to New York

Mexico, where he went in 1936 to

study mural painting with Diego

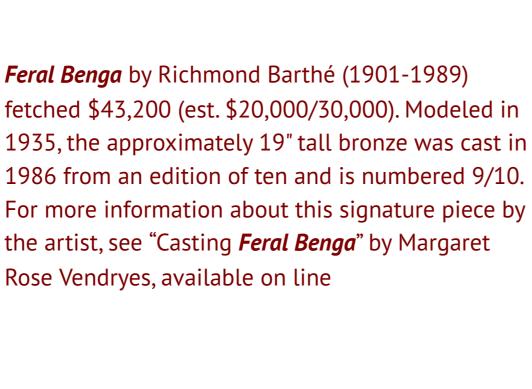
back to Africa; scenes from the

Underground Railroad; and

City, Washington, D.C., New Orleans, Connecticut, and elsewhere. For more schedule information, see (www.high.org). Photo courtesy High Museum of Art. Missouri C by Charles White (1918-1979) fetched \$26,400 (est. \$15,000/25,000), setting for a new record price for the scarce print. The 19 5/8" x 36" etching on cream wove paper is signed, titled, dated "1972," inscribed "ED," and numbered 10/25. other Catlett pieces in this sale went either within or above estimate, and a new record price was set at \$43,200 for one of her most iconic prints, a printed in 1970, this composition of a woman's strong-boned face under the wide-brimmed straw hat of a fieldworker was numbered 31/60 and cataloged as an "excellent impression, with bright colors and contrasts...."

collection, Richmond Barthé's bronze Feral Benga. The approximately 19" tall sculpture portrays the Senegalese exotic dancer (most famous in Paris) François Benga (1906-1957), holding a sword over his head. Modeled in 1935, it was cast in 1986 when the artist was in his 80's. According to Swann, there are only two bronzes from the 1935 casting known to exist, and this is the first time any casting of this celebrated Barthé work has come to auction. Collectors bought several more MFA consignments. One paid \$33,600 for New York, South Ferry by Palmer Hayden, a circa 1940 oil on linen. A second one took Beauford Delaney's Self-Portrait for \$36,000. Charles Alston's Shade Chadman, a 1940-41 gouache, went to a third collector

\$2000 to \$5000 range were, as always, an important part of this sale. This time, they included several prints each by name-brands Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden, as well as works by living artists whose reputations are only just now being formed.



cataloged as "a very good, dark impression."

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