

American and European Paintings and Prints

by Jeanne Schinto

"Going into the sale, I felt like a coach," said Colleene Fesko, Skinner's expert for American and European paintings and prints. "We knew we had a good lineup."

Fesko was speaking a few days after her department's auction on September 12 that grossed \$1,407,366. "A number of the paintings were from private collections, where they had been for many, many years, and they were in good condition. It was sort of 'central casting'—what you want for a sale. And so they performed better than even I had expected them to. Which just goes to show, when you have the wonderful, fresh merchandise, it always does well."

Maybe it also proves once again that getting the consignments, not selling them, is the true art (or at least the better part) of auctioneering.

The three top-dollar lots of the long, single session in the Boston gallery were oils on canvas featuring European genre subjects. A Dutch market scene of a woman selling pheasants at night by candlelight, the work of Petrus van Schendel (1806-1870), went to a phone bidder at \$160,000 (includes buyer's premium) on an estimate of \$30,000/50,000. The underbidder, who stood in the back of the room with a cell phone clapped to his ear, lost out to the same phone bidder on Jean Richard Goubie's *Before the Hunt*. Goubie's depiction of late 19th-century English gentry in riding gear, their horses carried to a sheen, went at \$105,000 (est. \$12,000/18,000), a record for the Frenchman. For the same price, another phone bidder took the cover lot, *In Her Garden* by Daniel Ridgway Knight (1839-1924), which carried a much more assertive estimate of \$100,000/150,000.

Fesko said, "It's so interesting to me that Ridgway Knight and Thomas Eakins were contemporaries who studied together at the Pennsylvania Academy [of the Fine Arts] and then both went to Paris, where they each responded to the figure in the two most different ways they possibly could. Ridgway Knight, influenced by the late Barbizon school and by the Impressionists, produced these really beautiful scenes of young peasant girls who, I was reading somewhere, are engaged in "light toil." (It's true that the young woman portrayed in *In Her Garden*, with pruning shears in hand, hasn't broken a sweat.) Meanwhile, Thomas Eakins (1844-1916) became a Modernist whose portraits were sometimes rejected because they failed to flatter those who had commissioned them.

There was an Eakins in this sale, *Portrait Sketch of Maybelle Schlichter*. The fleshy-faced subject was a friend of Eakins and the wife of the referee pictured in one of Eakins's famous prizefighting paintings, *Taking the Count*, owned by the Yale University Art Gallery. The catalog said the 10 1/2 inches x 8 1/2 inches oil on canvas was a smaller version of the larger work included in a 1998 director's choice exhibit at the Frye Art Museum in Seattle, Washington. It came with labels from the Baltimore Museum of Art and Babcock Galleries in New York City but failed to meet its reserve and was bought in at \$30,000.

"Eakins is probably among the most important American artists," Fesko said. "But [his works] really are of a particular taste. And yet, having worked at auctions for as long as I have, I think, should this one be offered again, it will probably sell. It wasn't his day. It wasn't the right day for it."

Other American painters did have their day. Marsden Hartley's *Rocky Coast* went at \$55,812.50 (est. \$30,000/50,000). Ernest Lawson's *The Quiet River* made \$47,000 (est. \$15,000/25,000). Orlando Rouland's *When Night Comes On, Central Park, NY* went to the man on the cell phone at \$41,125 (est. \$12,000/18,000), setting a second artist record for the evening.

"Hartley right now is about as hot as you can get," said Fesko of her top American dollar-getter. "He has various museum and gallery shows opening and closing throughout the county. He's arguably the most important American Modernist."

The Skinner catalog noted that the 10 inches x 14 inches oil on board, with its characteristic black Hartley outlines, is "possibly a Maine view." Certainly, the Lewiston native painted his coast many times and with as much understanding of the ocean's drama as this one conveyed. "I think the combination of the strength and intimacy of this scene, and the local interest—not that we count on New England for our complete bidding pool—brought everything together. There was also the fact that it was acquired from Babcock decades ago. That was his gallery."

The work of Ralph Cahoon (1910-1982) attracts interest well beyond the region of his birth, Cape Cod. His bright blue dream of a hot-air balloon scene, *A Balloon Ride*, brought \$47,000 (est. \$25,000/30,000).

Emile Albert Gruppe (1896-1978), long familiar to dealers and collectors on the North Shore of Boston, was represented by *Harbor View*, likely his lifelong home, Gloucester, Massachusetts. It sold at the top end of its \$7000/9000 estimate for \$9400. Meanwhile, Bostonian John Whorf's *The Bathers* made \$2350 (est. \$1800/2200). A second watercolor by Whorf (1903-1959), *A View of the Summit, Mount Washington*, did not meet its reserve and was bought in at \$2800.

In keeping with an observation Fesko made in a slide talk she gave a couple of nights before the sale, "Master of All She Surveyed," some American women artists performed well. One of Fesko's frequent reference points was A Studio of Her Own, the show at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, a couple of years ago. With over 80 pieces by 40 women artists working in the Hub area during the period 1870-1940, the show sparked "a significant change in the market," said Fesko. Whether it alone was the catalyst, evidence keeps mounting that works by these women, forced by family responsibilities to paint still lifes, gardens, and other domestic subjects, are in demand.

Laura Coombs Hills (1859-1952), Katharine Ward Lane Weems (1899-1989), and Margaret Fitzhugh Browne (1884-1972) were already well known before the show, with prices for their art now growing with their fame. Others, such as Rosamond Lombard Smith Bouvé (1876-1948), were uncelebrated until, as Fesko put it, "they got the MFA seal of approval, and once you have that...."

Each of the two flower still lifes in pastel by Hills in this sale, estimated at \$10,000/15,000 and \$6000/8000, sold for \$14,100 in a market characterized by Fesko as "quite strong" for the artist. A 10 1/2 inches high bronze sculpture of a baby elephant by Weems also went at \$14,100 (est. \$4000/6000). An oil on canvasboard, *Young Woman with Flowers* by Bouvé, made \$1527.50 (est. \$300/500).

An MFA imprimatur isn't foolproof. Two other paintings by A Studio of Her Own alumnae, both of them floral watercolors, fared only middlingly. Margaret Jordan Patterson's *Mountain Laurel* and Nellie Littlehale Murphy's *Peonies No. 1* made \$822.50 and \$1762.50 respectively, each on the same optimistic estimate (\$1500/3000).

One other disappointment in the same category was an oil on canvas by Fitzhugh Browne of a woman playing a piano. Its double title in the catalog, *The Rachmaninoff Prelude/ A Portrait of Mrs. Rubinstein*, was part of the problem, according to Fesko. "Sometimes I'll be looking at a painting to take in for consignment, and it's a little too specific. This one, I think, appeared to people as more of a portrait of a specific person rather than an early twentieth-century genre scene." Nor was its estimate (\$6000/8000) "particularly conservative," she said. The result was that it opened and closed at \$4250 without making its reserve.

As it happened, a southerner, Charleston's Alice Ravenel Huger Smith (1876-1958), was the star performer for the distaff side of this sale. "Her work is profoundly popular right now," said Fesko. "We have sold a number of them very successfully to all manner of collectors and dealers, and these works continue to do well." This one, *Raining in a Cypress Swamp*, a steamy, blue-hued watercolor, went to a phone bidder at \$35,250 (est. \$30,000/35,000).

Another watercolor by Huger Smith was badly foxed but accompanied by two of the artist's sketchbooks filled with drawings of southern swamps and vegetation, as well as a copy of *A Charlestonian's Recollections 1846-1913* by D.E. Huger Smith. The artist's father had signed, dated, and dedicated it to his daughter, who sometimes illustrated his books. Without too much effort by auctioneer and Skinner executive vice-president Stephen Fletcher, the same phone bidder who bought the first lot took the second one for \$4112.50 (est. \$4000/ 6000).

The total number of lots offered was 557, and 419 were sold, so nearly 25% did not sell. But a good chunk, 49 of them, were passed or bought in during the first 90 minutes, when 200 lots of prints were offered.

Two colorful white-line woodcuts by Henrietta Dean Lang did far better than the \$400/600 estimate given to each. *Street to the Sea* brought \$1762.50, and *Mending Nets* brought \$1880.

"Henrietta Dean Lang is not a very well-known name in printmaking," said Keith Sheridan of Keith Sheridan Fine Prints, New York City, who carries her art but didn't have much biographical information about her. (Neither did Skinner. The catalog listed her only as "American, 20th Century.") "So I think the prices were the result of the school and the type of work it was. White-line woodcuts have become very sought after. It's a method that was developed by B.J.O. [Bror Julius Olsson] Nordfeldt in Provincetown."

Nordfeldt (1878-1955) was born in Sweden, immigrated with his family to Chicago when he was a boy, and spent his summers in Provincetown from 1914 to 1917. "And that's when and where he invented this method and established a core of printmakers. It's a process that lends itself to a strong, bold design that's very American, not like anything that was done before."

Two other good sellers among the printmakers at this sale were Frank Weston Benson and Thomas Hart Benton. Benson's *River Drivers* made \$1880 on the phone (est. \$700/900), and his *Water Lilies* sold to an absentee bidder for \$1410 (est. \$600/800). Another absentee bidder bought Benton's *Prodigal Son* for \$2115 (est. \$1200/1800), and his *Night Firing* was bought by a bidder in the room for \$2937.50 (est. \$1500/2000).

A woman in lavender was determined to get Richard D. Tuttle's *Sun*, signed, dated ('63), and numbered (3/10). When a phone bidder finally dropped out, she got the abstract by Tuttle (b. 1941) for \$3407.50 (est. \$700/900).

A signed Wassily Kandinsky, *Kleine Welten XII* from "Kleine Welten, 1922," brought the most for any print in the sale, \$4700, but it was still under its \$5000/7000 estimate.

Also falling flat were Richard Estes's malls, markets, and other urban landscapes. Only three of the seven offered were sold, and only one of the three made even the low estimate. That was his *Movies*, 1981, which went at \$1880 (est. \$1800/2200).

Kathe Kollwitz didn't attract much interest, either. Half of her six lots were passed, and only her *Self Portrait*, 1934, did reasonably well at \$1175 (est. \$1000/1500). *Tod und Frau*, 1910, which showed a woman literally wrestling with death while her baby tried to keep her with the living, was lucky to make \$499.38 (est. \$500/700).

The Benton successes notwithstanding, most print buyers, plainly, wanted more cheerful images—a Dali clown (\$1057.50), a Mir<16> garden (\$2232.50), a whimsical Calder *supermarket* (\$1762.50). Even a happyish Ben Shahn, *Supermarket*, 1957, a Mondrian-like mosaic of colorful wire shopping carts, wasn't touched, perhaps due to guilt by association with the more sobering Shahns, including a passed lot of three that honored slain civil rights workers of the 1960's.

More in keeping with the mood was a piece of wearable art that was sold along with the prints. It was a screen-printed sleeveless A-line paper dress by an unknown maker, circa 1966, who had created a homage to Andy Warhol with a red, white, and black pattern of Campbell's soup cans. A label on its collar provided the care instructions to its buyer, an absentee bidder, who paid \$1410.

Besides the Weems elephant, sculptures that the bidders liked included two bronzes by Americans. *Balinese Dancer* by Allan Clark (1896-1950) made \$7637.50 (est. \$1000/1500). *Good Night* by Bessie Potter Vonnoh (1872-1955), a 9 1/2 inches tall image of a sleepy child in nightclothes, sold for \$10,575 (est. \$6000/ 8000).

Louise Nevelson's exuberant white-painted wood *Construction*, topped by a piece shaped like a coxcomb, went up at the end of the evening. Auctioneer and Skinner C.E.O. Karen Keane declared it her "favorite piece of the auction" after she sold it to yet another phone bidder for \$25,850 (est. \$15,000/20,000).

Given the tenacity of phone bidders—and, to a lesser extent, absentee bidders—few major pieces left the premises with live bidders. One of those few was *Venetian View* by Frenchman Felix Ziem (1821-1911). The 32 3/4 inches x 45 inches impressionistic oil on canvas made \$47,000 (est. \$20,000/40,000).

Jonathan Kenworthy's *Cheetah*, by contrast, was still greeting visitors in Skinner's lobby more than a week after a final bid by someone on the phone. The long 15 1/2 inches high smaller-than-life-size bronze by the British wild animal sculptor and illustrator (b. 1943) sold within estimate at \$15,275.

For more information, contact Skinner at (617) 350-5400 or visit the Web site (www.skinnerinc.com).