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Americana Sale Exhibits Irregular Pulse

by Jeanne Schinto



Skinner, Inc., Marlborough, Massachusetts

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Photos courtesy Skinner

Skinner's Americana sale on August 14 and 15 at the auction house's corporate headquarters in Marlborough, Massachusetts, proved the current rule once again. In the words of department head Stephen Fletcher: "The interesting, unique, or special things did well. Those that were not special did only OK. In this market there has to be, I hate to say, a 'gimmick.' There has to be something out of the ordinary about any given object to engage people."

Of the 1244 lots offered, 1105 sold for a gross of \$1,592,178 (including buyers' premiums). The top lot was a painting, not a piece of furniture, and it sold for five figures, not six. A ship portrait in oil on wood panel, it was cataloged as 19th-century American school.

The picture identifies the vessel on a pennant as the Rappahannock [sic]. The Rappahannock was built in 1841 by Clark & Sewall of Bath, Maine, but its history isn't what drove its price, said department expert Chris Barber. "Steve Fletcher compared it to a fireboard; that's not what its intent was, but you could certainly have seen it as one. It had a very folksy quality that appealed to a number of people," one of whom, an absentee bidder, bought it for \$35,550 (est. \$2500/3500). "As far as we know, what drove the price was purely folk aesthetics," Barber said.

Some other paintings did nicely too. Furniture generally was a different story. "The average piece of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century furniture is such a bargain," said Fletcher. "It seems that the prices are what I used to see when I first got out of the Navy and was going around with Bob Skinner [the auction house's late founder]."

The sale "typified so much of what's happening," he continued. "Auctions are the ultimate way of putting your finger on the pulse of the market, and it's an uneven pulse. Sometimes it quickens rapidly, and other times—where is it? I think we all have to collectively lower our expectations and let the dust settle."

Bidders kicked up a lot of dust in past years. Some overpaid (we were all there when it happened), but more than the market has changed since then. Think, for example, of how Americans eat now, how their dining spaces look today, and you won't wonder any longer about why sideboard prices have fallen. "I have the opportunity to go into 'trophy' houses, and the dining room does seem to be deemphasized," said Fletcher. "The kitchen has become the focal point. It seems we've gone back to the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, when so much of the activity of the household happened in the kitchen. We're going full circle here."

One piece of furniture that excited bidders was a 1795-1805 mahogany inlaid bowfront bureau, attributed to Abiel White (1766-1844) of Weymouth, Massachusetts. Estimated at \$1000/1500, it sold on the phone for \$10,665. "One reason it got so much attention is all the hard work that went into Brock's book," said Fletcher, speaking of *Harbor & Home: Furniture of Southeastern Massachusetts, 1710-1850* by Brock Jobe, Gary Sullivan, and Jack O'Brien.

According to Derin Brey, who wrote the White entry for the book, there are nine known examples of White bowfronts with distinctive half-spade feet. Now there are ten.

Bidders also were willing to compete for an 1810-15 carved and wavy birch inlaid mahogany two-tier dressing table with old refinish, made in either New Hampshire or Massachusetts. Part of a large consignment from the estate of John Arthur Leland and Roma Woodmansee Leland of Washington Court House, Ohio, it sold for \$9480 (est. \$1000/1500).

More typically, the furniture gave Fletcher a chance to flex his humor muscles. "We're not renting it; we're selling it!" he told his audience when they resisted an opening bid of \$4000 on a late 18th-century Chippendale carved cherry chest-on-chest found in Worcester, Massachusetts. With old surface but replaced brasses, no finials, and a base reinforced with some wood screws, it sold to a dealer in the room for \$5333 (est. \$8000/12,000).

The sale featured a slew of weathervanes, the largest group that Skinner has ever offered at one time, but bidders exerted themselves only on the rarest forms and most appealing surfaces, i.e., ram and codfish, yes; running horse and average cow, not unless it was a deal.

Some portrait miniatures and silhouettes did well, but once again, bidders slighted all but the best. "I never worked so hard for so little," department expert LaGina Austin told her audience after spending too much time selling four hollow-cut silhouette portraits to a phone bidder for a within-estimate \$504.

A lot that virtually sold itself, by contrast, was a painting called Harborside Distillery. Cataloged as 19th-century American school, the oil on canvas depicts a distillery compound, several ships at anchor, a mountain range in the distance, a railroad track, and small figures of men fishing from the shore. Signed with only the initials "SC" and bearing no other identifying marks, it has an almost Modernist look to it. Estimated at \$800/1200, it seemed well within reach of a less-than-millionaire. But then the full bank of phone bidders got readied, one of whom bought it for \$14,220. Oh, well.

Fletcher said the picture came from a woman in the Berkshires who is selling her parents' collection. "The central part of the canvas looks very American, but then you look at that mountain range—that part was so puzzling," Barber said, "I never heard from anybody at previews an opinion on just where that place is, and as far as I know, no one here determined who painted it. Obviously, we see tons of stuff over the course of a year. This is one of those things that—there is just something about it. You can't put your finger on exactly why you like it, but you do."

A painting attributed to Ammi Phillips (1788-1865) got some bidders into the action. A portrait of Rhoda Bennet Couch, it sold in the room for \$11,258. The buyer of the circa 1830 unsigned oil on canvas was Jonathan Rickard.

"I have been fascinated by Phillips's work for as long as I've known about it, and I am just thrilled to be its caretaker," said Rickard, a *M.A.D.* contributor who is an expert on English pottery.

The Phillips sold on the second day. Rickard was on hand for the first day too, when 137 lots of his consignments went up. They included 100 lots of mochwaware. "From a high of over seven hundred pieces I'm down to one hundred pieces of mocha," said Rickard.

Make that 102, since he bought two pieces consigned to this sale by others. "I bore easily, and I'm still collecting mochwaware after forty years and still get surprised," he said with a smile. "Those two pieces surprised me. I'd never seen anything quite like them."

Rickard said that his first encounter with mochwaware took place at Skinner in 1970. He had come to a sale on the hunt for mechanical banks. The Massachusetts College of Art graduate said he knew nothing about British ceramics, but in mochwaware he saw patterns that resembled Abstract Expressionism. That fascinated him. He was hooked. "I started to look for books to read about it and couldn't find any." Eventually, in 2006, he published the definitive work, *Mocha and Related Dipped Wares, 1770-1939*.

Along the way, he paid a world auction record price for mocha, appropriately at a Skinner sale on October 27 and 28, 1989, when he bought a piece for \$6600. "It was the best mocha I had ever seen. It had a marbled-fan pattern, deeply saturated colors, and was in essentially perfect condition." That same jug still holds the record. Rickard sent it back to Skinner, where it sold on October 28, 2001, for \$50,600. Rickard said, "The buyer was a prominent silver dealer, and I believe he was buying it for someone."

At this sale, the top price for mocha was \$5629. From the Rickard collection, the piece was a highly decorated handled pitcher. "As my friends in Britain might say, it was O.T.T.," said Rickard. (O.T.T. is over the top.) The estimate was \$2000/3000.

Did it reflect what he had paid? "The estimates [for all his pieces] were Skinner's. I bought it at the height of the market four years ago from John Sidel [a Wiscasset, Maine, dealer and artist] for almost ten thousand dollars more than what it brought. I definitely sold with losses incurred, but this was not a moneymaking venture. It was downsizing. The market was not perfect for selling, but [as a collector] I do that." And surely the pitcher's buyer is delighted? "Yes, in fact, I know the buyer. She is thrilled." A woman in New Jersey, she had a dealer bidding for her in the room, Rickard said. "She got about five pieces in all."

Besides two pieces of mocha and the Ammi Phillips, Rickard also bought a Pennsylvania fraktur for \$563 (est. \$800/1200). Made by Martin Brechall circa 1809, it will join another one by Brechall already in his collection, Rickard said. Oh, he collects frakturs too? "I've got the [collecting] disease badly; let's put it that way."

For more information, phone Skinner at (508) 970-3000 in Marlborough or (617) 350-5400 in Boston or see the Web site (www.skinnerinc.com).

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The auction's top lot was the portrait of the ship Rappahannock, a 31½" x 42" unsigned oil on wood panel that sold for \$35,550 (est. \$2500/3500).



This was the best seller among the dozens of vases. The 19th-century flattened full-bodied molded copper ram with weathered gilt surface and its original horns sold to a phone bidder for \$15,405 (est. \$4000/6000). The Waltham, Massachusetts, product is 22½" tall.



Cataloged as 19th-century American school, Harborside Distillery, a 19" x 24" oil on canvas signed "SC," sold for \$14,220 (est. \$800/1200).



The 3¾" tall circa 1800 mochwaware bowl with burnt sienna slip field and six dip-marbled fans sold for \$3437 (est. \$800/1200). "That marbled fan decoration is always a top seller," said Rickard, its consignor. "It's extremely difficult to find and very, very desirable."

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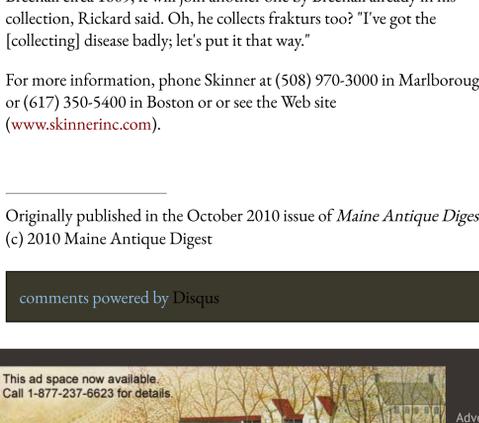
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