

March 9th, 2010

Bannister Paintings and a Whistler
Print Lead Winter Sale

by Jeanne Schinto



Grogan & Company, Dedham, Massachusetts

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Photos courtesy Grogan & Company

Fresh from a Rhode Island collection, seven oil paintings by Edward Mitchell Bannister were offered at Grogan & Company's December 7, 2009, sale in Dedham, Massachusetts. It was the first time in recent memory that so many Bannister works had come on the market at once, said Grogan's Allyson Lee, a fine arts specialist who has been working with company president and auctioneer Michael B. Grogan for 20 years.

Six of the paintings sold for a total of \$122,187.50 (including buyers' premiums), with the top four going to a private collector in the room. (The other two were hammered down to a phone bidder.) He was identified by Lee as someone who is putting together an African-American art collection and "had to have" examples by Bannister.

Known for his Tonalist landscapes, Bannister is widely acknowledged as the first African-American artist to receive national attention. In 1876, at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, he won a prize for a painting called *Under the Oaks* (location unknown today). Not everyone lauded the achievement. As the story goes, when the committee learned his race, it wanted to reconsider its judgment, but Bannister's competitors supported him, and the medal was awarded. Born in St. Andrews, New Brunswick, Canada (dates differ for his birth, 1828 and 1833; he died in Rhode Island in 1901), Bannister was by then living in Rhode Island, where he helped found the Providence Art Club in 1880; it is one of the oldest such organizations in the country, after New York City's Salmagundi Club.

The Bannister painting that sold for a high of \$37,375 was a view of the Sakonnet River in Tiverton, Rhode Island. (At Christie's in New York City in September 2004, a Bannister painting sold for \$54,000 [est. \$10,000/15,000].) The Bannister that sold for the least at \$2587.50 was an unsigned depiction of a man and horse plowing a field.

The auction house's estimates predicted the pattern accurately. "The top Bannister had all the bells and whistles," said Lee, "the water, the house. It shows an area of Rhode Island that's popular, and the painting was well done." The second-to-top Bannister, *Fishing Folk, King Phillip Rock, Mount Hope*, which sold for \$34,500, was a multi-figured genre scene signed and dated "92," and it was also "well painted."

It's safe to assume that private sales of Bannister works generally go for much more, although prices are rarely published. One exception is the \$125,000 that was paid by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, for Bannister's 1885 *Moonlight Marine*. The seller, as reported on line in the September 17, 2009, minutes of the meeting of the museum's board of trustees, was dealer Mark L. Brock of Concord, Massachusetts.

Bidders chased a James Abbott McNeill Whistler etching, *The Dyer*, found stored in a barn on Boston's North Shore, to the highest price of the evening, \$115,000. "I knew [*The Dyer*] had potential, because I had seen other copies go that high," said Lee. (One sold at Sotheby's in New York City on May 3, 2007, for \$144,000, but its provenance added value: it was ex-collection P.A.B. Widener [1834-1915], a wealthy American industrialist/art collector.)

Lee was also encouraged by "all of the big-name dealers" who requested phone lines for it. In the end, *The Dyer* went to one of them, based in New York, who also bought an etching from another consignment, Mary Cassatt's *Nurse and Baby Bill* (No. 2), for \$14,950.

The cover lot of the 177-lot sale, which brought a total of more than \$850,000, was Max Weber's *Spring Flowers*. Dating from 1944, the single-lot consignment from a local family went on the phone at \$46,000 (est. \$20,000/30,000). Successful too were works by M.C. Escher and Paul Klee, going at \$23,000 and \$25,875, respectively.

Thirteen 17th- and 18th-century Spanish and Spanish Colonial paintings did not excite bidders, at least not at the reserves suggested by the estimates. Bought in Spain at various auctions and galleries, they were the property of Ambassador and Mrs. William L. Eagleton, who retired to Taos, New Mexico, after postings on three continents. The one that bidders liked best was cataloged as "Andalusia school" and made \$8337.50, just clearing the low estimate. The buyer was a local dealer in the room. Five of the 13 remained unsold, even after post-auction deals.

Some regional works, likewise, were disappointments. These included paintings by Aldro T. Hibbard, Anthony Thieme, and Ralph Cahoon. "The Hibbard's size was a problem," said Lee. "It was too large, and that might have narrowed the market a bit. The Thieme wasn't signed on the front [only on the reverse], and it was a slight variation on his palette." As for the Cahoon, the seller had "overly high expectations," insisting on an estimate of \$20,000/30,000. Bidding stopped with a buy-in at \$19,000.

"The things that you expect the privates or people looking for a bargain to come in and scoop up for their homes seem to be a little flat," said Lee.

After the artworks came 53 lots of Oriental rugs and carpets, Michael Grogan's specialty, 89% of which sold, all but ten within or above estimates. "The market isn't what you'd call strong, but it's holding its own," said Lee. "The prices were good. We had seven phone lines going for a lot of them. The rug dealers in New York were on the phones bidding against the Boston dealers in the room."

For more information, call (781) 461-9500 or check the Web site (www.groganco.com).

Originally published in the March 2010 issue of *Maine Antique Digest*.
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***The Dyer* by James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), a brown-toned etching on laid paper, trimmed to plate imprint, brought an attention-getting \$115,000 (est. \$8000/12,000). Cataloged K219, III state of IV, it has the artist's butterfly signature and measures 19½" x 12".**



Edward Bannister's *Fishing Folk, King Phillip Rock, Mount Hope*, oil on canvas, 18" x 24", sold for \$34,500 (est. \$30,000/ 40,000). It is signed and dated "92."



***Böse Musik (Nasty Music)* by Paul Klee (1879-1940) was hammered down to a phone bidder for \$25,875 (est. \$15,000/ 20,000). The 9¾" x 15 7/8" circa 1932 ink drawing combines seeming musical notes with playful stick figures.**



***Ascending and Descending* by M.C. Escher (1898-1972) sold to one of several phone bidders for \$23,000 (est. \$9000/12,000). The circa 1960 lithograph, signed and numbered "No. 23/50," is 16" x 12¾"(sight size). The never-ending staircase, being climbed by a series of knights in armor, is based on a geometric model, the Penrose Illusion. Schinto photo.**