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Bidders Chase Tigers and Other Animal Art

by Jeanne Schinto

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*Copley Fine Art Auctions,
Plymouth, Massachusetts*

by Jeanne Schinto

On July 12, the first day of the two-day sporting sale at Copley Fine Art Auctions, a bidder in the salesroom at the Radisson Hotel in Plymouth,

Massachusetts, bought Friedrich Wilhelm Kuhnert's *Roused, a Tiger and Tigress* for \$333,500 (including buyer's premium).

German-born animal painter Kuhnert went on safaris in the early 20th century in the German and English colonial territories in South and East Africa, where he sketched and made field notes. He executed the paintings in his Berlin studio. The oil on canvas depiction of the tiger couple, which dates to 1912, came to the sale from a private New Jersey collection; it had been acquired from the J.N. Bartfield Galleries in New York City in 1996.

The new owner, who paid \$83,500 over the high estimate, wishes to remain anonymous, said Stephen B. O'Brien Jr., the auction house's chairman.

Three other artworks sold for six figures, including Charles Schreyvogel's famous 1903 bronze *The Last Drop*, which depicts an American cavalryman giving his horse a drink from his hat. O'Brien declared its \$109,250 price to be a new auction record for that casting. "We edged out Sotheby's by about a thousand bucks," he said. (We noted a previous casting that sold for \$96,000 at Sotheby's in New York City on December 1, 2004.)

The sale's cover lot, *Wapiti* by Carl Clemens Moritz Rungius, made a mid-estimate \$195,500. The 32" x 24" oil on canvas painting of an imperious elk on alert was the bestseller of seven early 20th-century big-game and landscape paintings by Rungius from a private Virginia collection. And like *Wapiti*, all did as expected, depending on their size and subject matter. Going for \$184,000, for example, was Rungius's 26" x 38" *Moose on a Ridge*, while his very beautiful 9½" x 11" plein-air landscape sketch of Mount Assiniboine fetched \$14,375.

A.B. Frost's *Snipe Shooting* was another standout, achieving \$66,125, more than twice its high estimate. The gouache, which was included in Frost's 1904 *A Book of Drawings*, shows two shorebird hunters crouched in a makeshift blind with a stand of shorebird decoys arranged in the water just beyond them. The work's original owner was businessman Isaac Norris De Haven (1847-1924), who acquired it directly from the artist. The catalog stated that it was likely painted to commemorate one of the many hunting trips that he and Frost took together.

A 1960's watercolor by Ogden M. Pleissner, *On a Scottish Grouse Moor*, did nicely too, bringing \$94,875 on a \$40,000/60,000 estimate. The catalog told the story of the commission in Pleissner's words. It was painted at the request of friends of Stanley "Chick" Allyn, a board chairman of the National Cash Register Company, who liked to hunt in Scotland with his business associates. "I went up there, and Chick Allyn and I got along," Pleissner wrote. "At the time I was shooting well, and they didn't have many good shots in the group. Well, anyway, he liked me and my wife and invited us back a number of times."

Old Timer, a circa 1985 acrylic on board depiction of an elephant by Bob Kuhn, found eager bidders, with one taking it at \$97,750, while a second Kuhn, an egg tempera of a lion in pursuit of a gazelle, was bought in on the same \$80,000/120,000 estimate.

In the sporting dog paintings category, Percival Leonard Rosseau's oil on canvas *Setters on Partridge* made its mark, selling at \$54,050 (est. \$40,000/60,000). The catalog identified the dogs as likely belonging to the artist's patron Percy Rockefeller, who, along with investors, built a private hunt and country club called Overhills in Cumberland County, North Carolina, that included an artist's cottage for Rosseau to use when he traveled there.

Besides these major painting lots, middle-market works—including oils by Lynn Bogue Hunt, Gustav Muss-Arnolt, and Edmund H. Osthaus, and a watercolor by Frank W. Benson—inspired competitive bidding. The only really soft spot in the artworks came with a series of whimsical golfing scenes by illustrator Henry Hintermeister and others. One explanation: after the majesty of the animals, human beings, flummoxed by the act of hitting a little white ball into a hole, just don't come off very well.

"The first day was terrific," O'Brien said. "We were really, really pleased with those results," which included a sell-through rate of 92% on nearly 300 lots. "Going into the sale, we knew we had a good group of paintings, with some of the top works by Frost, Ripley, and Pleissner, Rungius, and Kuhnert. In this economy you just don't know what's going to happen, so it was exciting to see the market response."

At the start of the second day, when 368 lots of decoys went up, auctioneer Peter J. Coccoluto told his audience, "It's Friday the thirteenth. I hope it brings us all good luck." Compared with the first day, bidding was much less consistently robust, but even so, Copley was destined to sell what were the top two decoy lots of the summer decoy auction week in New England. They were a red-breasted merganser hen by an anonymous maker and a single-lot pair of hissing Canada geese, one by Harry V. Shourds and the other by his son, Harry M. Shourds.

Perhaps the most exciting moment on that second day occurred when the circa 1850 merganser in original paint, from the rig of Captain Samuel Augustus Fabens from the North Shore of Massachusetts, shot past its \$15,000/25,000 estimate and landed at \$184,000.

"We knew that bird would do well, but there hadn't been any comparables at auction, so it was a difficult bird to estimate," O'Brien said.

As the catalog stated, only four Fabens rig mergansers have surfaced. The other three are in private collections. This is the first time any one of them has come to market, as far as is known by O'Brien, who identified the consignor as a private collection in Connecticut, where it has been since circa 1960.

Besides rarity and condition, two more factors that drove its price were the craftsmanship of its anonymous maker and the romantic nature of Fabens's life, which began in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1813 or 1814, when he was born into a seafaring family. He sailed all over the world, starting as a cabin boy and ending as an owner of ships, including the clipper ship *Challenge*, considered one of the finest tall ships of its day. To St. Petersburg alone he made 16 voyages, a detail that was recounted in *Old Marblehead sea captains and the ships in which they sailed...*, published in 1915 by the Marblehead Historical Society.

Going for \$201,250, a hair above the low estimate, was the pair of hissing geese by the Shourdses. Harry V.'s circa 1900 example is nearly identical to a famous one formerly in the John H. Hillman collection and more recently owned by John Tudor Jones II. It is an "M" encircled by a wreath, denoting that it was from a select group retained by the Mackey family until 1998, when it was sold by Guyette & Schmidt for \$57,500.

In most cases, carvings by A. Elmer Crowell still get the decoy collectors' juices flowing. A life-size standing green-winged teal by Crowell spilled over the high estimate to make \$92,000. Commissioned by the son-in-law of Harry V. Long of Boston, it was acquired directly from the carver and descended in the family.

Many lots later, a Crowell black-bellied plover mantel carving sold for \$60,375 (est. \$15,000/25,000). It had been in the collection of Joseph Archibald "Archie" Hagar (1896-1989), an ornithologist and conservationist for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and descended in his family.

A Crowell running golden plover from the rig of Parker Williams Whitmore of West Gloucester, Massachusetts, and branded as such ("P.W.W."), realized \$57,500 (est. \$40,000/ 50,000). A Crowell black-bellied plover from the same rig and with the same brand brought \$28,750 (est. \$25,000/35,000). "Those had been offered previously at a higher number at a different auction house fairly recently," O'Brien said. "So we were happy to get them sold for a decent price."

All told, 18 of the top 25 decoy lots sold—"which I'll take any time in this market," said O'Brien. He added, however, that the middle market for decoys was "finicky," and "the low-end market was pretty soft as well." In addition, he observed, "The miniatures were all over the place. The Crowell shorebird miniatures showed strength. And the Joseph Lincoln miniatures were pretty strong. But then the George Boyd miniatures were soft, and the Crowell duck miniatures were soft."

Still, 80% of the second day's offerings were sold, and the gross was up over last year's.

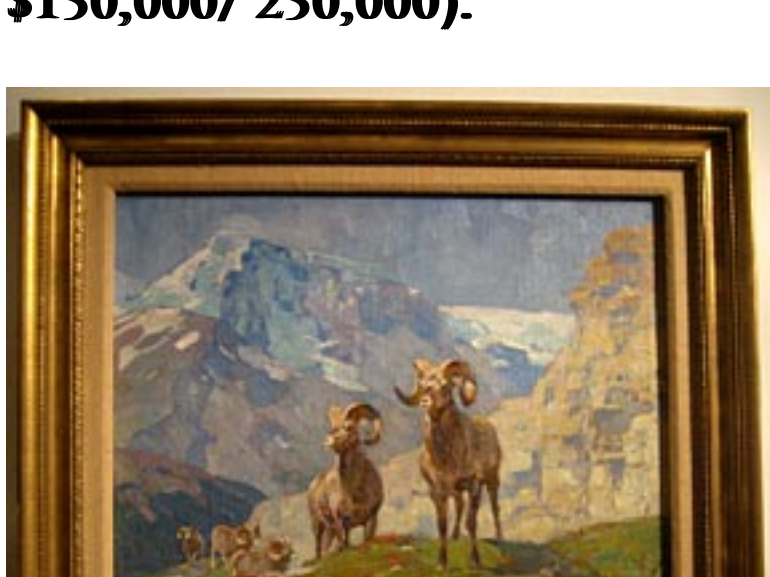
"I think overall it was a really solid sale," O'Brien stated. "We were up twenty or twenty-five percent from 2011," to about \$3.3 million, "and that doesn't include any post-auction sales." He takes it as an encouraging sign as he gets ready for his other annual sale "on the big stage" in New York City on January 21, 2013.

For more information, phone (617) 536-0030 or see the Web site (www.copleyart.com).

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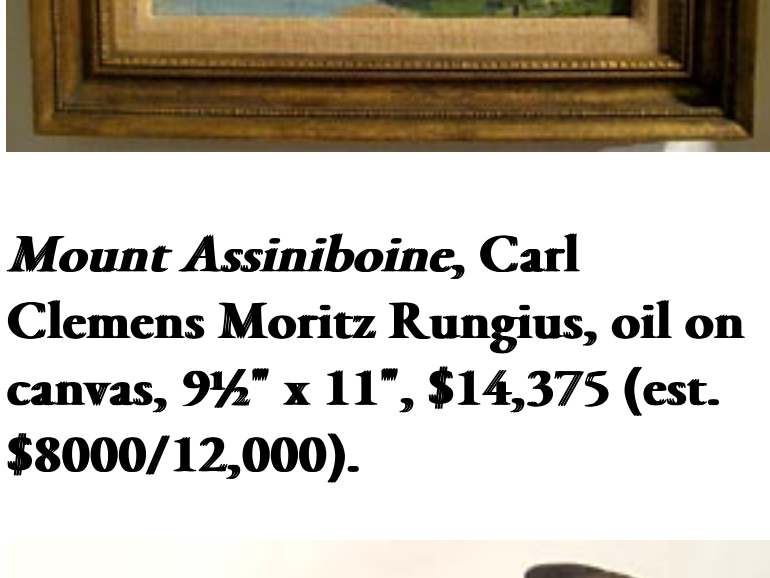
Roused, a Tiger and Tigress, Friedrich Wilhelm Kuhnert (1865-1925), 1912, oil on canvas, 24" x 39", \$333,500 (est. \$150,000/ 250,000).



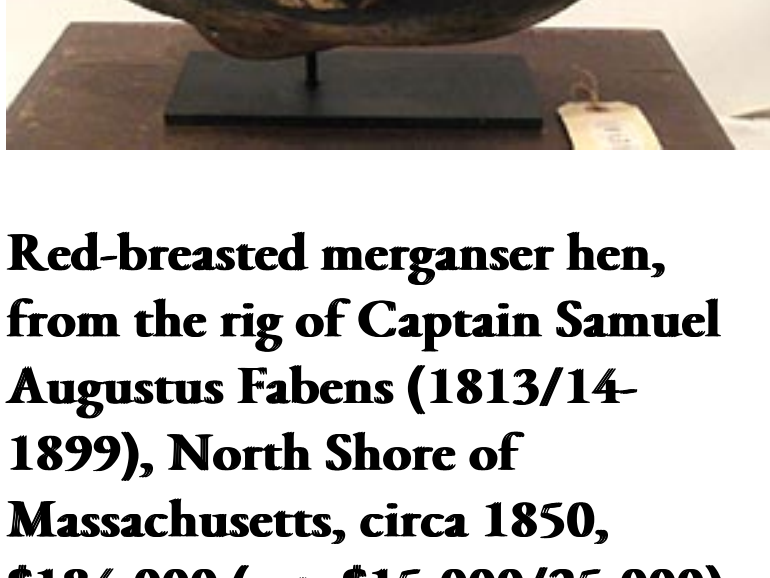
Home of the Big Horn, Carl Clemens Moritz Rungius, oil on canvas, 16" x 20", \$97,750 (est. \$60,000/90,000).



Mount Assiniboine, Carl Clemens Moritz Rungius, oil on canvas, 9½" x 11", \$14,375 (est. \$8000/12,000).



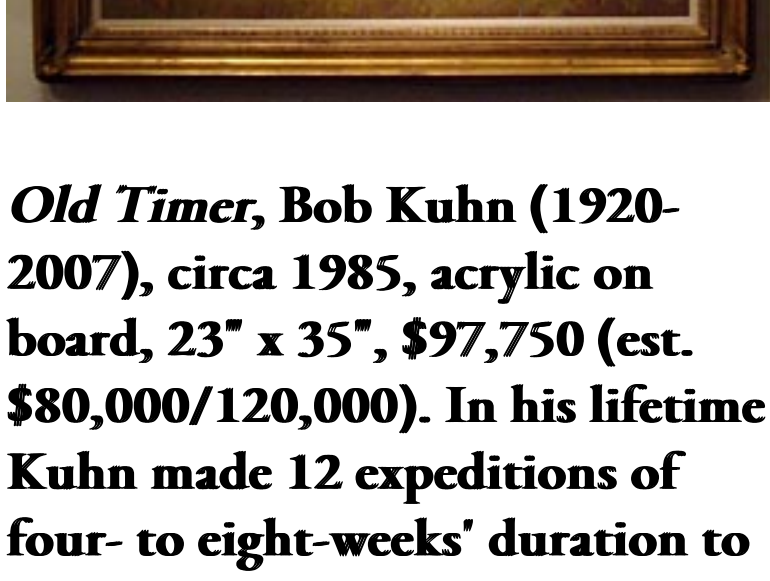
Red-breasted merganser hen, from the rig of Captain Samuel Augustus Fabens (1813/14-1899), North Shore of Massachusetts, circa 1850, \$184,000 (est. \$15,000/25,000).



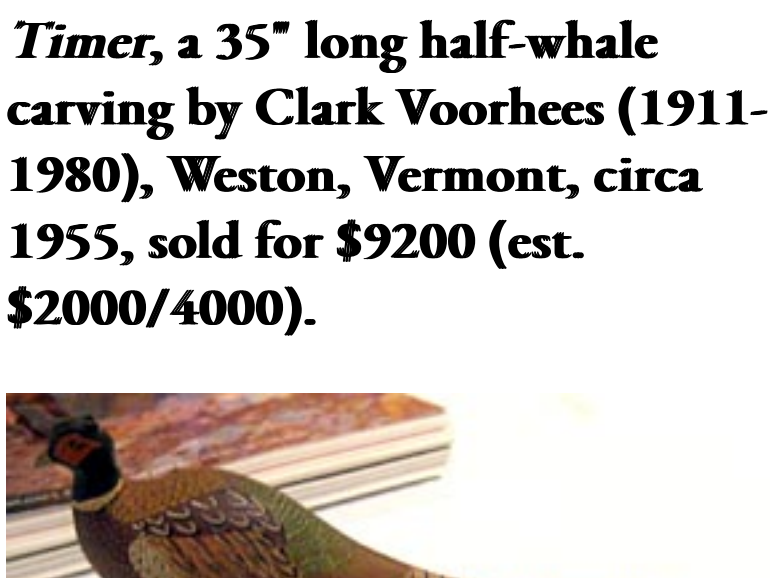
Old Timer, Bob Kuhn (1920-2007), circa 1985, acrylic on board, 23" x 35", \$97,750 (est. \$80,000/120,000).



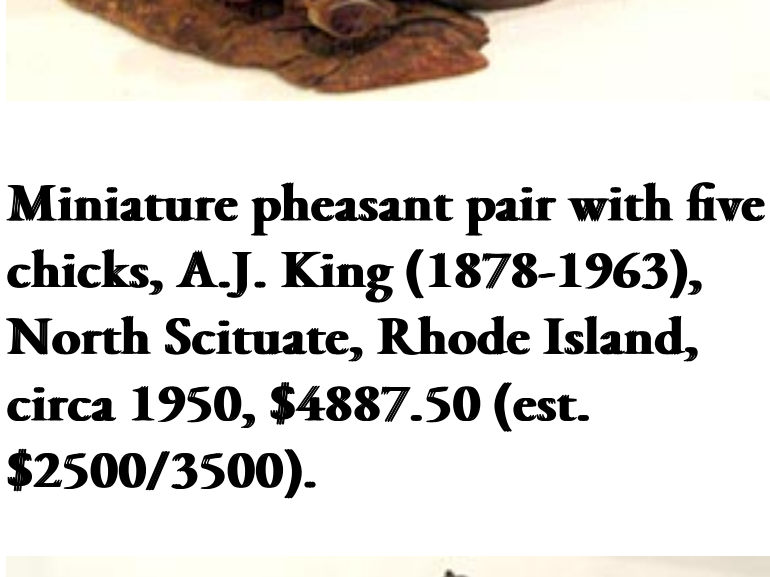
In his lifetime Kuhn made 12 expeditions of four- to eight-weeks' duration to Africa, six trips to Alaska, numerous forays into Canada, and numerous trips to the American West. Above Old Timer, a 35" long half-whale carving by Clark Voorhees (1911-1980), Weston, Vermont, circa 1955, sold for \$9200 (est. \$2000/4000).



Miniature pheasant pair with five chicks, A.J. King (1878-1963), North Scituate, Rhode Island, circa 1950, \$4887.50 (est. \$2500/3500).



The Last Drop, Charles Schreyvogel (1861-1912), copyrighted 1903 and inscribed on the base "Roman Bronze Works 1904," bronze, 12" x 18½" x 5", \$109,250 (est. \$60,000/90,000).



A duck hunter and his American water spaniel brave the white caps in Damn the Wind by William J. Koelpin (1938-1996). According to the catalog, this is the only known casting of the 10" x 24" x 9" 1976 bronze, and it sold for \$10,350 (est. \$4000/6000).