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May 31st, 2014

Books by Ben Franklin and Julia Child Make Sparks Fly

by Jeanne Schinto



Skinner, Inc., Boston, Massachusetts

Photos courtesy Skinner

Books by Benjamin Franklin and Julia Child were the top lots at Skinner's fine books and manuscripts sale at the auction house's Boston gallery on May 31. A fourth edition of Franklin's *Experiments and Observations on Electricity*, considered to be the most important scientific book published in 18th-century America, sold to an Internet bidder for \$22,140 (including buyer's premium). A first edition of the two-volume *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* by Child, coauthored by Simone Beck and Louisette Bertholle, sold for \$18,450 to a phone bidder who prevailed against many others. Skinner's book department head, Devon Gray, said the buyer wanted to remain anonymous for now.

Child inscribed both volumes to Avis DeVoto (1904-1984), an editor, reviewer, and accomplished cook in her own right who helped shape the classic French cookbook in its early stages and had the connections necessary to find a publisher for it. In the second volume, published in 1970, nine years after the first, Child wrote: "The second child: happily with the same Auntie Avis, still sheltering, advising, hand holding, scolding.... thank God... this is our inscription of thanks from her neice [sic] and nephew, Julia and Paul." (Ellipses hers.) Paul Child (1902-1994) was Julia's husband of 48 years. DeVoto's marginalia included notes and corrections that the authors consulted for subsequent editions. Gray said tucked inside one of the volumes was a recipe written on a napkin in Child's hand.

Because books always exist in copies, the perennial search is for those that set themselves apart. What set the Ben Franklin book apart was its condition. "That Ben Franklin had never been messed with," said Gray. "It had never had any repairs. It was in its original binding. I can't imagine how few copies of that Ben Franklin are in that pristine condition."

Gray described its consignors as "house pickers" and "people involved with auctions for many years." She said, "They have been in many houses and seen many wonderful things and picked it up some time ago."

Going for the third-highest price of the day was a broadside of the Declaration of Independence that sold for \$15,990 (est. \$18,000/20,000). It is the so-called Force Declaration. Printed on "rice" paper, it is the actual size of the original, 29" high x 25½" wide, and made from the engraving of W.J. Stone's facsimile that was published in an edition of 200 in 1823. Twenty years later, Congress commissioned Peter Force to compile and publish the *American Archives* into which he was to put a folded facsimile of the document. The printing was to be 1500 copies, but when subscriptions lagged, the project was canceled, and many fewer, perhaps only 500, were issued. This copy of the Declaration has a compromised John Hancock signature in need of restoration.

Another 18th-century American broadside was a good seller. Printed by Isaiah Thomas on March 30, 1773, a first (and only) edition of *By Direction of the Committee of the Town of Boston* sold for \$5843 (est. \$2000/3000). The text is a rebuttal to Governor Thomas Hutchinson's decree that a meeting by Boston's newly established Committee of Correspondence was illegal. It was signed in print and in ink by William Cooper, the committee's clerk, who became a member of the Massachusetts provisional government's House of Representatives in 1775.

A large-format (21" high x 27" wide) 18th-century British broadside, the iconic *Plan and Sections of a Slave Ship*, sold for \$13,530 (est. \$600/800). Published in London in 1789, the depiction of enslaved Africans bound and stowed like cargo was rightly characterized at the time as liable to strike a person unacquainted with the horror as "rather a fiction." In this rare variant, the text "Description of a Slave-Ship" was printed to the right of the graphic rather than below it. There are only five copies in United States institutions and seven in U.K. libraries, said Gray.

William Pynchon's *The Meritorious Price of Mans [sic] Redemption*, published in 1655, sold for \$2952 (est. \$2000/3000). It was his rejoinder to the Reverend John Norton's 1653 response to Pynchon's similarly titled *The Meritorious Price of Our Redemption* (1650), a critique of Puritan Calvinism that was the first book banned in Boston and was publicly condemned and burned throughout the New World.

Many decades later, his descendant Thomas Pynchon (born 1937) became a novelist, and at this sale a first-edition copy of his first book, *V*, published in 1963, plus a copy of his second book, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), sold for \$984 (est. \$800/1000), while a first edition of his much more plentiful third book, *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), made \$308 (est. \$500/700). The latter won the 1974 National Book Award, but when the Pulitzer Prize jury chose it for its fiction prize that year, other members of the Pulitzer board rejected the selection as "unreadable," "turgid," "overwritten," and in parts "obscene." No 1974 Pulitzer Prize in fiction was awarded. In a sense, then, the 20th-century's Pynchon has carried on the family tradition of writing books that offend the establishment.

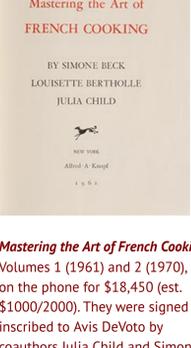
In the realm of theater, a 52-leaf manuscript of an unpublished play by George Washington Parke Custis, complete with stage directions and descriptions of costumes, sold to a phone bidder for \$6150 (est. \$600/800). Its importance to the dramatic arts is undoubtedly not what drove the price of *The Monongahela, or Washington on the First Great Field of his fame*. It was produced in New York on one night only: September 30, 1839. Devon Gray said, "That price was almost certainly fueled by the George Washington collectors." Custis was the nephew of our first president, and here was a play about that uncle, perhaps in Custis's hand.

"One thing that's important to me, besides the exciting moment of selling something for many thousands of dollars, is trying to see that everyone is able to own books, collect books," said Gray. "We want young people to come to the sales, trying their hand at buying things and developing a style and theme of collecting. So we need to have things all along the price ranges. Getting people initiated into this is a big part of the whole process."

A case in point: a collection of books on falconry that sold in a wide range of prices. A fourth-edition copy of a 17th-century book on the subject, *Latham's Falconry, or the Falcons Lure and Cure* by Simon Latham, published in London in 1658, sold for \$2460 (est. \$2000/2500). A first edition of Sir Richard Francis Burton's *Falconry in the Valley of the Indus*, published in London in 1852, sold to an Internet bidder for \$2583 (est. \$1500/1800). First and second editions of *Falconry in the British Isles* by Francis Henry Salvin and William Broderick sold for \$2214 (est. \$1500/1800) and \$1353 (est. \$2000/2500), respectively. Then again, a first Italian edition of a Latin poem on falconry by Jacques Auguste de Thou, published in Venice in 1735, fetched \$584 (est. \$300/500); it included the Latin text alongside the Italian, as well as numerous engravings. Group lots went at \$923 (est. \$400/500 for four books) and \$431 (est. \$200/400 for six).

Another mixed consignment that was part of this auction and sold in a wide range of prices came from a collector who is constantly refining his collection. "Samuel Pepys, the seventeenth-century British diarist, thought people should not have more than three thousand books," said Gray. "He believed in refining. So that's another important role that an auction house plays, to allow people to trade in some good things from their past that they don't collect anymore."

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

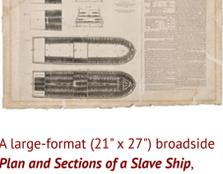


Mastering the Art of French Cooking, Volumes 1 (1961) and 2 (1970), sold on the phone for \$18,450 (est. \$1000/2000). They were signed and inscribed to Avis DeVoto by coauthors Julia Child and Simone Beck ("To my so dearest *chérie* / Avis, *avec toute ma / profonde affection*," Beck wrote in the first volume). The second volume had its original dust jacket. Through DeVoto's connections in the publishing world, the authors got a contract for their unprecedented cookbook from Houghton, Mifflin, which rejected it when it came in, after which DeVoto helped them get it sold to Alfred A. Knopf, to its everlasting culinary-publishing glory.

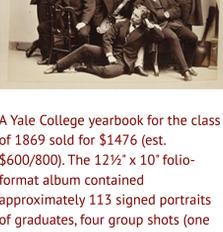
A lot comprising two more copies of **Mastering the Art of French Cooking** (not shown) went at \$2091 (est. \$400/600) to the same phone bidder. One was the 1966 Knopf edition, updated to reflect corrections made by Avis DeVoto. It was signed and inscribed by Child: "To Avis - with love / Final version of your / book with every known / fixable thing fixed - / Julia." The other, a London edition published in 1963, was inscribed to DeVoto by both Child and Beck and retained its dust jacket.



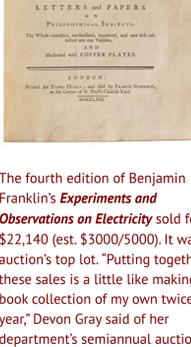
A very worn first edition of **Twelve Years a Slave** by Solomon Northrup sold for \$738 (est. \$600/800). Published in 1853, it was dedicated by Northrup to Harriet Beecher Stowe. Schinto photos.



A large-format (21" x 27") broadside **Plan and Sections of a Slave Ship**, published in London in 1789 to promote the abolitionist cause, sold for \$13,530 (est. \$600/800).



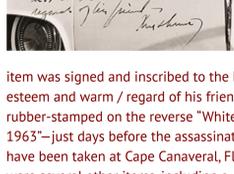
A Yale College yearbook for the class of 1869 sold for \$1476 (est. \$600/800). The 12½" x 10" folio-format album contained approximately 113 signed portraits of graduates, four group shots (one shown), approximately 22 photos of professors identified but not signed, as well as approximately 24 images of buildings and street scenes.



The fourth edition of Benjamin Franklin's **Experiments and Observations on Electricity** sold for \$22,140 (est. \$3000/5000). It was the auction's top lot. "Putting together these sales is a little like making a book collection of my own twice a year," Devon Gray said of her department's semiannual auctions.

However, in the case of the two top lots, books by Franklin and Julia Child, there is a coincidental connection beyond the marketplace. Each author is among America's most famous Francophiles. In the same year that Franklin helped draft the Declaration of Independence, he was appointed the first U.S. ambassador to France; he spent nine years in Paris. Child is credited with bringing French cooking techniques to American home cooks.

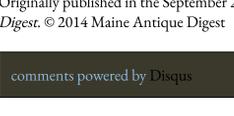
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A signed 8" x 10" photograph of John F. Kennedy talking with James E. Webb sold for \$2706 (est. \$200/400), but after the auction the sale was canceled. "The expert consensus after the sale was that the signature was not right," said Devon Gray. The item was signed and inscribed to the NASA administrator "With esteem and warm / regard of his friend - / John Kennedy" and was rubber-stamped on the reverse "White House Photograph / Nov 17 1963"—just days before the assassination. The photo appeared to have been taken at Cape Canaveral, Florida. Accompanying the lot were several other items, including a campaign bumper sticker with a signature.



A signed 3½" x 2¼" black-and-white photograph of Mahatma Gandhi sold for \$5535 (est. \$1500/2000). An additional snapshot and letter from Amrit Kaur came with it.



An archive of 17 letters by artist Rockwell Kent sold for \$3690 (est. \$2000/3000). The lot included ephemera, e.g., real photo postcards of Monhegan Island, Maine (one shown), where Kent spent time in summer. Schinto

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