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## Boy's Portrait and Auto Weathervane Drive \$4.1 Million Americana Sale

by Jeanne Schinto

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*Skinner, Inc., Boston, Massachusetts*

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A jaunty automobile-and-driver weathervane and a folk art portrait of a charismatic little boy were the top lots at Skinner's latest Americana sale, held November 3 and 4, 2007. The vane, made circa 1910 by Boston's W.A. Snow Iron Works and deaccessioned by a small eastern Massachusetts cultural institution, stopped just short of \$1 million, going to a phone bidder at \$941,000 (including buyer's premium). Jerry and Susan Lauren were the buyers, said Stephen Fletcher, head of Skinner's Americana department. The unsigned portrait, found by department associate Chris Barber on a house call in Boston's Dorchester neighborhood, went at \$886,000 to dealers David Schorsch and Eileen Smiles of Woodbury, Connecticut, who were bidding by phone on behalf of a client.

Together, the two lots were responsible for \$1,827,000 (43.5%) of the \$4,198,894.50 total achieved by the 984-lot sale. That's a telling figure. We're all used to the shape of the price structure by now, but the pyramid seems these days to be topped by a flagpole that only billionaires are equipped to ascend. Those startling sums notwithstanding, this sale's previews, notably more crowded than usual, foreshadowed strong prices fetched by several other featured lots at the merely millionaire level: a painting of a yacht by James Buttersworth, a Boston chest, a Connecticut bureau, a David Wood clock, and a landscape attributed to Thomas Chambers.

The sale took place on a weekend that drew prominent members of the Americana community to three other significant events in eastern Massachusetts. Top collectors, high-flying dealers, museum curators, conservators, and scholars convened not only for the 48th annual Ellis Antiques Show, just around the corner from Skinner's Boston gallery, but also for the American

woodcarving symposium at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, and for the opening of An American Vision: Treasures from the Winterthur Museum at the Worcester (Massachusetts) Art Museum.

Of course, it's also true that "if the material is good and you have the sale on an oil rig, people will find out about it," as Skinner's president and CEO Karen Keane once remarked.

The portrait of the boy was identified by its consignors as their ancestor, Edward Reed Dorr (1808-1880), who grew up to be a Boston tailor. Looking to be about five years old, he is seated on a fancy painted child's chair in a little blue suit with gold buttons, wide-collared white shirt, and black slippers. In one hand he holds an orange or large lemon, and fruit of the same kind hangs from branches over his head. His other hand pets the head of a lap dog, whose paws rest on his knee. All those details, however, would be meaningless without the fix of the boy's gaze. Confident without being cocky, wise without being a wise guy, he isn't cute. He's simply enchanting.

Reached by phone on the day after the sale, Schorsch said he and Smiles did not participate in any other weekend activities ("I just drove up to Skinner's and drove home"). Of the painting, he said, "When you get a composition like this one, in the state of preservation that it's in, it's mind-boggling. It's what you hope to find in your 'dream' folk art portrait. Only a signature would have made the picture any better."

Schorsch is pursuing the idea that the painting belongs to a group of pictures attributed to Jonas W. Holman (1805-1873). If it does turn out to be Holman's work, the family's identity of the sitter may also be shown to be amiss, Schorsch said. "I think the attire, the style of the chair, and the style of the picture itself falls into a date range closer to 1825 to 1830. The other pictures by Holman all date from that period."

A Holman portrait of Mrs. Seth Wilkinson, owned by the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum at Colonial Williamsburg, "is the key picture that links the others together," said Schorsch, also naming one at the Fruitlands Museum in Harvard, Massachusetts, and a pair at Winterthur, where graduate student Caroline M. Riley wrote a master's thesis on Holman not long ago. Schorsch himself has owned one in the past, and his Woodbury, Connecticut, colleague, Jeffrey Tillou, brought one to a recent Winter Antiques Show.

Schorsch said he and Smiles will study the subject and come to a conclusion. "I can't stand unanswered questions, but the story here isn't the identity of the sitter or of the artist. It's the magnitude of the image. This is all academically interesting, but at the end of the day, it was the charm of that little boy that equated to value. This is a picture that's now going to be a new little icon."

As for the other top lot of the day, there is no mistaking the maker of the weathervane. W.A. Snow's name and Boston address are embossed on a plaque above the car's front headlamps. Originally mounted on top of the Manor Crescent Building in Lexington, Massachusetts, the vane came down when the building was demolished in 1960 and given to the consigning cultural institution whose focus is pre-horseless carriage days, i.e., early American history. It was stashed in a storeroom when the Skinner people identified it as something that would be coveted by collectors.

"That joins the ranks of what's going to be the best private weathervane collection in America," said Stephen Fletcher, who had it on view during Skinner's science and technology sale at the auction house's Bolton, Massachusetts, gallery on the weekend before the Americana sale. Skinner was selling antique autos on that day. The Laurens, along with their advisor, New York City dealer Sy Rappaport, came up to see it there.

One previewer pointed out that the mustachioed driver has his foot firmly pressed on the gas pedal, a gesture that gives the static form a powerful, visual energy. It's also a readable symbol; he's driving the Americana market into its future. When the vane came down from the building it had once adorned, few people would have considered it an antique. "It was worth nothing," said Fletcher. "It was a local curiosity." Considering its folk art stature today, he added, "We're all very fortunate that it was mounted on the cupola of the building at such an angle that BB gun shooters could hit only its bottom, not its sides."

One piece in the sale that observers thought would see more action was the chair attributed to Samuel McIntire. Perhaps he's been overexposed a bit for the moment. In the end, the chair brought only \$15,275, and the opinion in the room was that it was a very nice buy.

A chest-on-chest with replaced brasses, without finials, and with Connecticut quirks did not endear itself to collectors, at least not at its reserve (est. \$30,000/50,000). Also remaining unsold was a 10¼" x 14" watercolor portrait, attributed to Joseph H. Davis, that had trimmed edges and other condition issues (est. \$40,000/50,000), but these disappointments were relatively minor. The sale featured very little flotsam and jetsam. As Fletcher put it, "We wanted the sale to be like the Joni Mitchell song, 'None of the crazy you get from too much choice.'"

For those whose Americana price points are at the wider parts of the pyramid, Skinner's had a Discovery sale scheduled three weeks later, November 29, at its Bolton facility, where parking is free, pickups are easier, and access by major highways are more assured than they are for bidders who make their way to Boston sales. Perhaps one really can please all of the people all of the time.

For more information, contact Skinner in Boston at (617) 350-5400 or in Bolton at (978) 779-6241; Web site ([www.skinnerinc.com](http://www.skinnerinc.com))


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