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February 1st, 2013

Bronze Dogs Find Good Home at Boston Museum

by Jeanne Schinto



Skinner, Inc., Boston, Massachusetts
Photos courtesy Skinner

“What you have to calculate on with animals is they never pose,” sculptor Anna Vaughn Hyatt Huntington told an interviewer in 1964. But a nearly life-size pair of Huntington’s Great Danes in bronze with green patina, offered at Skinner’s February 1 fine art sale in Boston, looked as if it was modeled on canines who instinctively knew how to sit for an artist.

Approximately 200 lbs. each, these reclining beasts, signed, inscribed, and dated 1907, had been in private hands for four decades, said Skinner’s fine art department head, Robin S.R. Starr. She told previewers on the night before the sale that the pair came from a house in Billerica, Massachusetts, north of Boston, where they were “outside dogs” for 20 years, then moved inside after the family realized their value. Real Great Danes lived there too, said Starr, and one of them liked “snuggling up against” its ersatz cousins.

The dogs’ estimate (\$125,000/175,000) proved to be too ambitious for bidders at the auction, but a day or two later, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, whose representative curator Nonie Gadsden had been in the auction room when they were bought in, agreed to buy the duo for \$126,000 (including buyer’s premium). They join other Huntington works in the MFA’s collection, including *Young Diana* and *Elephants Fighting*.

The two-catalog, 638-lot sale was a long one, with prints and photos up at noon, followed by paintings and sculpture at four. At the end, 85% of the offerings were sold for a total of \$2.2 million—a clear success, particularly, in Skinner’s view, because bidders favored no particular categories.

“We were happy to see that interest was across the board in terms of both price and period,” said Starr. “Modernism continues to do well for us, but we were thrilled that we also did well with nineteenth-century European, marine art, early portraiture, Hudson River school, and our old bread and butter—the Boston school and Cape Ann. Somebody wanted everything.”

Starr continued, “I’m not going to say it felt like early 2007, but it couldn’t help but remind you of that. Three very different people said to me, ‘You know, I think everybody is just tired of waiting for the darn economy to turn around.’ The results bear that out. People are done waiting. They’re just going for it. Just as the regular folk are getting back into the stock market, they’re getting ready to buy [fine art] again. They’re being cautious; they’re not being crazy, but that’s good.”

Going to a phone bidder at \$78,000 was *Überschneidung* (Interseccion/Overlap), a 1921 abstract collage on paper by László Moholy-Nagy. Off the market since the 1970’s, the collage came to the sale from the family of Roy Gussow (1918-2011), a one-time student of Moholy-Nagy. “These don’t come up much,” Starr said of Moholy-Nagy’s early artworks. “It had been in that frame forever, and it was just a terrific, very fresh package.”

Selling to an overseas phone bidder at \$54,000 was an abstract oil on canvas by Francis Picabia, a Frenchman who changed his style many times, finding repetition to be a trap. Probably dating from 1937-39, Picabia’s *Sr. Tropez* was painted over a previous, representational composition of his, a bust shown in profile superimposed over a floral motif. The underpainting is detectable somewhat with the naked eye. Infrared reflectography shows it clearly. There is even a second, faint Picabia signature visible. Another fresh-to-the-market piece, the “two-for-one,” as Starr characterized it, had been in a private Massachusetts collection and descended in the family.

The paintings and sculpture catalog’s cover lot was a closeup of *Phenomena Broken Prism Finder*, a 1984 abstract acrylic on canvas by Paul Jenkins. Starr said, “Like Helen - Frankenthaler, Jenkins drank the Jackson Pollock Kool-Aid,” but she noted that neither artist cared to adopt his famous drip technique. Frankenthaler preferred to stain unprimed canvases, while Jenkins always primed his and then used a knife and other means to control the flow of color. At 77” x 38”, this was a large canvas for Jenkins, and large tends to restrict any artist’s bidding pool somewhat. From a private Florida collection, it sold for \$24,000 (est. \$20,000/30,000).

Speaking of Frankenthaler, there was a woodblock print by her in the prints section of the sale that didn’t elicit any interest on auction day, though it sold later for \$18,000 (est. \$50,000/60,000). The 1977 abstract design, *Drawing on Woodblock Proof I*, was created with crayon and mulberry juice that came from the mulberry tree growing in front of the studio of the print’s publisher, the esteemed Kenneth Tyler. It is the first block of four used to create a highly regarded print by Frankenthaler, *Essence Mulberry*. “In hindsight, I think that [estimate] was more aggressive than it should have been,” said Starr.

Don’t let anyone ever tell you that setting estimates isn’t an art in itself. The most expensive print of the sale, estimated teasingly, was Andy Warhol’s color offset lithograph *Liz*, published by Leo Castelli Gallery in 1964 in an edition of approximately 300. Signed and dated “Andy Warhol 65,” the image of Elizabeth Taylor went by phone for \$26,000 (est. \$7000/9000).

Besides Warhol, other print equivalents of blue-chips—Picasso, Chagall, Jim Dine, Alex Katz, Robert Rauschenberg—did well. So did *La Mariée*, a color aquatint by Jacques Villon after Marcel Duchamp. From an edition of 200 (plus proofs) published by a Parisian gallery in 1934, *La Mariée* sold to a phone bidder for \$15,600 (est. \$1500/2000).

The Cubist work did have a bit of the *Nude Descending a Staircase* about it, and Villon, born Gaston Émile Duchamp, was Marcel’s elderly brother. What is more, it was signed by both of them, but it’s definitely after Duchamp. “Villon was commissioned by Galerie Bernheim-Jeune to do a series of mostly aquatints after well-known artists,” Starr explained. “He did Matisse, Picasso, Renoir—nearly forty in all. They were published by the gallery, then the Louvre published later editions. Villon’s own work was extremely good, but he was also good at imitating others.”

Thomas Hart Benton’s iconic *Wreck of the Ol’ 97* was another of the top print lots. The 1944 lithograph of a famous steam locomotive derailment, as witnessed by horse-drawn wagons, sold on line for \$13,530 (est. \$1000/1500). It was not in the best condition, a fact legitimately reflected in Skinner’s estimate. Better copies have gone much higher lately. One, described by Swann Galleries as “a brilliant, dark impression,” sold at that New York City auction house on March 8, 2012, for \$26,000.

When two prints by Josef Albers were on the block, which these days is the video screen, Skinner CEO and president Karen Keane told the audience, “There’s an image there, I promise.” The screen showed what appeared to be mere whiteness. Plates K and L from *Gray Instrumentation II* are screenprints in various pale grays. From a 1975 edition of 36 published by Tyler Graphics, the pair sold in one lot on the phone for \$3120 (est. \$1500/2000).

Richard Tuttle’s *Paper Octagonal #1* from an edition of 100 actually is all white, except for the faint outline of an octagon in graphite that fits inside its 54½” x 60” sheet. Tuttle (b. 1941) has said of the 1970 conceptual work, “If someone were to cut it (correctly, which means carefully inside the line), and wallpaper paste it to a white wall, it would be a work of art.” Asked if she thought anyone would take scissors to it, Starr said, “I would be floored if someone did, but in this world, you never know.” She laughed. The work went to a bidder on the phone for \$14,400 (est. \$2000/3000).

A mid-20th-century suite of ten gelatin silver prints from Aaron Siskind’s series “Pleasures and Terrors of Levitation” went in one lot to an Internet bidder for \$43,050 (est. \$10,000/15,000). The Siskind portfolio was easily the photo session’s best performer, but the rest of the 40 lots in this section did better than photos usually do at Skinner.

“We’re looking to get more involved in photography,” Starr said. “We’ve been trying to push it softly over the years, but we now have someone focused on it. We have hired a woman whose specialty it is.” That new member of the fine arts department is Annie Clafflin. A fine photographer in her own right, she has a master’s degree in arts administration from Boston University and was formerly a curatorial and collections intern at the Danforth Museum of Art in Framingham, Massachusetts. “We stole her from the Danforth, with their permission, of course,” said Starr.

Other changes at Skinner include a redesigned catalog and improved Web site that subtly and not so subtly encourages bidding by Internet. “Online bidding at [www.skinnerinc.com](#)” appears on every catalog page, and the Web site has many new interactive features, tempting you to linger. Judging by the increased number of Internet bidders, especially at the higher price levels, the strategy is working.

Skinner has also lately increased its buyer’s premium. This change may be contributing to more on-line activity, Starr said. That’s because, while its regular buyer’s premium went up from 18.5% to 20%, its Internet buyer’s premium went up only from 22.5% to 23%. As a result, buying by phone or in person, as opposed to on line, does not save as much money as it used to. “And the Internet is so convenient,” Starr added. “I also think people like the sense of feeling in direct control that on-line bidding gives them.”

In years gone by, Skinner’s fine art marathon sales were less edited than this one. Selling along with consignments of quality was all the rest, including the flotsam and jetsam of estates. Now that the department has what it calls studio sales and its suburban headquarters in Marlborough, Starr observed, “Major sales can now be stronger, and at the same time we can bring up the level of the Studio auctions.”

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



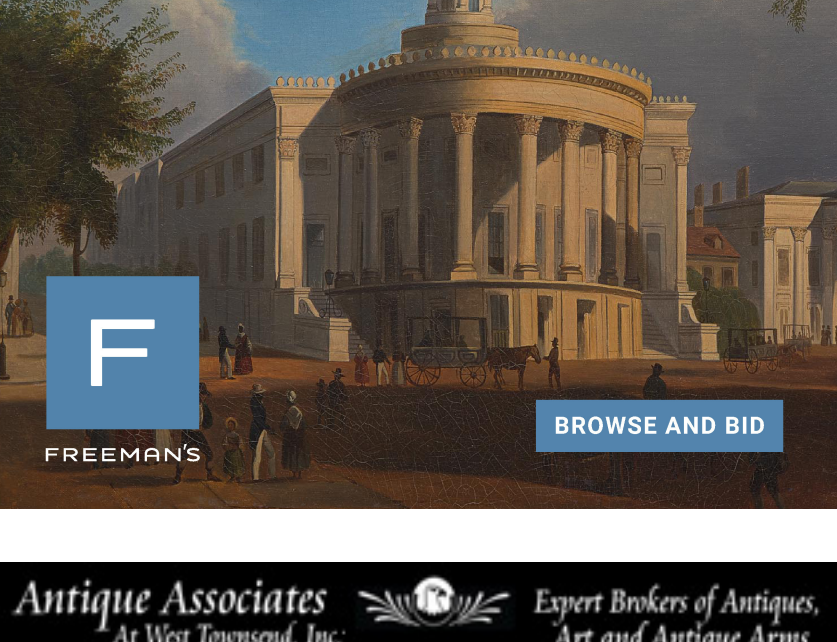
“Not a baaad price,” said Skinner executive vice-president Stephen L. Fletcher after he sold *Sheep and Hens in a Stable Interior* by Eugène Verboeckhoven (Belgian, 1799-1881). Signed and dated 1870, the 29” x 24¾” oil on (punctured) canvas went to a phone bidder for \$19,200 (est. \$1500/2500).

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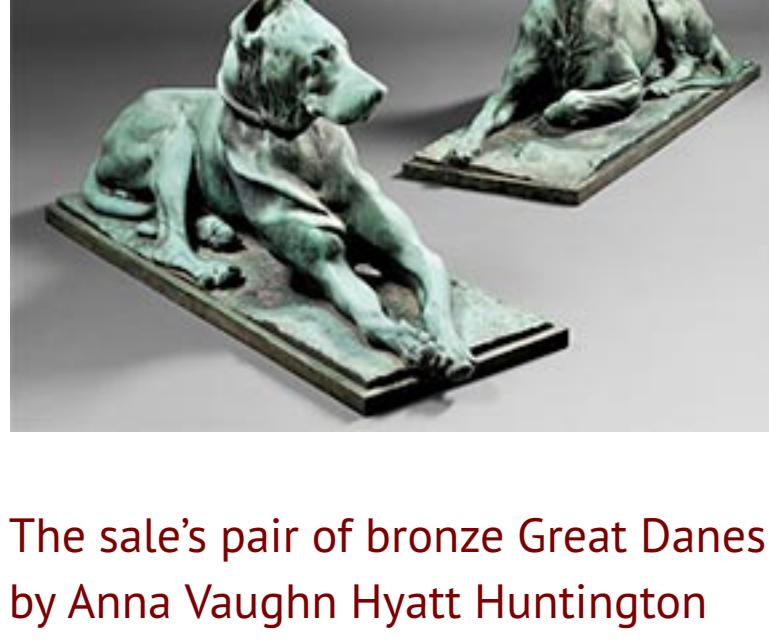
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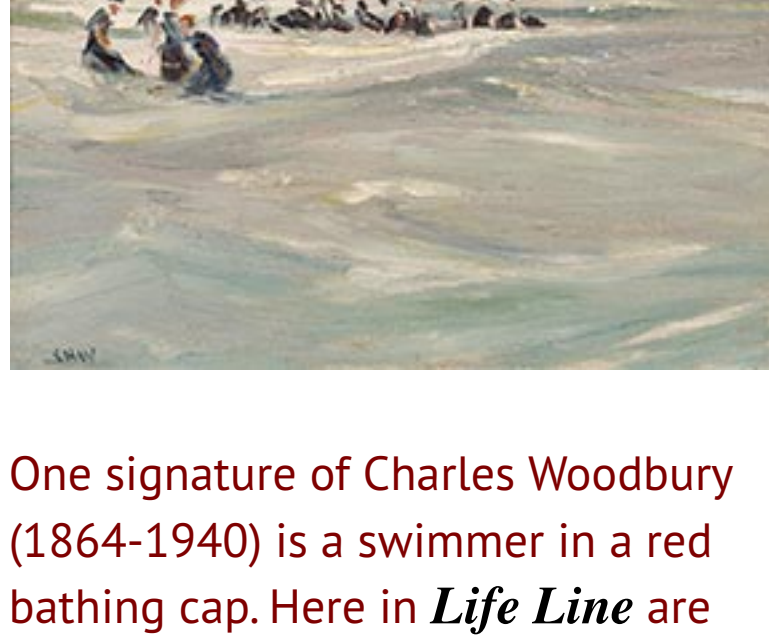
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The sale's pair of bronze Great Danes by Anna Vaughn Hyatt Huntington (1876-1973) lay at the feet of previewers in Skinner's Boston gallery on the night of Robin Starr's gallery walk. Each is approximately 27" x 53" and signed, inscribed, and dated by the artist "Anna V. Hyatt/ Auvers-sur-Oise 1907." Huntington, who spent time in the suburbs north of Paris, had the uncanny ability to translate animals' postural gestures into abstract notions. These dogs exhibit two different degrees of tranquility mixed with vigilance. They sold after the auction to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, for \$126,000.



One signature of Charles Woodbury (1864-1940) is a swimmer in a red bathing cap. Here in *Life Line* are many of them. The 10" x 14" oil on board fetched \$8400 (est. \$3000/4000).



Still Life with View to a Bridge by Antonin Pelc (Czech, 1895-1967) went to an Internet bidder for \$23,370 (est. \$3000/3500). The 1944 oil on canvas is 17¾" x 28¼".



The Marsh Hill (Sketch) by Edward Seago (British, 1910-1974) came from a Connecticut collection. The 10½" x 14" oil on masonite sold to a bidder on the Internet for \$24,600 (est. \$8000/12,000).



Paper Octagonal #1 by Richard Tuttle (b. 1941) reminded me of Yasmina Reza's 1994 play *Art*, concerning the breakup of a friendship between two men after one of them buys a painting that is all white. Consigned by a private Massachusetts collection, the 1970 conceptual work sold for \$14,400 (est. \$2000/3000). [Editor's note: The lighter white spots that appear on the top of the artwork are light reflections, not part of Tuttle's work.] Schinto photo.



Two phone bidders tussled at length for *Berliner Dom an der Spree von der Kurfürstenbrücke aus gesehen* (The Berlin Cathedral at the River Spree, seen from the Kurfürsten Bridge) by Lesser Ury (German, 1861-1931). The auctioneer's movements duplicated a metronome until one of the bidders took it for \$69,000 (est. \$20,000/50,000). The 1920's oil on canvas is 19¾" x 13¾". Schinto photo.



August Moon by Milton Avery (1885-1965) made \$60,000 (est. \$15,000/25,000). The mixed media on paper (sheet size 35" x 23") was signed and dated "1958."



MFA curator Nonie Gadsden competed for this one, *The Big Catch* by Seymour Joseph Guy (1824-1910). But the charming 9¼" x 12¼" oil on canvas went to a phone bidder for \$51,000 (est. \$15,000/25,000). It came to the sale from a dealer, said Starr, adding, "It was a great picture that had just been forgotten and nowhere forever."



Fairytale went by way of the Internet for \$12,300 (est. \$800/1200). The 1972 mixed media (gouache, colored pencil, and graphite on paper, sight size 11¼" x 9") by Lado Gudiashvili (Georgian, 1896-1980) was inscribed and dedicated on its reverse in Georgian, Russian, and English to William P. Campbell, a curator at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. It went from Campbell by family descent to a private New England collection.