

Swann Galleries, New York City

Institutions are Heavy Buyers at Printed and Manuscript African Americana Sale

by Jeanne Schinto

Photos courtesy Swann Galleries

At the podium before the start of Swann Galleries' auction of printed and manuscript African Americana on March 29, Nicholas D. Lowry, the house's president and chief auctioneer, congratulated book department director Rick Stattler. The kudos were due for successfully "stepping into the breach" left by Swann's former African Americana specialist, Wyatt Houston Day, who ended his tenure last year after more than two decades. In addition to this annual sale, Stattler is still the specialist in charge of the twice yearly printed and manuscript Americana sales at the New York City gallery.

Not only is this annual event always a good time to acknowledge and reflect upon the history makers, it is also a time to remember and adulate the history keepers.

In a post-auction statement Stattler said that "after 22 years of fine catalogues put out by my predecessor..., it was a challenge to do credit to this sale. Fortunately, the market for this important material shows no signs of slowing down. While results were strong overall, it was the most rare and unique material in this sale that brought out stiff competition, particularly from the institutional buyers."

Indeed, four of the top five lots and 13 of the top 20 will be joining institutional collections, a Swann press release said, without naming any of them.

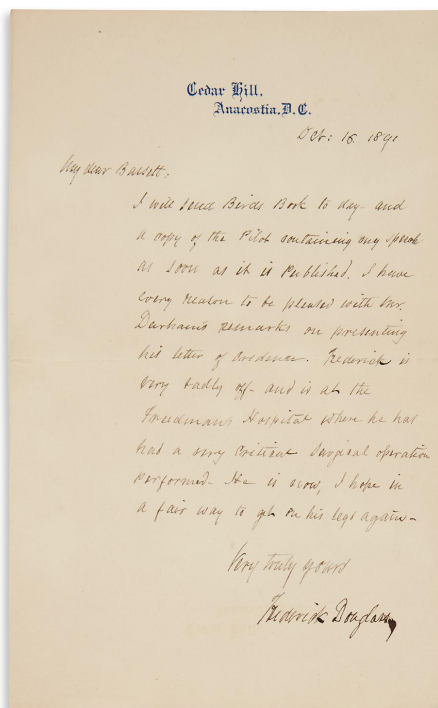
What is more, institutions participated in the sale at nearly every price level. In all, 95 or nearly 25% of the sale's 386 lots were won by these collections, some "very, very small" and others "very large," said Stattler, who didn't have permission to identify any of them any more specifically. "And that doesn't count institutions who had agents bidding for them."

Stattler organized the catalog somewhat differently from years past, i.e., alphabetically ("Art," "Business," "Civil Rights," etc.) rather than chronologically, from "Slavery & the Middle Passage" to the present day. One aspect of these sales' offerings was unchanged. Not only is this annual event always a good time to acknowledge and reflect upon the history makers—Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Frederick Douglass, and so on—it is also a time to remember and adulate the history keepers. These are the people who had, and continue to have, the historical presence of mind to save such things as posters, broadsides, sheet music, newspapers, correspondence, photos, placards, pamphlets, advertising circulars, and other bits of ephemera that can be used to bear witness to the past. Given the evidence that they have kept, and keep, for us all, we don't have to speculate about what happened long ago or, in the case of some of our (shall we say) less informed brethren, bother trying to deny it. It's right there in the handwriting and typewriting, on the printed page in the big bold graphics, and especially in the faces seen in the photographs.

Photography in general lit up the sales



A group of 83 mid-19th-century images (two shown), most of them cartes de visite, many of them African Americans and abolitionists, fetched \$47,500 (est. \$6000/9000). They were inserted into 5 1/4" x 4 1/2" album pages, disbound.



Six Frederick Douglass letters to Ebenezer Bassett of New Haven, Connecticut, sold to a dealer for \$42,500 (est. \$10,000/15,000). Each man served as an American minister and consul general to Haiti. The lot included this autograph letter signed on letterhead from Douglass's home in the Anacostia section of Washington, D.C., Cedar Hill, now a National Historic Site open to the public for guided tours. For more information on Cedar Hill, see (www.nps.gov/frdo/index.htm).

results. Four of the top dozen lots were photographic.

At \$47,500 (including buyer's premium), the most expensive lot of the day was both photographic and an institutional purchase. The item was a group of 83 mid-19th-century portraits, mostly cartes de visite, among them numerous African Americans and abolitionists. Stattler said that Swann was "unable to trace a common family thread" through the photos, which were inserted into disbound album pages, but they were "captioned in the same light pencil hand and likely came from the Boston area." One of them is believed to be Harriet Bell Hayden, wife of Boston abolitionist Lewis Hayden. Both escaped from slavery in 1844 with the help of



Papers of Nancy Leutenant-Colon (b. 1920), the first African American to serve in the Regular U.S. Army Nurse Corps, sold for \$6000 (est. \$2000/3000). She joined in 1945, at the tail end of World War II. She later served at the start of the Vietnam War in 1954. She retired as a major, married a former Tuskegee Airman, then worked as a school nurse and became active in veterans' groups.



An archive of approximately 290 publicity photographs taken at Manhattan's Café Society nightclubs from 1938 to 1948 sold to a dealer for \$20,000 (est. \$2000/3000). Most measure about 8" x 10". Shown in this photo are the harmonizing Andrews Sisters, LaVerne, Maxene, and Patty, with folk singer Josh White.

the Underground Railroad. Stattler said Swann was unaware of any other images of Mrs. Hayden. The success of such newly discovered material was a theme that ran through the sale.

Whoever assembled this album (or albums—two may have been combined) also collected a possibly previously unknown portrait of African American sculptor Edmonia Lewis; a dual portrait of abolitionist Charles Sumner and poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, with both of their signatures pasted below; and a portrait with an affixed signature of Arthur Crumpler, who escaped slavery in 1861, made his way from Virginia to Boston, and married the woman who became the first African American graduate of medical school, Rebecca Lee Crumpler; along with portraits of whites, including Robert Gould Shaw, who led the all-black 54th Massachusetts regiment, William Lloyd Garrison, Ulysses S. Grant, Abraham Lincoln, and period celebrity entertainers Tom Thumb and his wife.

One of the most delightful lots of the

sale was an archive of approximately 290 publicity photos taken at Manhattan's famous integrated Café Society nightclubs. Café Society opened on Sheridan Square in Greenwich Village in 1938; Café Society Uptown followed two years later on East 58th Street in Midtown. Owner Barney Josephson (1902-1988), whose first career was a shoe salesman, made a point of treating performers and audience members of all races equally. The club's slogan was "The wrong place for the right people." Billie Holiday first performed "Strange Fruit" there. Found among the papers of the club's publicist Ivan Black (1903-1979), Josephson's childhood friend, these photos included images of performers (e.g., Count Basie, Tommy Dorsey, the Andrews Sisters, Josh White) and of their audiences (e.g., Richard Wright, Adam Clayton Powell, Rita Hayworth, Frank Sinatra). The New York Public Library holds a cache of other Ivan Black papers. It did not buy this cache, however, unless an agent was the intermediary. Ignoring

the \$2000/3000 estimate, a dealer bidding by phone took the lot for \$20,000.

A signed photo of Frederick Douglass (1818-1895) went to an institution. The 5 3/4" x 4" cabinet card was from the studio of photographer George Kendall Warren of Boston. Dating from circa 1879, it was on its original mount with the photographer's gilt stamps on both sides. Swann said it was unaware of any other signed Douglass cabinet cards at auction since 1996, and the price, \$30,000, is a new record for any signed image of the abolitionist.

In this 200th year of his birth, the sale offered other strong Douglass material. An institution paid \$37,500 (est. \$5000/7500) for a lithographed title page of a song featuring a portrait of Douglass by British artist William Behnes. The song itself was inspired by the close of one chapter in Douglass's life story and the beginning of another, i.e., the end of his two-year exile in England. It is titled "Farewell Song of Frederick Douglass, on Quitting England for America—the Land of his Birth." Published in London in 1847, it was created by a sister-brother team. The music was composed by Julia Griffiths, and the words were written by her younger sibling Thomas Powis Griffiths. Julia later followed Douglass to the United States and assisted with his newspaper, *The North Star*. Swann could trace no complete copies of this song at auction, although it did sell a detached title page at a previous printed and manuscript African Americana sale on March 1, 2012, for \$9000. This copy of "Farewell" was bound in a volume with 16 other songs.

A lot of six letters written by Douglass to his friend and colleague Ebenezer Bassett went to a dealer for \$42,500 (est. \$10,000/15,000). The correspondence descended through the Bassett family. Douglass wrote most of the letters during the period from September 1890 to October 1891 while serving as the American minister and consul general to Haiti. Bassett (1833-1908), the first African American diplomat, preceded Douglass in Haiti from 1869 to 1877. Swann said these letters, written by Douglass during stateside visits, have never been published or consulted by scholars.

Among the most notable of other letters offered was a lot of four, all to or from John Augustine Washington III (1821-1861), George Washington's great-grandnephew. The letters sold to an institution for \$21,250 on a \$12,000/18,000 estimate. Each concerns Gabriel Johnson (b. 1820), enslaved at Mount Vernon; one letter was a dictation by him. Johnson had run away and been returned; he then landed in the infamous Bruin Slave Jail in Alexandria, Virginia, after an altercation with a Mount Vernon overseer. Johnson's missive to his master, believed to have been dictated to Henry P. Hill, a co-owner of the jail, was neither apology nor capitulation; he held his ground: "I want you, if you please, sir to come down & see about the matter & hope that you will be satisfied that at least I am not the only one to blame."

Even more extraordinary than that group were two pages written by an enslaved man living and working on a plantation in Hootenville, Georgia. "Any letters by enslaved people are scarce, and those few that exist are often written to their master," Stattler said. This one was written by Moses Walker to his mother, who was enslaved on a plantation in North Carolina. "It's remarkable enough that both mother and son had acquired enough education to carry on a correspondence; [the son's] spelling and penmanship are probably somewhat above the average for a typical white man of the period."

Walker's missive mixed small talk about family with the business of helping

a brother find a better situation, albeit in the enslaved world. "You say that Henry is to be sold, and my Master says that if he is as healthy as I was when I came away from there, he will give eight hundred dollars for him, delivered at Hootenville, Upson County, Georgia," Walker wrote. "... Tell Henry he must leave his family and come," he continued. "I will give him thirty dollars to start on if he will come, and a good wife, a good home and a good master to live with. I have been living with him nearly seven year and myself and Fanny never has had a lick since we have been here.... Tell Henry that this is a great place for black people.... Tell Henry there is some of the pretyest yellow girls out here he ever saw. They are a great deal prettyer than Ann Diggins ever was...." The letter, dated January 18, 1854, went to an institution bidding online; the price was \$16,900.

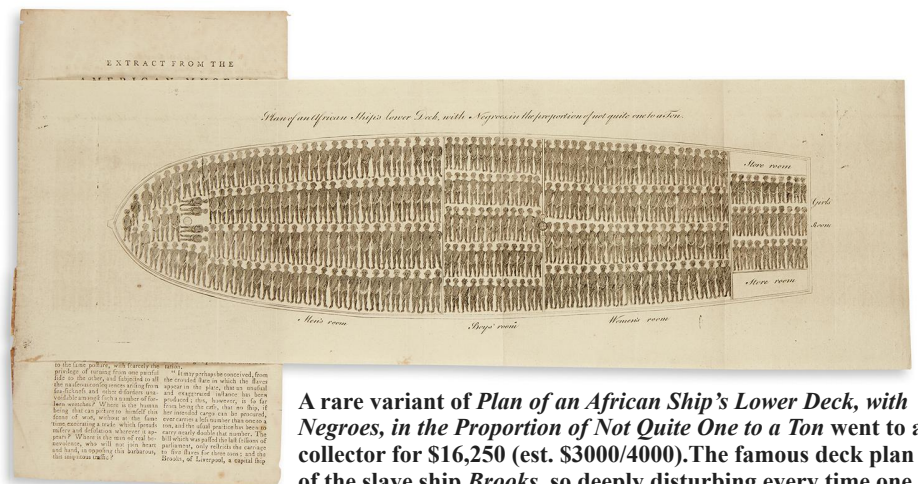
Descendants of Gideon Welles (1802-1878), Abraham Lincoln's secretary of the navy, consigned two noteworthy lots. One was a trio of photographs of Henry Green, a once enslaved man who was Welles's longtime servant. They were, one, a carte de visite of a seated Green, shot in Trieste, while he was accompanying Welles's son Thomas as servant on the U.S.S. *Franklin*'s tour of Europe; two, an image depicting Green with another family servant, believed to be James Smith, likely taken on the same tour; and three, a sixth-plate tintype of Green holding an infant identified by the family as Hubert Gideon Welles (1876-1892), son of Thomas and grandson of Gideon. Much more common are photos of African American women holding the white babies of the families who employed (or enslaved) them. The photos of Green were bought by a dealer for \$2500 (est. \$2000/3000).

The other consignment from the Welles descendants was a pair of men's boudoir slippers attributed to Elizabeth Keckley (1818-1907), Mary Todd Lincoln's dressmaker and confidante. According to Welles family lore, the slippers, crocheted with a red, white, and blue patriotic design, were made by Keckley (sometimes spelled Keckly) for Secretary Welles around the time of Lincoln's second inauguration in March 1865.

Born into slavery in Virginia, Keckley bought her freedom in 1855. She arrived in Washington in 1860 and quickly developed a prominent clientele that included not only Mrs. Lincoln but Secretary Welles's wife. Keckley's 1868 book, *Behind the Scenes. Or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House*, describes her business—she had a shop with assistants—and her closeness to the First Lady. (The book outraged Mrs. Lincoln, some say unreasonably; in any case, after its publication the friendship was over. Mrs. Lincoln never spoke to Keckley again.) Several times the book mentions Mrs. Welles. "Shortly after entering the room on Saturday morning, Mrs. Welles excused herself, as she said she must go to her own family, and I was left alone with Mrs. Lincoln," Keckley wrote of the time of the assassination.

That the slippers came from the Welles family has been well documented, and the lot was accompanied by other Welles family papers and photographs. But it remains unproven that they were made by Keckley or even one of her assistants. Estimated at \$10,000/15,000, the slippers fetched \$6500.

One of the infuriating lots of this sale—and there are always more than a few—was a mimeographed memo from the World War II era, the American Red Cross's "Statement of Policy Regarding Negro Blood Donors," following Army and Navy policy, ensuring that "that those receiving transfusions may be given plasma from blood of their own race." The memo was accompanied by a cover



A rare variant of *Plan of an African Ship's Lower Deck, with Negroes in the Proportion of Not Quite One to a Ton* went to a collector for \$16,250 (est. \$3000/4000). The famous deck plan of the slave ship *Brooks*, so deeply disturbing every time one sees it, was first published in England in March 1789 as part of a four-page pamphlet. The 5" x 16" image that sold here was reengraved in reverse for its first American appearance three months later, in the May 1789 issue of the Philadelphia magazine *American Museum*. According to Swann, only two other copies have been traced, both at the American Antiquarian Society. This is the print's first appearance at auction. The price sets the auction record not only for this variant, but for any of the dozen versions ever issued.

This carte de visite (3 1/2" x 2") of the often copied and reproduced "Wilson Chinn, a Branded Slave from Louisiana" went to an institution for \$11,875 (est. \$2000/3000). The albumen image, made by Myron H. Kimball in 1863, was on the original photographer's mount.



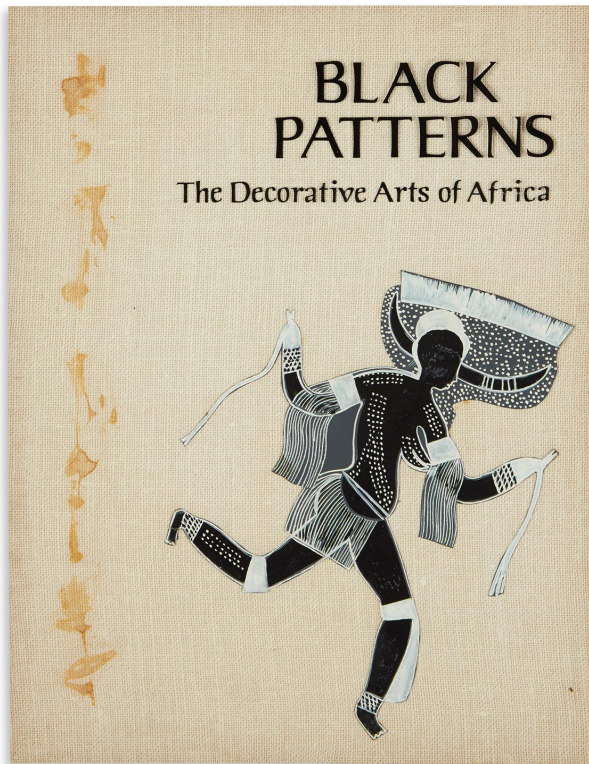
This circa 1860 hand-tinted ninth-plate oval tintype (2 1/2" x 2" sight size) of abolitionist John Brown, in a period gilt mat, sold to an institution for \$10,000 (est. \$4000/6000).

letter from a Red Cross official to a local chapter chairman in Iowa, explaining that "differences of opinion on his subject are such that they cannot be reconciled by the Red Cross." On an estimate of \$500/750, the single sheet brought \$4160. As Stattler wrote in the catalog, it was, ironically, an African American physician, Charles R. Drew (1904-1950), who had been instrumental in developing blood bank technology; as the first director of the Red Cross blood bank, he vocally objected to the segregation of blood.

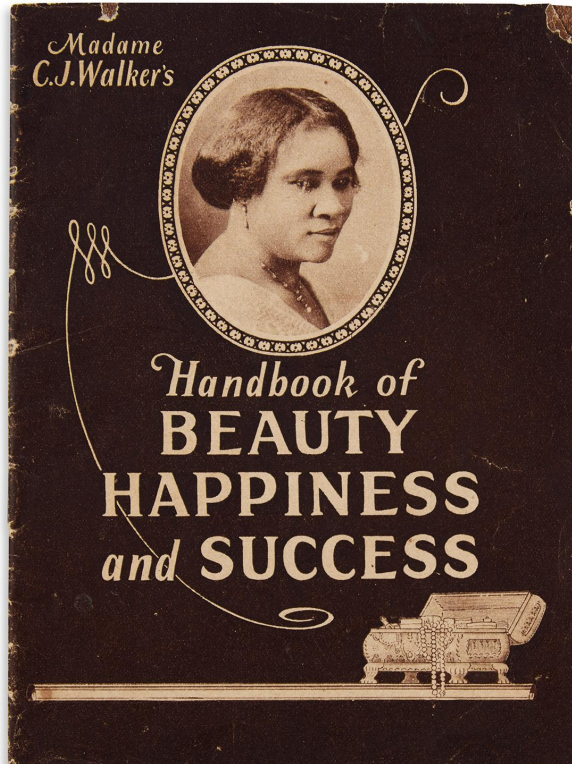
After so many years of these sales, certain objects once thought to be scarce have proven to be not so scarce, as more of them are unearthed by their keepers and sent to auction following reports like this one. That happens in every field. In this

field it has happened with Black Panther items. At this sale, while some of the more common ones passed or sold for bargain prices, two rare posters did particularly well. One was designed for the 1968 run Huey Newton made from prison for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. It sold to an institution for \$6500 (est. \$2000/3000). The other was a 1972 black-light example in green, red, and black—the Pan-Africa colors—featuring an iconic stalking panther. A bidder in the room bought that one for \$5000 (est. \$600/900). Swann said it could not trace other examples of either. We shall see if this report flushes out any more.

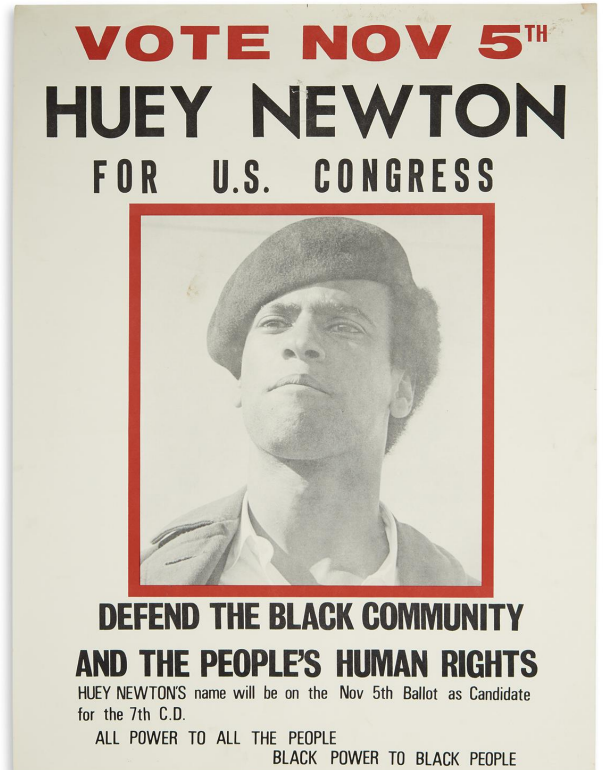
For more information, contact Swann at (212) 254-4710 or via its website (www.swanngalleries.com).



An institution paid \$10,000 (est. \$4000/6000) for the papers of the artist, photographer, author, cartographer, and graphic designer Louise E. Jefferson (1908-2002). The lot comprises hundreds of items in five boxes. Jefferson was best known for her 1974 book *Black Patterns: The Decorative Arts of Africa* (pictured), her long association with Friendship Press, and the series of historical and educational maps she created for that press. At Swann's sale of African American fine art held a week after this sale, two works by Jefferson sold for strong prices, both over estimate—a watercolor for \$8215 and a lithograph for \$9375. The latter was the first-known lithograph of Jefferson to come to auction.



Madame C.J. Walker's *Handbook of Beauty Happiness and Success*, published circa 1930, brought \$4250 (est. \$400/600). The 32-page booklet was written by the woman who assured her readers on the booklet's rear wrapper that her products were "made exclusively for and by the people of our race." Swann could find no other examples at auction or on the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC).



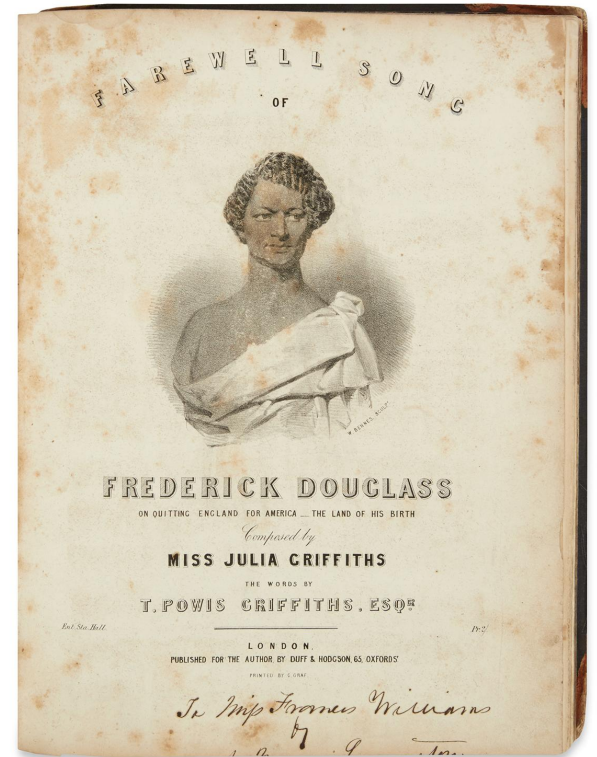
This rare campaign poster for the 1968 run Huey Newton made from prison for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives sold to an institution for \$6500. It is 23" x 17½".



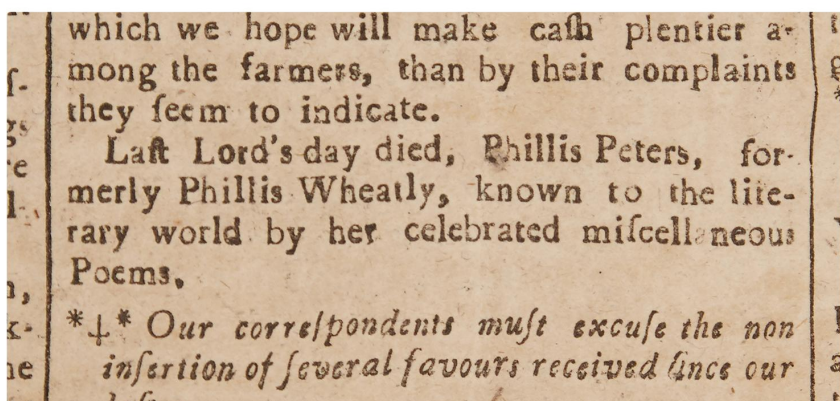
A bidder in the room took this Black Panther rarity for \$5000. The 35" x 20½" two-color silkscreen poster was printed by Dargis Associates, Beltsville, Maryland, in 1972. In the same lot were two other Black Panther black-light posters.



This 14¼" x 18" poster featuring a 1962 photograph by Danny Lyon (b. 1942) sold to an institution for \$6750 (est. \$3000/4000). It was produced in 1963 in an edition of 10,000 for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) by the Lincoln Lithograph Company in Atlanta, Georgia. The posters were sold for \$1, mostly in the North. The protesters depicted are kneeling in prayer at a segregated public swimming pool in Cairo, Illinois. At left is 22-year-old SNCC organizer John Lewis, who has been a member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Georgia's 5th District since 1987. Stattler commented in the catalog: "Is kneeling a peaceful gesture of protest or a threat to American society? You be the judge." Lyon was on summer break between his junior and senior years at the University of Chicago when he made this photo. He took others for SNCC from 1962 to 1964. Four more were made into posters. Swann previously sold another from the series on March 10, 2011, for \$3840.

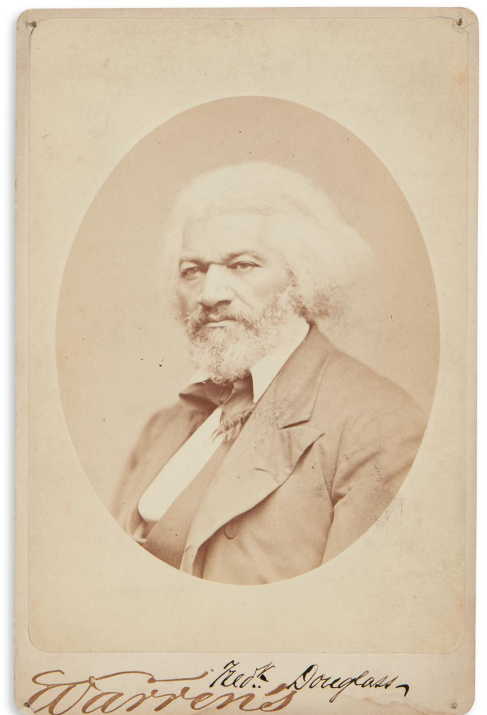


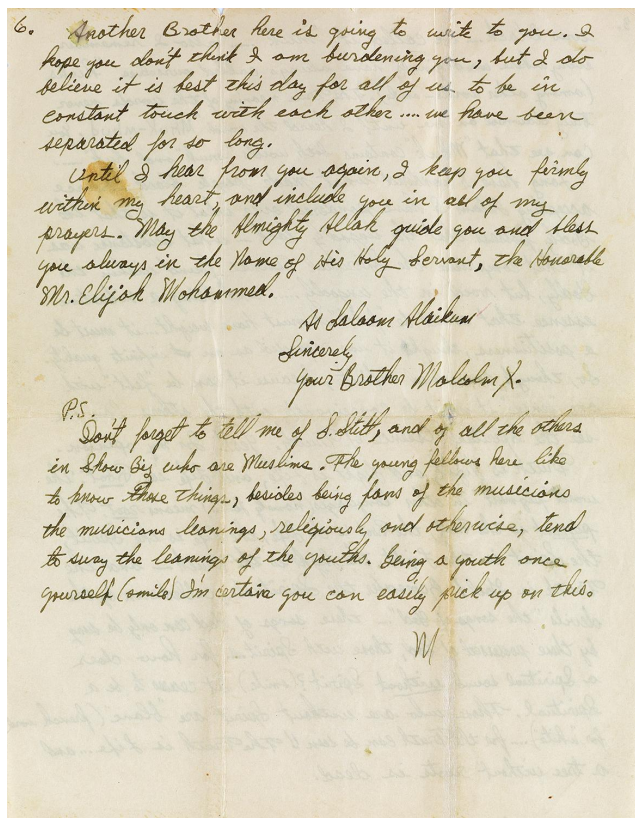
An institution paid \$37,500 (est. \$5000/7500) for this lithographed title page of a song featuring a portrait of Frederick Douglass by British artist William Behnes (1795-1864). Written by Julia Griffiths and Thomas Powis Griffiths, "Farewell Song of Frederick Douglass, on Quitting England for America—the Land of his Birth" was published in London by Duff & Hodgson in 1847.



A single folded sheet of the *Massachusetts Centinel* from 1784 announcing the death of poet Phillis Wheatley (whose married name was Phillis Peters) achieved \$2750 (est. \$800/1200). Significantly, the notice made no mention of Wheatley's race or former servitude, Stattler pointed out in his catalog, "only the importance of her literary output."

This circa 1879 signed cabinet card (5¾" x 4") of Frederick Douglass sold to an institution for \$30,000 (est. \$10,000/15,000)—a record for a signed Douglass photo. Used as the frontispiece for his third autobiography, it is from the Boston studio of photographer George Kendall Warren (1834-1884).





A collector bidding absentee bought a six-page letter (one page shown) by Malcolm X (1925-1965) for \$12,500 (est. \$20,000/30,000). The former Malcolm Little wrote it on three 11" x 8½" sheets on March 12, 1950, while imprisoned at the Norfolk Prison Colony, Norfolk, Massachusetts. He signed it "Your Brother Malcolm X." According to Swann's research, that closing represents one of the first instances of his use of that name, taken up after he joined the Nation of Islam. The addressee is "My Dear Most Humble Brother Raymond," possibly Raymond Sharrieff (1919-2003), a fellow member of the Nation of Islam and son-in-law of Elijah Muhammad. "The Light teaches the Blacker a man is, the holier he is inside," he wrote. "Oddly, but I've never been taught this yet, directly, by anyone—but my mind has given it much thought and drawn many conclusions." Besides his musings on the connections between blackness and divinity, he described his efforts to bring others to the Nation of Islam, including fellow prisoners and his half-sister Ella Little Collins.



This carte de visite (3¼" x 2") of an African American soldier in a Civil War uniform typical of those worn by western units sold to an institution for \$4000 (est. \$1000/1500).



An archive of papers of Lieutenant James B. Coleman (1858-1935), who served in the Philippine theater of the Spanish-American War, fetched \$5500 (est. \$1500/2500). Pictured in the cabinet card shown here in his infantry uniform, Coleman was a teacher and principal in his home state of Missouri.



Three photographs of Henry Green, longtime servant to Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles, went to a phone bidder for \$2500 (est. \$2000/3000). When Welles left government service in 1869, Green went with the family to their Connecticut home, where he spent the rest of his life as head servant and coachman. He is pictured here with another family servant thought to be James Smith. This may have been taken while accompanying Thomas Welles on the U.S.S. *Franklin* on a tour of Europe.



A phone bidder paid \$5750 (est. \$700/1000) for this watercolor sketch on a 12" x 9½" sheet of heavy paper. It is Lemuel Ayers's costume design for Pearl Bailey, who played the role of Butterfly, a barmaid, in the 1946 Broadway musical *St. Louis Woman*. A card of fabric samples is stapled to the sketch.



At the center of this 7" x 9¼" silver print of the Wooster (Ohio) High School football team of 1899 is Charles W. Follis (1879-1910), the first African American to play professional football. The image sold to a phone bidder for \$3500 (est. \$800/1200).



A phone bidder paid \$6500 (est. \$10,000/15,000) for a pair of men's boudoir slippers attributed to Elizabeth Keckley (1818-1907). Made of crocheted silk yarn in a red, white, and blue patriotic pattern and with 10¼" x 3" leather soles, the slippers were consigned by descendants of Abraham Lincoln's cabinet member Gideon Welles. Lynne Zacek Bassett, an independent scholar specializing in historical costumes and textiles, noted in a report prepared for Swann, "The Civil War gripped the nation in patriotic fervor and inspired all manner of fancywork designs."

