

Swann Galleries, New York City

Black History Matters: 20th Anniversary of African Americana Sales

by Jeanne Schinto
Photos courtesy Swann

“Rather astoundingly, this is our twentieth sale,” Nicholas D. Lowry, president of Swann Galleries, said as he prepared to open the firm’s annual auction of printed and manuscript African Americana on March 31 in New York City. The first sale had taken place in these same rooms on the sixth floor of a building in the Flatiron District almost exactly 20 years earlier on March 28, 1996. The collecting specialty has grown and thrived ever since. Lowry congratulated Wyatt Houston Day, the department’s founding specialist, on his achievement and gave

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“very, very honorable mention” to the whole Swann team, especially associate cataloger Arielle Bremby and book department administrator David Rivera.

Afterward, Day said in a press statement that he was “really very gratified” with the 2016 sale results. “It has more than lived up to my expectations.” When going into this milestone, Day continued, he had hoped all along to make it special. “I was very fortunate to have both the weight of twenty years of auctions and exposure behind this one, as well as just plain good luck in locating and acquiring some truly exceptional material in the course of the year.”

One of those exceptional offerings was the original pen-and-brush artwork for a well-known and often reproduced black-and-white magazine centerfold, “A Night-Club Map of Harlem,” published in 1932, heyday of the hip-flask era. The map’s creator was E. Simms Campbell (1906-1971). Campbell was 26 years old when the map appeared in Vol. 1, No. 1 of *Manhattan Magazine*. The same map, both a guide and a witty cultural commentary, also ran in *Esquire*, where Campbell’s artwork was published in almost every issue from 1933 to 1958. He was the first African American illustrator to be syndicated.

Between the diagonal parallel lines of Lenox Avenue and Seventh Avenue (a.k.a. “Heaven”), Campbell’s map features vignettes of the famous clubs—e.g., the Cotton Club featuring Cab Calloway, the Radium Club (“Big breakfast dance every Sunday morning 4 or 5 a.m.”), Small’s Paradise (“Café au lait girls and dancing waiters”), and Club Hot-Cha (“Nothing happens before 2 a.m. Ask for Clarence”), among others. Throughout the map Campbell sprinkled caricatures of personalities such as Calloway and Earl “Snakehips” Tucker (originator of the eponymous dance) and Bill “Bojangles” Robinson (“the world’s greatest tap dancer”) on this game board-like view of the after-hours jazz and speakeasy paradise. He also depicted street life—a marijuana sale, a vendor selling hot crabs, people playing the numbers. It’s not an exclusively black world. Some white couples, for example, are shown outside the entrance of a club. The men are in tuxes, the women in long dresses and fur wraps. One line of dialogue says, “Are we going in here?” The reply is “Yeah Man,” which happens to be the name of the club.

At Swann’s African Americana sale on March 10, 2011, an original of the magazine centerfold sold for a whopping \$16,800 (includes buyer’s premium). This unique artwork carried an estimate of

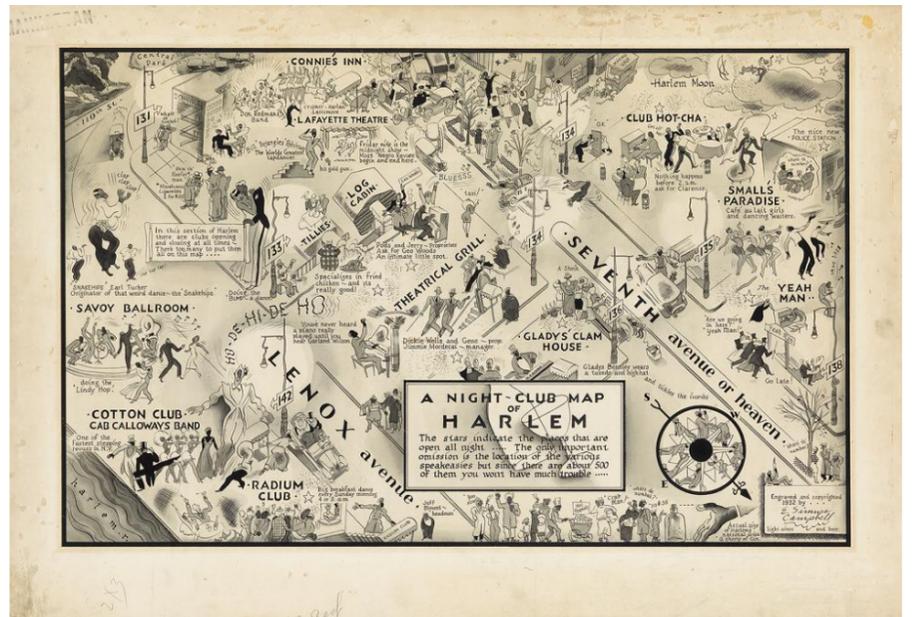
\$40,000/60,000. Among the hopefuls in the room was Mike Thibault of Rochester, New York. He traveled to Manhattan to try for the unique item. As he wrote on his Facebook page afterward: “Long story short, I was unsuccessful. Today I am tired and sad, but grateful for the experience and for finally being able to see the piece I’ve been researching for nearly a decade.” He began that research shortly after seeing a documentary featuring Calloway looking at the map and reminiscing about his favorite erstwhile haunts. Thibault all along had been intending to buy it for a museum, he said. In fact, it did go to “a major research library,” according to the successful proxy bidder, rare book dealer William S. Reese of New Haven, Connecticut, who was on the phone. The price was \$100,000, a new artist record for Campbell.

Reese underbid another highlight of the sale, a huge family archive of ex-slaves and their progeny who lived in Farmville, Virginia. Nelson W. Jordan, born a slave in 1842, was the patriarch. At 18 he joined the Union forces and fought with the 55th Massachusetts Volunteers in South Carolina. He later became an ordained Baptist minister, pastoring four rural churches. In 1879 he married a teenaged Catherine “Carrie” Spencer (1862-1945), who bore ten children, several of whom distinguished themselves in education, the church, and military service. The trove contains multigenerational layers of letters, documents, photographs, postcards, scrapbooks, ephemera, clothing, plus an enormous family Bible that shows the Jordan genealogy.

At a preview, Day recounted how he got the consignment. A New Jersey descendant of the Jordans came to see him at Swann with a cart filled with a variety of items. “It certainly got my interest,” said Day, who subsequently drove out to her small apartment. “As she started bringing out stuff, it became clear to me that she had an extraordinary family history. We seldom see all the elements coming together. Usually it’s tantalizing. You see a little bit of this, a little bit of that, and you wish there was more. In this case, it was the gift that kept on giving. I took all of what she showed me, and then she called and said, ‘I’ve got more.’ And then she called again with more. Then she got stuff out of her sister’s apartment.”

Unlike many black families of the South in the early 20th century, the Jordans didn’t move north during the Great Migration. As a result, the archive is an extraordinary time capsule of the South from the 1860s through the 1940s, the likes of which Swann had never sold before. “I’ve had archives from families, but they weren’t like this one,” said Day. “There wasn’t the richness and the completeness.” Before the sale, Day had been touting it to “a couple of institutions.” Modestly estimated at \$5000/7000, then \$6000/9000 as the additional material got added, it went instead to an unidentified dealer on the phone, who paid \$27,500.

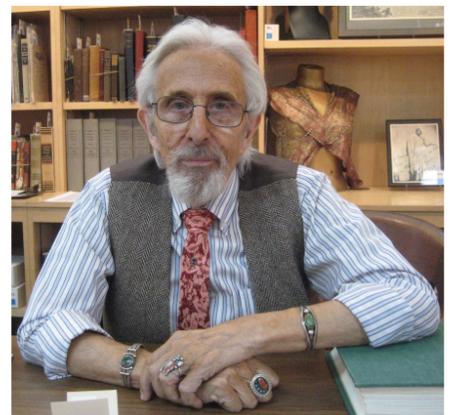
About 50 consignors were represented by the 461-lot sale that, as is typical, was divided into themes: slavery and abolition, Civil War, civil rights, Black Panthers, music, business, and so on. The slavery and abolition section featured two significant Frederick Douglass letters that brought \$22,500 and \$45,000, respectively. It also offered a printed slave



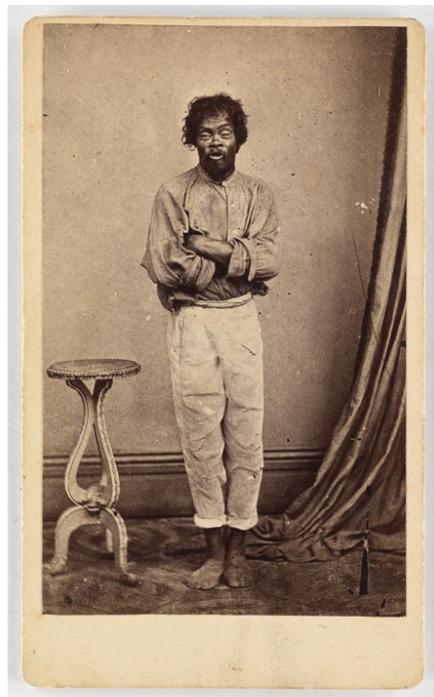
The original pen-and-brush artwork for “A Night-Club Map of Harlem” by E. Simms Campbell sold for \$100,000. It is 19½” x 30” and mounted on a Whatman drawing board that measures 24½” x 34½”. At the lower right-hand corner it says: “Engraved [sic] and copyrighted 1932 by E. Simms Campbell / light wines and beer,” the reference to liquor, during Prohibition, a private joke no doubt.



Swann’s associate cataloger Arielle Bremby and book department administrator David Rivera. Lauren Kristin photo.



The department’s founding specialist, Wyatt Houston Day. Schinto photo.



This is a carte de visite of a man who had obviously been badly beaten. It’s possible that he was a runaway slave. Inscribed “Tom” on the reverse, the photo sold to a collector for \$4500 (est. \$1500/2500).



A well-known carte de visite of men presumed to be Civil War “contrabands” (the name for slaves liberated and recruited by Union troops) went to a phone bidder for \$4500 (est. \$1500/2500). The two were posed in a studio in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.