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Chief's Blanket a Winner, Pre-Columbian Lots Withdrawn

by Jeanne Schinto



Skinner, Inc., Boston, Massachusetts

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Photos courtesy Skinner

Anyone who went on line to check the prices of the first 197 lots of Skinner's American Indian and ethnographic art sale, held January 15 in Boston, Massachusetts, found that the list started with lot 198. What happened to the preceding ones?

Skinner CEO Karen Keane responded in an e-mail sent from New York City during Americana Week.

"We withdrew the pre-Columbian from the beginning of the auction in order to understand more fully the provenance of that material," she wrote. "We had some questions from foreign consuls. We decided it was in the best interest of the consignors, potential bidders, and Skinner to do so." Department expert Douglas Deihl was asked for more details, but he wrote in his e-mail and reiterated on the phone that he could not discuss the matter.

Despite the subtraction of a full third of the sale, the remaining 453 lots (83.6% of which sold) still grossed \$1,007,190.75 (including buyers' premiums). The biggest oomph to the total came from an early third-phase Navajo chief's blanket that sold on the phone for \$213,300.

"I knew it would draw a lot of attention, although I thought the most it would do, in the best of situations, was fifty thousand to seventy-five thousand," said Deihl. "But it's one of the better chief's blankets to sell in several years. It's like a modern art piece-a painting. It was tightly woven and had a beautiful presence." Of its \$5000/7000 estimate, he said, "It came from a family who wanted to estimate it low, because of its poor condition," which bidders obviously forgave.

Fifteen ledger drawings by Southern Arapaho artist Mad Bull sold to another phone bidder for \$62,805, which seemed a bargain considering its \$60,000/ 80,000 estimate. In recent years other groupings of ledger drawings have gone at auction for six figures.

"The problem was that twelve of the drawings were back-to-back on six pages," said Deihl. If they had been on separate pages, he believes they would have brought another \$30,000. That's because they would have been attractive to those interested in splitting them up and reselling them singly, in much the same way that books of lithographs are dismantled and sold. "So the dealers probably stayed off them because of that," said Deihl, who was not at liberty to divulge whether the buyer was a collector or an institution.

The sale's cover lot, a rare Northwest Coast shaman's rattle, brought a strong price of \$59,250 (est. \$20,000/30,000). Once again the buyer bid by phone. Cataloged as "probably Tlingit," the rattle was carved in two pieces, one the handle and the other a round head with a hole in the middle.

Examples from the small group in which this type of rattle belongs are sometimes called donut rattles or pierced rattles, because of the hole that pierces through the head's center. Steven Brown, former associate curator of Native American art at the Seattle Art Museum, who contributed the catalog copy, cannot say why or how this rattle variant came to be, "though it may be related to the concept of a tubular 'soul-catcher.' This is a type of shaman's rattle, most often carved of hollowed bone, within which a lost or errant spirit could be captured and retained."

Another good seller at \$20,145 (est. \$15,000/20,000) was a Central Plains beaded and quilled hide pipebag that once belonged to Doug Deihl. "Believe it or not, that was the first really nice piece of Plains beadwork that I ever bought," he said. "I owned that for several years about thirty years ago, never having found that note inside it. It was wadded up in a little ball in the bottom." The note reads in part, "beaded pipebag with quilled decoration, Cheyenne tribe, purchased in London, England, by G.G.H."

The initials are undoubtedly those of George Gustav Heye (1874-1957), who was founder of the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, in New York City, which formed the basis for the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C. When Heye's collection merged with the Smithsonian in 1990, the inventory list was almost a million items long, making it the largest assemblage of Native American artifacts gathered by a single individual.

What specialist today wouldn't love to have some new collectors as obsessed as Heye was? Instead, they are selling exceptional items like these to fewer and fewer. "At my sales I rarely see new blood," said Deihl.

It's too bad. Beyond the highlights described here, many worthwhile items went at beginner collector prices. A circa 1900 Northwest Coast carved wood bowl in the form of a seal sold for \$711 (est. \$800/1200). A Southwest silver and turquoise cluster bracelet, Zuni, signed "JOL," fetched a reasonable \$889 (est. \$400/600). A late 19th-century Eskimo wood and hide model kayak, 15½" long, made just \$444 (est. \$400/600). The detail work included a paddler in a cloth parka with a bone-tipped paddle in his hands.

For more information, contact Skinner at (617) 350-5400 or (508) 970-3000, or see the Web site (www.skinnerinc.com).



A rare Northwest Coast shaman's rattle, cataloged as probably Tlingit, 1840-60, sold for \$59,250 (est. \$20,000/30,000). It is carved in two pieces and painted in red and black, it measures 9¼" x 3 7/8" with a mask-like face on each side and a pierced, circular mouth through the middle. As Steven Brown wrote in the catalog copy, "This example is unusual, even among the small group of rattles with related form, in that the hole piercing the rattle is smaller in relation to the rattle's diameter than most others." Brown also commented on the relief-carved seals above and below the face. "These images may refer to the clan affiliation of the shaman who owned the rattle, or they may represent some of the shaman's helper spirits...."

Examples of this type of rattle may be seen at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City and at the National Museum of the American Indian at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., as well as in Canada and Europe. Douglas Deihl was not at liberty to say whether the buyer was a dealer, a collector, or an institution but said the underbidder was a collector.

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