Classic Chinese Furniture and a Sleeper Self-Portrait

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by Jeanne Schinto

Massachusetts by Jeanne Schinto

Oak, maple, cherry, mahogany,

Grogan & Company, Dedham,

Photos courtesy Grogan

pine, birch—American furniture enthusiasts know these woods, their grains, colors, and feel, intimately. But zitan and huanghuali? At Grogan & Company's sale on December 11, 2011, in Dedham, Massachusetts, attendees had the chance to examine, perchance to buy, pieces from a dozen-lot collection of classic Chinese furniture made from these Asian hardwood trees between the 16th and 20th centuries. Early items made of huanghuali were the best sellers. Michael B.

chief auctioneer, said, "There was participation from all over —some from California, some from mainland China, some in the room. A local collector bought two pieces. So it was all good." A pair of 17th-century high yoke-back huanghuali armchairs (est. \$60,000/90,000) was the top lot of the group, selling to a

phone bidder for \$70,800

(including buyer's premium). The same bidder paid \$29,500 for an 18th-century huanghuali corner-leg table (est. \$40,000/ 60,000). He or she also bought a late 18th- or early 19th-century zitan footstool for \$3835 (est. \$5000/10,000). A bidding couple paid \$53,100 (est. \$20,000/30,000) for a high rectangular-back armchair from the early 17th or late 18th century. They paid \$23,600 for a

17th-century huanghuali side

table (est. \$15,000/30,000).

The couple's underbidder, a

man in the room, won a small 17th-century huanghuali chest for \$44,250 (est. \$15,000/ 25,000). He had bought two Chinese ivory pieces while waiting for the furniture to come up. One was a 19thcentury tusk fashioned into a thermometer—perfect for a cabinet of curiosities—for which he paid \$708. He paid exactly double that, \$1416 (est. \$500/700), for the other ivory, an undated figure of a grasshopper resting on (or

eating?) a cut bunch of bok

Internet bidders were active on

furniture pieces. A late 19th- or

sold in cyberspace for \$5747.50

(est. \$8000/12,000), and a 17th-

century huanghuali kang table

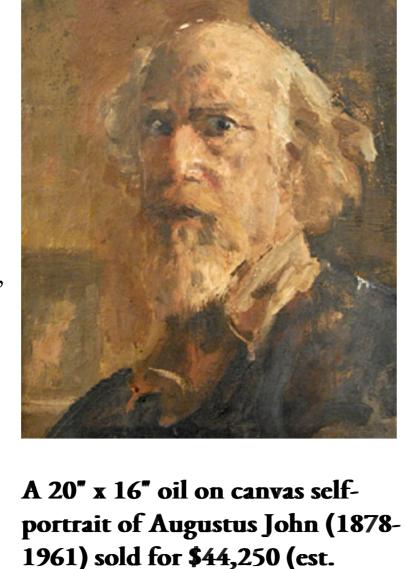
early 20th-century zitan stool

the less-expensive Chinese

choi.

went the same way at \$8470 (est. \$8000/12,000). An absentee bidder won a late 18th- or early 19th-century huanghuali altar table for \$14,160 (est. \$15,000/25,000). The same bidder bought a pair of huanghuali stools a century older for \$5900 (est. \$4000/8000). Gracefully and economically designed for specific uses, Chinese classic furniture has been compared to what the practical Shakers made. "Whether this is by example or coincidence remains controversial," Stanford University professor Thomas Bartlett commented in a catalog

Estate in Concord, New Hampshire.



sale, it bore a gallery label from **Arthur Tooth & Sons of London** and is going back to London, said Michael B. Grogan. Grogan, the firm's president and





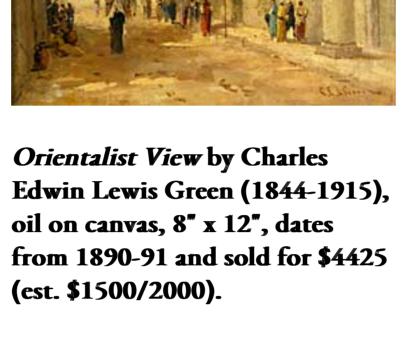
A late 18th- or early 19thcentury zitan footstool with rollers, 4¾" x 31¼" x 15½", sold to a phone bidder for \$3835 (est.

\$5000/10,000). The form was

designed to keep feet off a cold

floor; the rollers were meant to

be used for a foot massage.



China as an advisor to the Chinese government on building projects. That's where he bought his collection, mentored by Cui Wei Lian (1935-2004), a director of the Beijing Hardwood Furniture Factory. American furniture aficionados might label some of these pieces reproductions. But as Swenson noted in the exhibition catalog, it's a Chinese tradition to repeat the production of earlier art forms. They regard the practice as "respecting [the forms'] artistic integrity." To my eye, the furniture is light and clean-modern looking. Adding to its attraction are its polished smoothness and its color. It's inaccurate to call

it merely "brown." Huanghuali ranges from yellowish to purplish, while

Before the sale Grogan said, given the vicissitudes of the market today, he

auctioneer, we keep our expectations modest." In the end he was more

really didn't know how the Swenson collection would do. "As an

zitan may go all the way to black as it acquires patina.

published when the collection, put together by J. Malcolm Swenson of

Hanover, New Hampshire, was on view in 2004 at the Kimball-Jenkins

Swenson, whose career was in the stone industry, spent many years in

than satisfied. The group achieved a total of \$257,651 on an estimate total of \$191,000/304,000, with only one lot failing to find a buyer. That was a pair of late 17th- or early 18th-century huanghuali folding stools with woven seats. Bought in at \$25,000 (est. \$40,000/60,000), they had replaced bases and possibly some brasses replaced. Besides Asian decorative arts, the 473-lot sale featured some fresh and desirable American and European fine art. Old Trinity Winter (Wall Street) by Guy Wiggins (1883-1962) went nearly to the top of its

\$30,000/50,000 estimate, selling on the phone at \$45,375 against an

its original Newcomb-Macklin frame.

photographs of him.

value.

aggressive absentee bid. Acquired at a Boston gallery in the 1960's, the

16" x 12" oil on board descended to the consignor in 1979 and retained

Doing almost as well as the Wiggins, a 20" x 16" oil on canvas self-portrait

of Augustus John (British, 1878-1961) sold for an unexpected \$44,250

(est. \$2000/3000). The buyer was a phone bidder calling from London.

"It came out of a house in Newport," said Grogan. "I tried my best to lose it, but the client kept saying, 'No, this is good.'" He laughed. "I couldn't read the signature to begin with." After research, he learned that John was revered in his day as the man who painted portraits of T.E. Lawrence, George Bernard Shaw, Thomas Hardy, W.B. Yeats, and others. Known as the "King of Bohemia," John was also famous for the wildness of his lifestyle. (For starters, he was rumored to have fathered

100 children.) A display on view at the National Portrait Gallery in

James E. Buttersworth (1817-1894) that sold for \$13,310 (est.

London through March 18 marks the 50th anniversary of his death with

Two small American artworks did well at the sale. One was a signed 7" x

\$4000/6000). It came from a local woman from a distinguished family,

Grogan said. The other was a 3¾" x 2¾" unsigned portrait of Amory

Austin, attributed to John Singer Sargent (1856-1925), that fetched

9" oil on board portrait of the U.S. Navy's sloop of war U.S.S. *Peacock* by

\$1815 (est. \$500/1000). An inscription on the back read: "Amory Austin drawn by John Singer Sargent in his youth." Austin (1849-1920) of Boston and Newport, Rhode Island, was Sargent's cousin. A very beautiful Boston school work, Arrangement by Frederick A. Bosley (1881-1942), fetched \$9440 (est. \$7000/10,000). The 36" x 34" oil on canvas is a portrait of a young woman in white posed with a statue of Nike of Samothrace—i.e., the Greek goddess of victory that the runningshoe company was named for. The painting was signed and dated 1913. Regional artist Antonio Cirino's Fall in New England brought \$4425

(est. \$2000/4000). Orientalist View by Charles Edwin Lewis Green

(1844-1915) sold for the same price (est. \$1500/2000). One of the Lynn

Beach painters, Lewis was born in Lynn, Massachusetts, but traveled and

painted abroad. The price for Lewis's 8" x 12" oil on canvas adds weight

to the current idea that Orientalist subjects by Americans are gaining

The auction room never was crowded with bidders at this well-edited

swiftly executed sale. After the fine art was sold and 173 lots of Oriental

rugs went up, there were literally only eight or ten bidders left sitting in the folding chairs. People have become more efficient users of their time; they find other ways to participate, we commented to Grogan. "That was the old-fashioned way," he agreed, adding that the new way remains plenty good for business. Even the rugs did "exceedingly well," he observed. "I think it's amazing that so few people show up but that the bidding continues. It's very encouraging that there's still broad—based buying across the board and across the world."

For more information, contact Grogan at (781) 461-9500 or visit the

A portrait of Captain Benjamin

Davies, attributed to Sir Joshua

Reynolds (1723-1792), together with

an unattributed portrait of Elizabeth

\$8470 (est. \$1000/2000). Each 29½" x

An 18th-century

\$29,500 (est.

A 164" tall Chinese butterfly-

Qing Dynasty, with a Guangxu

for \$7670 (est. \$800/ 1200).

reign mark, sold to a room bidder

A small (38½" x 26½" x 13¾")

tapered chest sold to a room

Competition was in the room

17th-century huanghuali

bidder for \$44,250 (est.

\$15,000/25,000).

and on the phone.

decorated bottle-form vase, possibly

huanghuali corner-leg

table, 31¾" x 58¼" x 19",

sold to a phone bidder for

\$40,000/60,000). Because

of its lack of stretchers, it's

Viscount Davies, sold in one lot for

24" oil on canvas is laid down on

Web site (www.groganco.com).

board.



rare and fragile.



the Bay of Naples and **Mount Vesuvius fetched** \$19,360 (est. \$3000/5000). The 29" x 35¾" oil on canvas is inscribed "G. M.F." A catalog note speculated that the main Giacomo Close & Company. For more information about Close, see The Merchant of Naples, edited by Julian Potter. A signed 7" x 9" oil on

board of the U.S. Navy's

This 19th-century Italian

school painting of English

merchants with a view of



American oil on canvas still life with fruit, 18" x 22", sold for \$6655 (est. \$800/1200).

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