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# Colescott's Satirical Adam and Eve Leads African-American Art Sale

by Jeanne Schinto



Swann Galleries, New York City

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Photos courtesy Swann

Bidders declared the \$50,000/ 75,000 estimate on Robert Colescott's *A Legend Dimly Told*, offered at Swann's African-American art sale on October 7, 2010, to be a few sizes too small. One paid \$132,000 (including buyer's premium) for the mammoth (84" x 72") acrylic on canvas whose title comes from an Emily Dickinson poem. The price for the work was a record for the artist, according to department director Nigel Freeman, who identified the buyer as a collector.

"We had high hopes, and it exceeded all our expectations," said Freeman. "Robert Colescott's paintings pack a punch, and this was a really strong example."

The 1982 work is a fractured retelling of the Adam and Eve story (Dickinson's phrase refers to Eden), but the figures make a comic mockery of it. The physical features of this about-to-be-banished couple have minstrel-show qualities—bug-out eyes; thick, red-painted lips; exaggerated, cartoonish expressions. Peeking out over purple mountains is a white-haired God who resembles Uncle Tom, with a paintbrush and palette in his hands. Obviously Colescott, who died in 2009, was trafficking in stereotypes of all kinds.

He is perhaps best known for his first satirical "history painting," Completed in 1975, it's a takeoff on Emanuel Leutze's 1851 rendition of Washington Crossing the Delaware River, owned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. In Colescott's version, *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: Page from an American History Textbook*, the figures are "darkies" doing things that stereotypical ones do: swilling moonshine, strumming banjos, and smiling their white-teethed smiles.

In an oral history interview with Robert Colescott, conducted April 14, 1999, by the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art, the artist spoke about these "appropriations," as he called them. From the beginning, he said, there has been criticism, which surprised him. "I thought everybody would get it. But...." He didn't finish the sentence because he had learned by then he needed to spell it out. The works are "about White perceptions of Black people," he stated. "And they may not be pretty. And they may be stupid. We didn't make up these images. So why should we take the heat? But it's...it's satire. It's the satire that kills the serpent, you know."

*Mask* by Sargent Claude Johnson made another record-breaking price, according to Swann, when it sold to a dealer for \$67,200 (est. \$30,000/ 50,000). (Swann claimed the previous record too, for Johnson's untitled terra-cotta standing figure of a woman that sold to an institution on February 23, 2010, for \$52,800.) The 1933 copper repoussé sculpture, an interpretation of an African mask, came to the sale from a private collection in Pennsylvania. "It has a streamlined Modernist quality that's very much his," said Freeman. "At the same time, it's based on African source material. Johnson did a series of these in the 1930's, but they're very hard to find, and it attracted a lot of interest."

For the same price of \$67,200 (est. \$20,000/30,000), a collector bought a Jacob Lawrence gouache on brown composition board, *Two Card Players*. The 1941-42 work is an apparent companion to a similar-themed painting by Lawrence. "This is the sister piece to the one that we offered in February from the same owner," said Freeman. "We were really excited to see that this one did even better." (Of the same size and from the same period, the previous one sold for \$45,600.)

Neither painting was signed, but in each case, the attribution was confirmed by Peter T. Nesbitt, coauthor of *Jacob Lawrence: Paintings, Drawings and Murals* (1835-1999), a Catalogue Raisonné, and his letter of opinion accompanied each lot. Neither one was in the best condition, but it didn't seem to matter. "Work by Lawrence from the pre-1950 period is really hard to find," said Freeman.

Another rare work, an early (1948-50) figurative painting by Haywood "Bill" Rivers, who went on to become an abstract artist, sold to a dealer for a mid-estimate \$13,200. The oil on canvas, untitled (*Woman in Armchair, Smoking Pipe*), depicts a female sitting with a quilt over her lap, which, according to the catalog, recalls the artist's quilt-making family in North Carolina. According to the Judith Rothschild Foundation, which awarded a grant to a conservator of a Rivers work, the artist's better-known geometric abstract paintings were partly influenced by the quilts he designed as a child with his mother and grandmother. "Fabric was a part of his life," said Freeman.

*Squirrel*, a circa 1940 stone sculpture by William Edmondson, realized \$31,200 (est. \$40,000/60,000). "Obviously, we had slightly higher hopes for that piece, but we were happy with the result," said Freeman. "It's the first time Swann has offered a piece by him. He's a folk artist, and we tend not to put many folk artists in these auctions because it's a fine art auction, but he's an interesting one, since he was the first African-American artist to have a solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, and he's been included in many modern art collections. So his aesthetic fits."

These sales at Swann frequently offer works by African-American artists who have no auction records. This time, one of the first-timers was Cloyd Lee Boykin, whose *Still Life with Flowers*, an oil on board from 1940-50, sold for \$5040 (est. \$3000/ 5000).

Cloyd L. Boykin is the subject of Palmer Hayden's circa 1930 *The Janitor Who Paints*, owned by the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Like his friend Boykin, Hayden worked as a janitor in New York, and past scholars have thought it was a self-portrait. But *A History of African-American Artists: From 1792 to the Present* by Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson sets the record straight—in more ways than one. Hayden, who painted Boykin wearing an artist's beret, is quoted as saying, "It's sort of a protest painting. I painted it because no one called Boykin the artist. They called him the janitor."

Another artist whose work was offered at auction for the first time at this sale was Robert Savon Pious (1908-1983). But his circa 1941 oil on illustration board, Joe Louis vs. Clarence "Red" Burman, did not sell (est. \$40,000/ 60,000).

Forty-one other paintings—29% of the total 140—were passed. These included a number of key offerings. An untitled 1959 oil on canvas (*Yellow, Green, and White Abstraction*) by Beauford Delaney (1901-1979), went unsold (est. \$120,000/180,000). Bidders also declined *Training for War* by William H. Johnson (1901-1970), a circa 1942 color pochoir and screen print that was reproduced on a postage stamp in 2005 (est. \$75,000/100,000). Nor did they go for an early (1969) untitled abstract work by living artist David Hammons (b. 1943) (est. \$80,000/120,000), whose flyswatter-like object and untitled body print made such an impression at last February's sale, selling for \$66,000 and \$114,000, respectively.

Institutions have been conspicuous participants at past sales of this department, and they might have been considered likely candidates for any of the above. At this sale, however, just four institutional purchases were among the top 20 lots, and each was modest. One (unnamed) public collection bought an untitled turn-of-the-20th-century French landscape in oil on canvas by William A. Harper for \$19,200. Others (also unnamed) spent \$9600 and \$11,400 for color aquatints by Bearden and \$9600 for a Charles White lithograph, *El Pensador (The Thinker)*.

Asked why he thought there wasn't more institutional participation this time, Freeman said, "Well, I think we've been very lucky that we had artwork of museum quality at times when some major museums were looking. Museums are still very active, looking and collecting in this area. But as with everyone else, their budgets are tighter, and harder choices are being made."

An institutional purchase is a many-stepped process, Freeman reminds us all. The piece has to fit into the institution's collection. A curator has to be an advocate for acquiring the work. It has to be approved by an acquisitions committee. And the funding has to be available. "For all those things to happen takes some doing," he said. "So we've been very fortunate to have some big museum purchases in the past, and I'm sure we'll see more in the future."

Swann customarily has two sales devoted to African-American art each year, in October and February. This past year there was a third, smaller one, on June 24, 2010, called "Out of the Blue: Modern Art & Jazz." An offering of 76 music-themed lots, including an oil on canvas by Norman Lewis, Bassist, and an oil monotype by Bearden, *Jazz Musician at Piano*, sold for a total of \$391,620.

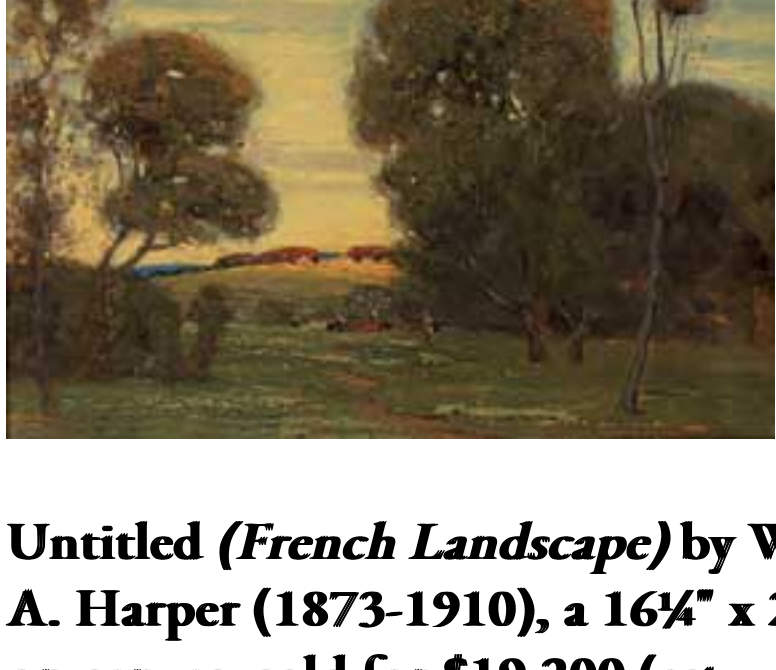
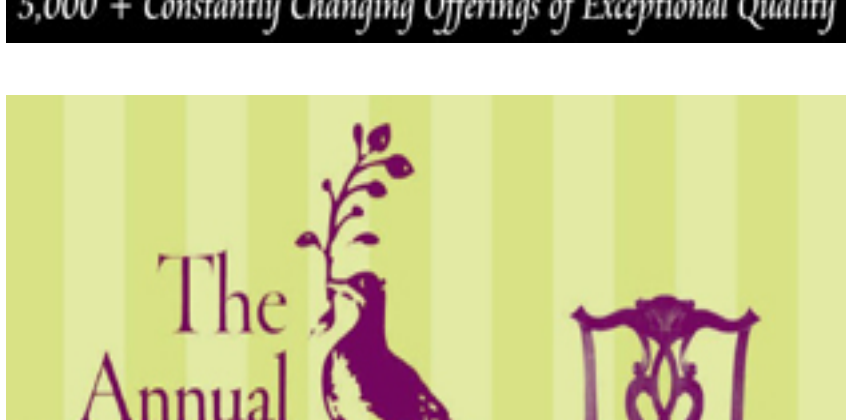
"We wanted to try something a little different," Freeman said of the motivation behind that extra sale.

Will Swann present something like it again? "It's yet to be determined. Part of what we're doing is to broaden the market and reach a wider audience, so that was part of that effort. There's a nice crossover with modern art, jazz, and African-American artists. I'm not sure we'll do exactly the same kind of sale again, but we're looking to present work in new and exciting ways."

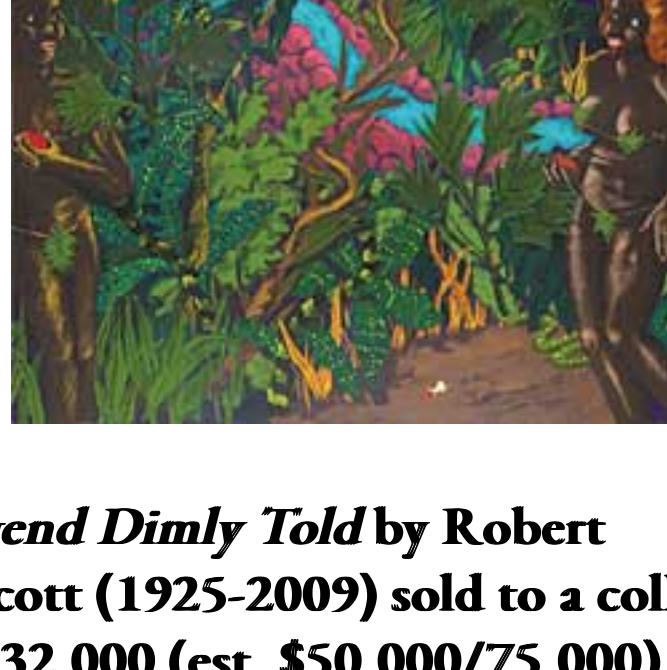
For more information, contact Swann Galleries at (212) 254-4710 or see the Web site ([www.swannalleries.com](#)).

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**Untitled (*French Landscape*) by William A. Harper (1873-1910), a 16¼" x 20¼" oil on canvas, sold for \$19,200 (est. \$6000/9000). Swann said the price for the 1905 work was an artist's record.**



***A Legend Dimly Told* by Robert Colescott (1925-2009) sold to a collector for \$132,000 (est. \$50,000/75,000). The 84" x 72" acrylic on canvas, dated "June 1982," came to the sale from a private collection. Other works by Colescott are in major public collections, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C. In 1997 Colescott became the first African-American artist to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale. To read the complete transcript of the oral history interview conducted with him in 1999 by the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art, see the Web site ([www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/colesc99.htm](#)).**



***Two Card Players* by Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000), 1941-42, gouache on brown composition board, 19" x 16½", sold to a collector for \$67,200 (est. \$20,000/30,000).**



***Mask* by Sargent Claude Johnson (1888-1967) sold to a dealer for \$67,200 (est. \$30,000/50,000). A 1933 sculpture in copper repoussé with gilding, it is approximately 12½" x 6½" x 2".**

