

Welcome Subscriber 75667 ([Logout](#) or [View Account](#))

January 6th, 2010

Collection of King of Dolls Sells for
\$1.23 Million

by Jeanne Schinto



Skinner, Inc., Marlborough, Massachusetts

by Jeanne Schinto

Photos courtesy Skinner

He was the "king of dolls." He was also a "pied piper of people," consulting specialist Andy Ourant said of William Richard Wright Jr. (1946-2009), whose collection of rare and important dolls was sold in the gallery at Skinner's corporate headquarters in Marlborough, Massachusetts, on October 10, 2009.

Everywhere he went, Wright attracted people to him. At the preview one of the silliest questions one could ask was, "Did you know him?"

"Of course, of course," said Christiane Gräfnitz. "Everyone knew Richard." The collector and author of *Papiermache Puppen 1760-1860: Papier-Mâché Dolls* had traveled from Germany for this historic sale. So excited about it, she declared she'd had trouble sleeping for the weeks leading up to it.

Those who knew Wright best were also there: his life partner, Glenn Stevens; his close friend and employee of 40 years, Meriel Marlar, who was the restoration specialist at Richard Wright Antiques, Birchrunville, Pennsylvania; and two other longtime employees, Gemma Leigh with 30 years' service and Beth Ditullio with "only" a quarter century.

"The best part of being with Richard was meeting all the people, making new friends," said Stevens, who met Wright by chance 11 years ago in a bar in San Francisco, where Wright had traveled to be an appraiser for the first time on *Antiques Roadshow*. The ex-CPA said that Wright, besides having a charismatic personality, was a natural businessman. "As a boy, he told me, he bought a broken doll for a dollar, put it back together, and sold it for ten dollars." An entrepreneur was born.

His profit margins weren't always tenfold. Keith Kaonis, publications director of *Antique Doll Collector*, said he once witnessed Wright buy a doll at a show for \$2000, then turn around—literally—and sell it to someone else for \$2200. "Not a very big markup," Kaonis said he observed to Wright. "But it was twenty-five seconds' work," was Richard's reported reply.

Indeed, his own profits were not the first thing on his mind, many said. One of his often-quoted refrains was, "You need to buy that. You'll make money."

"He was the kind of guy who took care of the whole market," said Ourant. "He didn't worry about Richard. He worried about the doll world. He was a dealer's dealer."

At the same time, Ourant continued, many collectors counted on him. "He helped build a lot of great collections. It can't be substantiated, but it's likely that nobody bought and sold more dolls in a lifetime than Richard Wright."

Ourant was asked if Skinner's landing of the Wright doll collection had been a coup. Skinner was a "good fit," said Ourant, because the auction house could handle the dolls as well as the decorative arts and furniture of the late 19th and early 20th centuries—Art Nouveau, Arts and Crafts, and Aesthetic Movement antiques—that Wright collected and also dealt in over the years. "His total interest was in antiques," said Ourant, who repeated the story that the late Jim Croce's hit song "Time in a Bottle" was inspired by a visit to Wright's antiques shop.

Stevens, who after meeting Wright became a volunteer for *Antiques Roadshow*, said that of all the show's appraisers, Wright and Stuart Whitehurst of Skinner were considered to have just about the widest knowledge, capable of sitting at any of the specialty tables. "He was fascinated by so many different things," said Stevens.

Asked if there was anything he wasn't interested in, Stevens quickly replied, "Sports." After a pause he added gambling. "His father had been a gambler. Probably for that reason Richard couldn't even stand to play cards. As a kid, for show and tell, he once brought his father's tickets from the racetrack for win, place, and show. It didn't go over well with the family."

The good man was in certain ways a bad boy, according to the many other stories told about him, especially from the days of his early adulthood. This was in the 1960's and '70's after a move to England, when he was road manager for Fleetwood Mac and friends with the likes of Keith Moon and Pattie Boyd's sister Jenny, who was married to Mick Fleetwood. (Jenny Boyd's real name was Helen, but Pattie reportedly nicknamed her after her favorite doll.)

The collection speaks to both sides of him as well as to his sense of wit and whimsy. One very Wrightian piece in the sale was a rare belsnickel squeak toy, made in Germany circa 1870, that depicts the Christmas character spanking a bare-bottomed boy. Another was a rare four-faced prosopopoeia doll head, made by Ozias Morse in Acton, Massachusetts, circa 1866, with one face uglier than the next. A third example was a row of six Simon & Halbig dollhouse monks, German-made circa 1900, lined up in the Skinner display case as if they were ready to break into dance.

His reputation drew into the Skinner parking lot on sale day cars with license plates from more than a dozen different states, including Maryland, Michigan, Virginia, Minnesota, Florida, Ohio, Georgia, New Jersey, New York, Vermont, Maine, Rhode Island, and Connecticut. Bidders, at least in the gallery, were mostly women, but there were also some couples and a few unaccompanied men, including one who was representing a German museum.

Even a non-doll collector could be fascinated by what was being offered in 457 lots, unreserved. "There's not a single dolly face here," said Ourant of the collection as a whole. It truly was a most unusual assemblage, starting with the cover of the sale catalog, which featured five gentlemen dolls, four with facial hair.

The cover is "an inside joke," said Ourant. "It's a tribute to Richard. He would laugh" if he could see it. "There are more men and boy dolls in this sale than in most, and they're relatively rare."

Why so many? "We collect dolls who look like ourselves," said Dorothy A. McGonagle of Sudbury, Massachusetts, an appraiser of antique dolls, who for a number of years directed the doll department at Skinner.

More important than its plethora of soldiers, Scottish highlanders, sheiks, and Prussian fusiliers was the sale's overall excellence. Its offerings were characterized not so much by gender as by each doll's integrity as well as by the sweep of doll-making history over more than 250 years. "The collection has the 'right' example of everything," said Ourant. "He bought a lot of collections and kept the best."

Most interesting to Wright were hard-to-find examples of German manufacturers' dolls from about 1820 to 1870, Ourant said. He also specialized in character dolls. "The character-doll reform movement began in 1908 with doll makers creating dolls that reflected the real children of Munich," said Ourant, whose business, which he runs with Becky Ourant, his wife, is Village Doll & Toy Shop in Adamstown, Pennsylvania. "It changed the way doll makers made dolls. Later the character dolls' realism was softened. They became less severe, because children had found the realistic ones scary. So they became more dolly-faced, more appealing as playthings."

The sale was also notable for its numerous examples of early dolls, the earliest being a circa 1720 doll whose image Wright used on his business shopping bags. His so-called logo doll, the Queen Anne lady is 25" tall with a carved wooden head and body dressed in the original beige silk brocade dress over multiple petticoats and a matching wide-brimmed hat. Displayed in a mahogany and walnut veneered case, the doll carried one of the sale's highest estimates, \$50,000/70,000. Interestingly, it did not inspire competitive bidding. With Ourant at the auctioneer's podium, it just cleared its lowest expectation and sold in the room for \$50,363 (includes buyer's premium).

"It's hard to predict very rare things," Ourant said later. "With an unreserved sale, you're flying without a net. I talked to someone afterwards who said, 'I just figured it was Richard's stuff, and I wouldn't be able to touch those woodens, so I didn't bid. And boy, do I wish I had!' I think they [the early wooden dolls] were very well bought, to be honest."

Prices in general were healthy but not crazy. There was a great deal here for the doll community to absorb. Still, the total came to \$1,232,284, making it Skinner's first-ever million-dollar-plus doll sale. (The Maurine S. Popp sale in 2003 did \$953,606.) Given that every lot sold, it was also officially a white glove sale for Ourant. And it was a warm wave good-bye to King Richard.

For more information, phone the Boston gallery at (617) 350-5400 or the Marlborough facility at (508) 970-3100; Web site (www.skinnerinc.com).

Originally published in the January 2010 issue of *Maine Antique Digest*.
(c) 2009 Maine Antique Digest

comments powered by Disqus



A phone bidder took the top lot, a 28" tall Roulet & Decamps automaton of a female magician. The price was \$80,580 (est. \$25,000/35,000). The mouth of the monkey opens and closes; the bisque child blows kisses; and the clown sticks out its tongue. Made in France circa 1890, the magician is mostly seen with a white face. This one is extremely rare for having brown skin.



This mid-19th-century Kris Kringle doll, made in Germany, sold for \$14,220 (est. \$6000/8000) to the niece of a well-known Pennsylvania dealer. With a papier-mâché head and overstuffed cloth body, it was covered with approximately 55 period playthings, such as toy pocket watches, whistles, tin horns and bells, and American flags. A handwritten note accompanying the doll makes it clear it was a gift on Christmas Eve 1852.

A rare Steiff Petsy teddy bear with unusual blue glass eyes fetched \$16,590 (est. \$7000/9000) from a phone bidder. "Richard was well known for dealing in bears," said Andy Ourant. There were eight Steiff bears in the sale, representing "the teddy bear part of his life." This one brought the most.

A rare Steiff Petsy teddy bear with unusual blue glass eyes fetched \$16,590 (est. \$7000/9000) from a phone bidder. "Richard was well known for dealing in bears," said Andy Ourant. There were eight Steiff bears in the sale, representing "the teddy bear part of his life." This one brought the most.

A rare Steiff Petsy teddy bear with unusual blue glass eyes fetched \$16,590 (est. \$7000/9000) from a phone bidder. "Richard was well known for dealing in bears," said Andy Ourant. There were eight Steiff bears in the sale, representing "the teddy bear part of his life." This one brought the most.

A rare Steiff Petsy teddy bear with unusual blue glass eyes fetched \$16,590 (est. \$7000/9000) from a phone bidder. "Richard was well known for dealing in bears," said Andy Ourant. There were eight Steiff bears in the sale, representing "the teddy bear part of his life." This one brought the most.

A rare Steiff Petsy teddy bear with unusual blue glass eyes fetched \$16,590 (est. \$7000/9000) from a phone bidder. "Richard was well known for dealing in bears," said Andy Ourant. There were eight Steiff bears in the sale, representing "the teddy bear part of his life." This one brought the most.

A rare Steiff Petsy teddy bear with unusual blue glass eyes fetched \$16,590 (est. \$7000/9000) from a phone bidder. "Richard was well known for dealing in bears," said Andy Ourant. There were eight Steiff bears in the sale, representing "the teddy bear part of his life." This one brought the most.

A rare Steiff Petsy teddy bear with unusual blue glass eyes fetched \$16,590 (est. \$7000/9000) from a phone bidder. "Richard was well known for dealing in bears," said Andy Ourant. There were eight Steiff bears in the sale, representing "the teddy bear part of his life." This one brought the most.

A rare Steiff Petsy teddy bear with unusual blue glass eyes fetched \$16,590 (est. \$7000/9000) from a phone bidder. "Richard was well known for dealing in bears," said Andy Ourant. There were eight Steiff bears in the sale, representing "the teddy bear part of his life." This one brought the most.

A rare Steiff Petsy teddy bear with unusual blue glass eyes fetched \$16,590 (est. \$7000/9000) from a phone bidder. "Richard was well known for dealing in bears," said Andy Ourant. There were eight Steiff bears in the sale, representing "the teddy bear part of his life." This one brought the most.

A rare Steiff Petsy teddy bear with unusual blue glass eyes fetched \$16,590 (est. \$7000/9000) from a phone bidder. "Richard was well known for dealing in bears," said Andy Ourant. There were eight Steiff bears in the sale, representing "the teddy bear part of his life." This one brought the most.

A rare Steiff Petsy teddy bear with unusual blue glass eyes fetched \$16,590 (est. \$7000/9000) from a phone bidder. "Richard was well known for dealing in bears," said Andy Ourant. There were eight Steiff bears in the sale, representing "the teddy bear part of his life." This one brought the most.

A rare Steiff Petsy teddy bear with unusual blue glass eyes fetched \$16,590 (est. \$7000/9000) from a phone bidder. "Richard was well known for dealing in bears," said Andy Ourant. There were eight Steiff bears in the sale, representing "the teddy bear part of his life." This one brought the most.

A rare Steiff Petsy teddy bear with unusual blue glass eyes fetched \$16,590 (est. \$7000/9000) from a phone bidder. "Richard was well known for dealing in bears," said Andy Ourant. There were eight Steiff bears in the sale, representing "the teddy bear part of his life." This one brought the most.

A rare Steiff Petsy teddy bear with unusual blue glass eyes fetched \$16,590 (est. \$7000/9000) from a phone bidder. "Richard was well known for dealing in bears," said Andy Ourant. There were eight Steiff bears in the sale, representing "the teddy bear part of his life." This one brought the most.

A rare Steiff Petsy teddy bear with unusual blue glass eyes fetched \$16,590 (est. \$7000/9000) from a phone bidder. "Richard was well known for dealing in bears," said Andy Ourant. There were eight Steiff bears in the sale, representing "the teddy bear part of his life." This one brought the most.

A rare Steiff Petsy teddy bear with unusual blue glass eyes fetched \$16,590 (est. \$7000/9000) from a phone bidder. "Richard was well known for dealing in bears," said Andy Ourant. There were eight Steiff bears in the sale, representing "the teddy bear part of his life." This one brought the most.

A rare Steiff Petsy teddy bear with unusual blue glass eyes fetched \$16,590 (est. \$7000/9000) from a phone bidder. "Richard was well known for dealing in bears," said Andy Ourant. There were eight Steiff bears in the sale, representing "the teddy bear part of his life." This one brought the most.

A rare Steiff Petsy teddy bear with unusual blue glass eyes fetched \$16,590 (est. \$7000/9000) from a phone bidder. "Richard was well known for dealing in bears," said Andy Ourant. There were eight Steiff bears in the sale, representing "the teddy bear part of his life." This one brought the most.

A rare Steiff Petsy teddy bear with unusual blue glass eyes fetched \$16,590 (est. \$7000/9000) from a phone bidder. "Richard was well known for dealing in bears," said Andy Ourant. There were eight Steiff bears in the sale, representing "the teddy bear part of his life." This one brought the most.

A rare Steiff Petsy teddy bear with unusual blue glass eyes fetched \$16,590 (est. \$7000/9000) from a phone bidder. "Richard was well known for dealing in bears," said Andy Ourant. There were eight Steiff bears in the sale, representing "the teddy bear part of his life." This one brought the most.

A rare Steiff Petsy teddy bear with unusual blue glass eyes fetched \$16,590 (est. \$7000/9000) from a phone bidder. "Richard was well known for dealing in bears," said Andy Ourant. There were eight Steiff bears in the sale, representing "the teddy bear part of his life." This one brought the most.

A rare Steiff Petsy teddy bear with unusual blue glass eyes fetched \$16,590 (est. \$7000/9000) from a phone bidder. "Richard was well known for dealing in bears," said Andy Ourant. There were eight Steiff bears in the sale, representing "the teddy bear part of his life." This one brought the most.

A rare Steiff Petsy teddy bear with unusual blue glass eyes fetched \$16,590 (est. \$7000/9000) from a phone bidder. "Richard was well known for dealing in bears," said Andy Ourant. There were eight Steiff bears in the sale, representing "the teddy bear part of his life." This one brought the most.

A rare Steiff Petsy teddy bear with unusual blue glass eyes fetched \$16,590 (est. \$7000/9000) from a phone bidder. "Richard was well known for dealing in bears," said Andy Ourant. There were eight Steiff bears in the sale, representing "the teddy bear part of his life." This one brought the most.

A rare Steiff Petsy teddy bear with unusual blue glass eyes fetched \$16,590 (est. \$7000/9000) from a phone bidder. "Richard was well known for dealing in bears," said Andy Ourant. There were eight Steiff bears in the sale, representing "the teddy bear part of his life." This one brought the most.

A rare Steiff Petsy teddy bear with unusual blue glass eyes fetched \$16,590 (est. \$7000/9000) from a phone bidder. "Richard was well known for dealing in bears," said Andy Ourant. There were eight Steiff bears in the sale, representing "the teddy bear part of his life." This one brought the most.

A rare Steiff Petsy teddy bear with unusual blue glass eyes fetched \$16,590 (est. \$7000/9000) from a phone bidder. "Richard was well known for dealing in bears," said Andy Ourant. There were eight Steiff bears in the sale, representing "the teddy bear part of his life." This one brought the most.

A rare Steiff Petsy teddy bear with unusual blue glass eyes fetched \$16,590 (est. \$7000/9000) from a phone bidder. "Richard was well known for dealing in bears," said Andy Ourant. There were eight Steiff bears in the sale, representing "the teddy bear part of his life." This one brought the most.

A rare Steiff Petsy teddy bear with unusual blue glass eyes fetched \$16,590 (est. \$7000/9000) from a phone bidder. "Richard was well known for dealing in bears," said Andy Ourant. There were eight Steiff bears in the sale, representing "the teddy bear part of his life." This one brought the most.

A rare Steiff Petsy teddy bear with unusual blue glass eyes fetched \$16,590 (est. \$7000/9000) from a phone bidder. "Richard was well known for dealing in bears," said Andy Ourant. There were eight Steiff bears in the sale, representing "the teddy bear part of his life." This one brought the most.

A rare Steiff Petsy teddy bear with unusual blue glass eyes fetched \$16,590 (est. \$7000/9000) from a phone bidder. "Richard was well known for dealing in bears," said Andy Ourant. There were eight Steiff bears in the sale, representing "the teddy bear part of his life." This one brought the most.

- No Cost until you Sell

- 9.9% Commission on Sales

- Easy Setup

- Most Trusted Marketplace

www.RubyLane.com

Come join us for our special

Grand Opening

Saturday & Sunday,
December 30th-4th & 10th-11th
10AM-4PM
Fanatic Country Attic
Lewisburg, PA (570) 523-8363

American Furniture, Folk
and Decorative Arts
November 15

F

FREEMANS

BROWSE AND BID

STEVEN S. POWERS

WORKS OF ART & AMERICAN

The Annual
Delaware
Antiques
Show