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Collectors Dominate African-American Fine Art Auction

by Jeanne Schinto

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Swann Galleries, New York City

Photos courtesy Swann

Private collectors dominated Swann's African-American fine art sale on February 17 in New York City, taking all but three of the top 20 lots. Dealers scored two; an unnamed institution got one. What bidders paid the most for were the best and freshest examples of works by the best-known artists in the sale, but they also cast votes for some up-and-comers, including Carrie Mae Weems (b. 1953), Fred Wilson (b. 1954), and Kerry James Marshall (b. 1955). The 148-lot sale, which was 79% sold, grossed \$1,263,234 (including buyers' premiums).

Nigel Freeman, Swann's African-American fine art expert. "All three areas of the sale-nineteenth century, modern, and more contemporary-did well. There was good energy—a lot of activity, a lot of people looking, new buyers. Some people had a very specific interest in one piece, and some bought several pieces." The catalog's cover lot was a 1967 cast bronze sculpture by

"We were very pleased," said

Elizabeth Catlett (b. 1915). "We've had a Catlett and other sculptures on the back covers but never on the front," Freeman said. "And never a female artist, either, and she certainly is deserving of it." The nearly life-size (47" tall) figure of a standing African-American woman went at

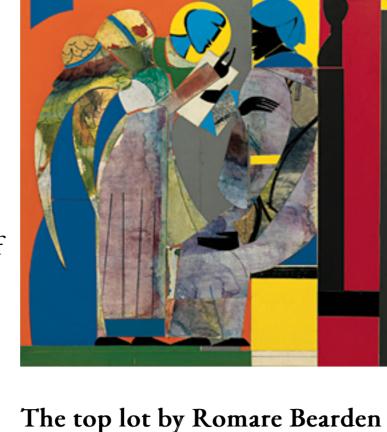
\$108,000, under estimate but a new record for a Catlett bronze, according to Swann. The auction house retains the artist's collection. record for any Catlett sculpture, set on October 8, 2009, when a collector paid \$288,000 for Homage to My Young Black Sisters. Made of carved red cedar with painted carved details, the 1968 work is on view until May 29 in Stargazers: Elizabeth Catlett in Conversation with 21 Contemporary Artists at the Bronx Museum of the Arts. The other featured works in that show were inspired or influenced by Catlett. For more information, see the Web site (www.bronxmuseum.org). Beauford Delaney's Le Balayeur, painted in Paris in the late

\$96,000. The oil on canvas features a street sweeper of African descent against a background of yellows, gold, and green flecks. One interpretation, put forth by the painting's consignor, among others, is that the work is a metaphorical self-portrait—a dark-skinned man working in isolation in a foreign place, just as Delaney was, with the broom standing in for the artist's paintbrush. Two other early Delaney worksportraits from 1933 and 1940sold within estimates for \$13,200 and \$8400. On the

1960's, went to a collector at

abstraction by Delaney (est. \$15,000/25,000) did not sell, showing that, despite his abstracts being highly desirable, their freshness counts. This one had most recently been on the market at Swann's first African-American art sale on February 6, artist. 2007, when it sold for \$31,200 (est. \$12,000/18,000). It was just too soon to offer it again. illustration board brought an overestimate \$5040. The first significant work by Vincent Smith to come to auction made a

other hand, an untitled



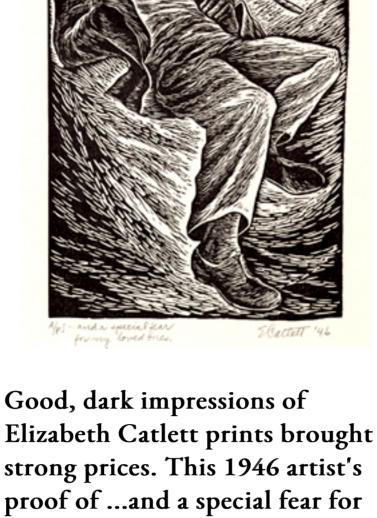
(1911-1988), the circa 1973

Tidings, a 17" x 16" collage of

various papers and mixed media mounted on masonite, sold for \$96,000, nearly twice the high estimate. Be on the lookout for a Bearden retrospective, opening in September at the Mint Museum in Charlotte, North Carolina, and traveling after that. For more information, see the Web site (www.mintmuseum.org). There is also forthcoming a book about Bearden by Mary Schmidt Campbell, dean of the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University and vice chair of the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities. Dr. Campbell spoke at an invitationonly reception at Swann before this sale.



The arched 7½" x 9½" oil on paperboard came from a private



my loved ones brought \$5040 (est. \$2000/3000). The $8\frac{1}{4}$ " x 5 7/8" linoleum cut on heavy wove paper is from "The Negro Woman" series.



Virtually every sale by this department features artists whose work is being auctioned for the first time. An untitled painting of female field workers by Ann Tanksley (b. 1934) was in that category. The 1992 oil on

1965, it is an early work for the

as significant is the storefront nearby with signage showing it to be a local headquarters for the Congress of Racial Equality. Two superb 19th-century works were crowd favorites. A small (7½" x 9½") late-period (1860-65) oil on paperboard landscape by Robert Scott Duncanson went to a collector at \$45,600 (est. \$15,000/25,000). "It was the first Duncanson we've had at Swann," said Freeman.

Yet another collector won Sunflowers by Charles Ethan Porter for

\$15,000/25,000). The focal point of The Voices Are Stilled (First New

York Office of C.O.R.E.), a 1965 oil on masonite, seems at first to be a

grocery store in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood, but just

new artist's record when it sold to a collector for \$21,600 (est.

\$36,000 (est. \$15,000/25,000). The dramatic vertical (24" x 10") still life in oil on wood panel from the artist's brief Paris period of the early 1880's has an impressive provenance. It descended in the well-connected family of its first owners, James Clarke Welling and Clementine Dixon Welling of Washington, D.C., and Hartford, Connecticut. James Welling was president of what is now George Washington University and a friend of William Corcoran, founder of the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Clementine Welling was the daughter of James Dixon, U.S. senator from Connecticut from 1857 to 1869.

Six of the top performers were by Romare Bearden, the centennial of

photomontages, watercolors, some scarce prints, and several fine

examples of his all-important collages.

about the actual case that inspired the novel.

whose birth is being celebrated this year. Those works, which went up at

the auction's very end, were from a variety of consignors. They included

"There will be lots of things going on to celebrate Bearden's centennial," Freeman said. "And we thought, why not get it started with a really good Bearden group?" One collector paid \$72,000 for Bearden's collage The Stubborn Old Lady. It served as the cover illustration for Loften Mitchell's similarly titled 1973 novel about an elderly, semi-blind woman who digs in her

heels when faced with eviction from her crumbling New York City

tenement. Mitchell and Bearden were once social workers in the New

York City Department of Welfare, and Mitchell wrote a magazine piece

Another collector bought a rare complete set of Bearden's 1971 "Ritual Bayou" for \$43,200 (est. \$20,000/ 30,000). The six editioned collages, each made from photolithographs printed from collages, are color-rich images of women mainly in the hardscrabble South. According to Swann's research, only a handful of these prints have come to auction individually, and the auction house was unable to locate any other complete set in a collection.

Bearden's circa 1973 collage *Tidings* was the most successful Bearden in

the sale, fetching \$96,000 (est. \$30,000/ 50,000). Freeman said it is the highest price paid for a Bearden collage in approximately three years-i.e., since the economic downturn of 2008. Its subject is religious—the Annunciation of Mary. Bearden used a very similar composition for a same-titled color screenprint, which is itself scarce. Like the other top Beardens, Tidings went to a collector. For more information, phone (212) 254-4710 or see the Web site (www.swanngalleries.com).

Bayou" brought \$43,200 (est. \$20,000/30,000). Each of the 20" x 15½" prints is numbered 11/75. One



printed from collages and mounted on finished plywood, as issued in 1971. Sunflowers by Charles Ethan Porter (1847-1923), a 24" x 10" oil on wood panel dating from the 1880's, brought \$36,000 (est.

A scarce complete set of

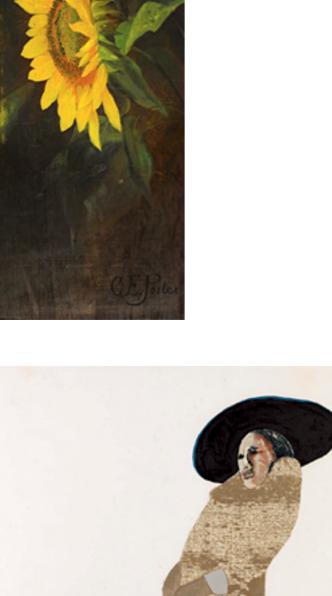
Romare Bearden's "Ritual

example is pictured from the

editioned collages, each made

from color photolithographs

set, which consists of six



30" x 22" fabric collage and oil on thick wove paper dates from 1989.

Untitled (Venice Biennale) by Fred Wilson (b. 1954), a 15 3/8" x 21 7/8" digital print on Kodak \$2880 (est. \$1000/1500). Numbered 7/125, it is

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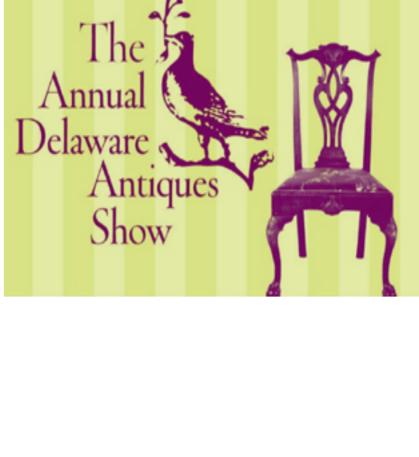
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A collector bought Long Live the Queen by Benny Andrews (1930-2006) for \$19,200 (est. \$10,000/15,000). From the artist's "America" series, the

Professional paper, sold for signed and dated 2003, the year the artist was the U.S. representative to the exhibition in Venice.

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