

Copley Fine Art Auctions, Boston, Massachusetts

Copley Fine Art Auctions Combines Canvasbacks and Canvases

by Jeanne Schinto

One of the collectors who had come for the decoys was doubtful, to say the least, about the prospects for the paintings. "Who's going to buy them?" he asked his seatmate at the inaugural sporting sale of Copley Fine Art Auctions that took place over two days, July 26 and 27, in the elegant ballroom of the Boston Park Plaza Hotel in Boston, just around the corner from Skinner Inc., in Back Bay.

He soon would find out. The top lot of this successful experiment—an auction that offered high-end waterfowl and shorebird decoys, sporting art, fishing collectibles, and some good pieces of folk art, all together—was Frank W. Benson's *Salmon Fishing*. Given by the artist to its original owner as a wedding present in 1927, the oil on canvas sold to a collector at about mid estimate for \$747,500. (All prices include the buyer's premium.)

"On the Benson estimates, you could say we 'split the uprights,'" said Stephen B. O'Brien Jr., who joined with business partner Jonathan B. Nash in launching this new venture. All told, the sale brought \$2,311,817 on an offering of 403 lots. "On a scale of one to ten I thought the first sale was an eight," O'Brien said in a selfcritique. "We've got room for improvement, but to come out of the gate and do almost two point four million, I thought it was a good first effort."

O'Brien is a well-known dealer and respected advisor to collectors and museums in the sporting field. The A. Elmer Crowell preening pintail drake that he bought for \$801,500 at Christie's in New York City on January 18, 2003, remains the world record for a decoy sold at public auction. Likewise, the scrimshaw whale's tooth by the so-called Pagoda/Albatross Artist that he bought for \$303,000 during the sale at Northeast Auctions in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, on August 20 and 21, 2005, remains a world record auction price in that category.

O'Brien and his wife, Cinnie, opened a retail gallery on Boston's Newbury Street in 1996, selling the same sort of sporting mix that was offered here. They exhibit at shows on Nantucket, in New York City, Philadelphia, and elsewhere; and they are a new addition to Boston's most prestigious venue, the Ellis Antiques Show.

Given that résumé, we wondered why O'Brien would enter the auction business—or, that is, reenter it after 13 years, his first experience having been in 1993, when he partnered with Rafael Osona to sell roughly 300 decoys.

"A lot of our clients were looking for different sales avenues, and an auction gives them another option that we can offer," O'Brien said. "We've done exceptionally well privately, and some clients are very interested in selling only privately. But others are a little bit more interested in the risk and the potential greater upside that you can get with an auction. We just wanted to keep up with the times."

Note that O'Brien was careful to say "potential" upside of the auction process. "I make sure to point out that at times you can do just as well privately as you can at an auction," he said. "I know of a decoy that was recently sold for half a million privately. That bird at auction might have brought three hundred thousand. It depends on the material. There's an upside and a downside to each avenue. You have to analyze it on a piece-by-piece and collection-by-collection basis, and match the needs of the owner."

In keeping with tradition, O'Brien and Nash scheduled their sale in the same week as the auctions of Guyette & Schmidt in Boston and Ted Harmon's Decoys Unlimited in Hyannis on Cape Cod.

"Historically, the decoy auctions have always been held together in a clump, whether it was at Bourne's or Oliver's or Julia's or Harmon's or Guyette and Schmidt's," O'Brien said. "Most of the collectors in that arena want to come to New England during one week's period, and obviously we wanted to cater to them."

The Guyette & Schmidt operation holds its auction at a hotel in the seaport area of Boston; it is neither close to downtown shops nor easily gotten to or from without a car. O'Brien and Nash, by contrast, chose a downtown location. That seemed to please the noncollector spouses, who could visit the city's attractions while the bidders dueled with bidding cards.

Cocktails preceded the discovery sale on the first night (a modest offering of 247 lots that brought an equally modest total of about \$18,000). To accompany the drinks there were raw oysters, hot hors d'oeuvres, and a general party atmosphere. Celebrating the launch, and helping to work the auction too, were many O'Brien and Nash family members.

Earlier, a dealer exhibition had opened in a room adjacent to the ballroom, where most of the previewing and all of the auctioning took place. Dealers included Parke Madden of The Weather Store, Sandwich, Massachusetts; Russ and Karen Goldberger of RJG Antiques, Rye, New Hampshire; and Alan and Elaine Haid of Classic Decoys, Darien, Connecticut. The American Museum of Fly Fishing, Manchester, Vermont, and *Decoy Magazine* had tables too.

We peeked in every so often over the course of the two days; it always looked pretty sleepy in there. The bidders, who came in person from every part of the country, as well as many Canadian provinces from the Maritimes to British Columbia, were obviously saving their money for the main event. Auctioneer Jay Beard was the appropriate choice to wield the hammer at this podium, considering his benefit auction work for Ducks Unlimited, the waterfowl and wetlands conservation organization. He opened with a winner, a rare glass-eye wood duck drake from the Mason Decoy Factory, Detroit, Michigan, circa 1905, that brought \$31,050, well above the \$15,000/20,000 estimate.

It wasn't often that a final bid went over the top like that one. More often they came within the numbers. We asked O'Brien if he had purposely decided not to be conservative. "One of the transitions I need to make is going from a gallery business model to an auction model," he said. "I would say that, in some cases, the estimates were a little bit high and more geared toward retail prices, which is what a lot of the pieces ended up bringing. We decided this time to be realistic about what we thought they would bring. Obviously, if you have something estimated at one thousand, and it goes for ten times that, you look like a hero. I think overall the values were right where they should have been. Next time, we may come down a little bit, in keeping with the industry standard."

Instead of separating the various categories into discrete sessions, the auction schedule commingled them. First, some decoys were offered, then a painting or two, then some fishing items, then another round of decoys, then more paintings, and so on. It pleased some, annoyed others, but there was a method to the madness. "Crossover is something we've been trying to develop for the fifteen years I've been in business as a private dealer," said O'Brien. "There was definitely some crossover at this sale, but there are certainly people who just collect paintings and some who just collect decoys. At the next sale, we'll probably run each category separately."

Since O'Brien obviously owns inventory, we asked if any of his stock items had been offered in the sale. "We owned a few, but ironically those were, mostly, the pieces that were bought in. We'd had them around for a while, and they were what I'd call shopworn, and they did what you'd expect them to do."

All the major pieces—decoys, paintings, fishing items, and a single gun lot—were consignments gathered from far and wide. Two of the best birds in the sale, by Toronto's George Warin, had been discovered in a boathouse on Ontario's Rice Lake, along with six other decoys by Canadian makers. Warin's tucked-head mallard drake sold for a literal song, \$14,950, against an estimate of \$30,000/40,000. O'Brien called it "the steal of the auction." Why did it happen? "I have no idea. It was the best buy by far. That bird was absolutely given away."

Another of the boathouse finds, a blue-winged teal hen made by Warin at about the same time as the mallard, was estimated at \$6000/8000. The hen made up for the mallard's performance when it fetched \$27,600 from a bidder on the phone.

Eighty other decoys came from Georgia. "Most of them were in the ten-dollar to hundred-dollar range," said O'Brien, "and then there were these two mixed in with that group." He referred to a white-winged scoter drake made by Joseph W. Lincoln and a hollow high-head Canada goose, the work of Dave "Umbrella" Watson. The scoter sold to a phone bidder for \$29,900; the same bidder took the goose for \$25,300.

The Georgia consignors drove the birds to the O'Brien gallery on Memorial Day weekend. "I had already seen them in photos," O'Brien said, "but you still never know until you actually have them in your hand whether it's original paint or major repairs and whatnot. The neat thing is, the woman who consigned them is using the money to build a horse farm." So the money goes back into the sporting world.

At this specialized auction we learned, among other things, that Nina Fletcher Little wasn't the only one who affixed annotated jelly-jar labels to her purchases. A member of the Milton C. Weiler family affixed one to its model of a greater yellowlegs by Bunn/Bowman—that is, either Charles Sumner Bunn (1865- 1952) of the Shinnecock Indian Reservation, Long Island, New York, or Bill Bowman (1824- 1906) of Bangor, Maine, and Lawrence, Long Island, New York. Estimated at \$80,000/120,000, it brought \$97,750, making it the top bird lot of the sale.

We asked O'Brien about the double attribution, Bunn/Bowman. "There's a lot of controversy right now about the origins of those birds," he said. "Originally, Bill Mackey, the legendary collector, claimed that he didn't know who their maker was. Subsequently, he came up with an attribution to a Bill Bowman, and he was considered to have been the carver up until three or four years ago, when some research came out about a Native American from the Shinnecock Reservation, a carver and a guide by the name of Charles Sumner Bunn. Everything now points to him. I believe in my heart of hearts that Bunn made those birds and that eventually he will come to be the accepted maker. But there's a faction who doesn't want to hear about the new attribution. Right now, collectors are divided just about straight down the middle."

Interestingly, another Bunn/ Bowman example, offered directly after the yellowlegs, was bought in at \$40,000. The dowitcher had come from the same source, the family of sporting artist Weiler, and also had a jellyjar label on bottom of it. What was the problem?

According to O'Brien, the bird was unfairly bad-mouthed. "You get a little bit of negative talk on the floor, and all of a sudden people cool to an item," he said. "There was talk that there was something wrong with the bird's bill, but it was just trash talk. There was nothing wrong with it at all. I know that if I had taken that bird and offered it privately to somebody for sixty thousand [its low estimate], it would have sold immediately. Some people say auctions are always the way to go, but this just goes to show that you never know what's going to happen."

In closing, we should mention the top fishing-rod lot of the two dozen that were offered. It was a 7'6" two-piece, two-tip trout rod made by Everett Garrison (1893- 1975) of Yonkers, New York. The model #209, with original cloth bag, tube, and cap, brought \$6325 (est. \$8000/10,000). Nine others failed to sell at all. Bidders did go for a 24" tall polymer model of an angler with bamboo fly rod in hand. The showroom sample, cataloged as having been made circa 1940 by the Kingfisher Flyline Company, sold to an absentee bidder for a low-estimate- skimming \$3565.

The date of the next Copley auction was undecided as we finished this report. "It might not be until next July, or it might be in the winter," said O'Brien. "You can never tell when a good collection might come to the surface." For more information, contact Copley Fine Art Auctions at (617) 536-0030 or visit the Web site (www.copleyart.com).