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Cropsey at the Top, Then All the Rest

by Jeanne Schinto



Skinner, Inc., Boston, Massachusetts

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Stephen Fletcher called it "a little sweetheart of a painting" as he prepared to sell Autumn on the Hudson by Jasper Francis Cropsey at Skinner in Boston on May 16. The 5" x 10" oil on board, painted in 1858, had been consigned by a private New York state collection and was teasingly estimated at \$15,000/25,000. A full bank of phone bidders got ready to vie for it. Only four of them actually participated as bidding quickly rose to the six-figure level. A bottle of Prosecco popped unintentionally in the back of the gallery—far too soon. The two phone bidders who outlasted the rest took it to \$369,000 (including buyer's premium), where one of them won it.

About 350 lots later, an untitled 1957 oil and collage on paper by Abstract Expressionist Michael Goldberg (1924-2007) sold for the second-highest price of the evening, \$50,363, more than double its high estimate and an artist record, according to the Web site Artfact.

The third-highest lot of the sale was also a record, according to the same source. An animated view of Valparaiso harbor by Jacob C. Ward, a 19thcentury American artist, sold within estimate for \$36,735. Reminiscent of China trade paintings, the 1845 oil on canvas depicts an important port of call en route to the Pacific. Skinner's Colleene Fesko said the painting went directly from the artist's easel to the Loring family of Hingham, Massachusetts, whose members established Loring & Company in Valparaiso and were engaged in trade there during the period that the painting depicts. It passed by descent to the consignor.

In addition to the top lots, several of the unsigned or indistinctly signed European works caught bidders' attention. So did the best of the regional works by Frank Shapleigh and Aldro Hibbard and some of the contemporary works by Americans as well as international artists. There were, however, some significant disappointments.

Thomas Wilmer Dewing's *The Duet* (alternatively titled *The Interlude*) was anticipated as the auction's main cause for celebration. The 20" x 30" oil on canvas in a reproduction Stanford White frame had previously been sold on a \$200,000/250,000 estimate for \$156,500 by Skinner on November 12, 1999. This time, the high estimate was \$300,000. That's not too much of a reach, and almost ten years after that first sale offering the painting again didn't seem rash, but the Dewing got bought in at \$120,000.

John Joseph Enneking's Storm in the Adirondacks (est. \$12,000/ 18,000) also was passed, as was J. Ambrose Prichard's An Afternoon by the Rhone (est. \$15,000/25,000) and two by Eric Sloane, Geese Flying (est. \$12,000/18,000) and The Stone Wall (est. \$15,000/25,000). In the end, the buy-in rate was 21.6%, with 394 of the 502 lots selling for \$1,239,345.

Fesko noted that the beleaguered middle market, which she defined as items with estimates under \$50,000, was "very compromised" in this sale. "I think we have to look to the economy on that. The world moves so fast; I don't see it as part of a trend. I do see it as the art market at that level reacting to the financial news."

Fesko also tends to believe that the new buyers currently spending their money on Russian, Chinese, and Indian art will eventually broaden their tastes. "One of the first things that new buyers buy is the artwork of their country and heritage," she said. "That's the first phase of a new-market buying style. Once that has been sated, then that money will go into buying artworks from other realms, including European and American. I think in time the market will reinvent itself, as it always does."

For more information, contact Skinner in Boston at (617) 350-5400 or in Bolton at (978) 779-6241; Web site (www.skinnerinc.com).

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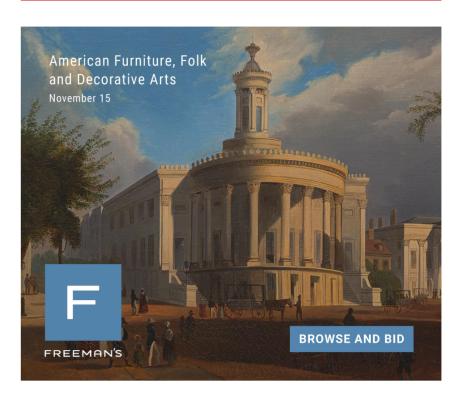
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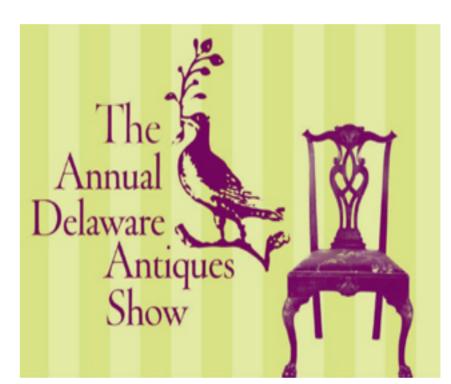


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