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Early Photography at Americana Sale Soars

by Jeanne Schinto



Skinner, Inc., Boston, Massachusetts

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Photos courtesy Skinner

Even before the record-breaking folk art portrait went up at Skinner's nearly \$3 million Americana sale in Boston on November 5, 2011, the auction was off to an auspicious start. The first 150 lots, Rod MacKenzie's early photography collection, went white glove—every single offering found a buyer.

Those buyers—some of them institutions, according to Americana department director Stephen Fletcher, although he wasn't at liberty to name them—were willing to pay big. A half-plate daguerreotype portrait of two hunters with game and a sleeping dog was the top lot, bringing a heavy-weight \$18,960 (including buyer's premium) on a \$1500/2500 estimate. Bidders ignored the identical estimate on a half-plate daguerreotype of an architect at work in his office. It sold for \$15,405. Someone else paid \$15,405 for a quarter-plate daguerreotype of students in a classroom, more than ten times its high estimate. All told, the images—daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, and tintypes—brought \$220,512.

Later that day, as the sale continued, the success of its first part was a topic of conversation at a weekend trade fair in nearby Wakefield, Massachusetts, sponsored by the Photographic Historical Society of New England.

"Those kinds of sales happen once in a while," said a dealer who left bids via the Internet on five lots and was successful on only one, paying \$2370 for a sixth-plate daguerreotype of a large Federal house with logging activity in front of it. He recalled a sale at Sotheby's in New York City on April 6, 2000, when the 49-lot Stephen Anaya collection of gold rush images sold for \$1.3 million, more than double its presale estimate. He also remembered Christie's sale of Jackie Napoleon Wilson's collection of 44 African-American images, which sold in New York City on October 4, 2001, for \$261,902, more than double its presale prediction.

Obviously, the MacKenzie collection didn't achieve the same dollar-per-lot levels as Anaya's and Wilson's collections, but just as they did it went well beyond expectations. Indeed, the general consensus was that the results were "out of sight" because of the marketing prowess of Skinner in addition to the overall strength of the material.

For many years MacKenzie and his wife, Mary, had an antiques shop, Sign of the Thistle, in Sterling, Massachusetts. He also taught in the Clinton, Massachusetts, school system for 25 years, and he worked in inventory and cataloged military items for Skinner, said Fletcher.

As a collector, MacKenzie favored portraits that evoked narratives. There were portraits of a young girl holding a chalkware cat; a boy with a port-wine birthmarked face; and one of a young chap in a jauntily cocked hat, strumming a banjo. There were also many occupational (carpenters, buggy drivers, firefighters, a blacksmith, a mason) and numerous uniformed soldiers. On the evidence, he liked dignified poses, people looking their best, well-behaved children, and happy families.

The auction house issued a separate catalog for this portion of the sale. It was a tour de force. The idea for it came from Fletcher, who recalled, "I said, 'Why don't we make the catalog look like a giant daguerreotype? The cover could be the thermoplastic case. You open it up. There's the velvet inside. The whole thing.'" Its front and back covers cleverly reproduce the front and back of a daguerreotype union case. When opened, the inside front cover shows an image of a deep-blue velvet inside front cover of a case and its brass hinges at the fold. The page facing the inside front cover of the catalog is a reproduction of a gilt-brass mat.

The idea was more than clever, however; it fit the collection. "Rod MacKenzie went through some connoisseurship to place the daguerreotypes in fine union cases," said photography historian and collector Clifford Krainik, who knew MacKenzie and whose book, written with his wife, Michele Krainik, *Union Cases: A Collector's Guide to the Art of America's First Plastics*, is repeatedly cited in the catalog. Published in an edition of 2000 in 1988, the guide is illustrated with the Dr. Carl Walvoord collection.

Reached by phone at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., where they were doing an appraisal, the Krainiks graciously offered this reporter a brief survey course on union cases.

"A union case is a manmade plastic container," Clifford Krainik said. "The plastic industry began with union cases. There was no manmade plastic prior to the introduction of the union case in 1853. There was the use of horn and papier-mâché to be molded from dies, but not yet a true plastic, in which two unlike substances are combined to come up with a third substance—that's really the definition of plastic."

That process is also where the name union came from, Krainik said. Sawdust, resin, and shellac were combined to create a union of materials. He added, "Today these cases are referred to as thermoplastic, as opposed to styrene or other early kinds of plastics and celluloids that came later."

Some images in the Skinner sale were in earlier pressed-paper or leather cases. Making them was a cottage industry, said Krainik. "The wooden frames had to be handmade and joined. The leather had to be stretched and glued. The clasps and hinges all had to be done by hand. It was very time-consuming. Whereas once a die for a union case was engraved, you could pour the thick, malleable plastic material into it, press it, and cool it. You could have a whole assembly line making these union cases quickly and inexpensively. Plus, you could present decorative motifs, artwork, Currier and Ives, old masters—a whole range of designs."

The Krainiks were asked how one should view swapping images and cases. Was it akin to, say, swapping clock movements and cases? (In the world of horology, these are called "marriages" and, while quite common in older long-case clocks, almost always devalue the clock substantially unless overwhelmed by a truly superior case or movement that you would be happy to find in any arrangement.)

"While we recognize that people do it, we don't condone it," said Krainik. "It does detract from the historical integrity of a photograph in its case. But there's a collecting aesthetic in which, to enhance the value or beauty of a photograph, a better case will be chosen. And it didn't begin in the twentieth or twenty-first century."

"As early as the era when union cases were made, switching was occurring. So we do find 1840's daguerreotypes in 1850's union cases. They were upgraded at the time. A family member might have said, 'This portrait is much more important to us than that one. So let's put uncle or grandfather in there.' The interchangeability of the standard sizes—sixth, ninth, quarter, half-plate, and so forth—makes that possible. So although it's not a practice we would condone as historians, collectors might view it differently."

The daguerreotype and ambrotype processes became obsolete in the 1870's, supplanted by the dry-plate process. Krainik said that development started people wondering what else could be done with "this 'strange substance' [thermoplastic]. Well, a whole array of decorative arts was introduced."

Michele Krainik's entry on union cases in *Encyclopedia of Nineteenth-Century Photography* (New York and London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2008, Vol. 2, pp. 1420-22) names some of those uses: "...buttons, belt buckles, jewelry, combs, knife handles, chessmen, mirrors, gun cases, brush handles, picture frames, and lids for men's collar boxes, some using union case designs."

Her article concludes, "Union cases were America's first plastic products—the very beginning of a significant industry. Used as a protective device for the popular daguerreotype, union cases became artful objects in their own right and are collected today for their wonderful and intricate designs."

More items from the MacKenzie collection will be offered at a future Skinner sale. For more information, phone (617) 350-5400 or see the Web site (www.skinnerinc.com).

Image Sizes

Approximate sizes of images, including the portion of image hidden under the mat, but not including the case:

- Whole plate: 6½" x 8½"
- Half-plate: 4¾" x 5½"
- Quarter-plate: 3¾" x 4¾"
- Sixth-plate (the most common size): 2¾" x 3¾"
- Ninth-plate: 2" x 2½"
- Sixteenth-plate: 1 3/8" x 1 5/8"

—From the Web site of the Daguerreian Society (www.daguerre.org).



A sixth-plate daguerreotype of a young man playing a banjo sold for \$7229 (est. \$600/800).



A quarter-plate ambrotype of a mixed race military band and soldiers in a thermoplastic frame made \$2963 (est. \$600/800).



Considered the definitive word on the subject, Clifford and Michele Krainik's *Union Cases: A Collector's Guide to the Art of America's First Plastics* is out of print and costly to obtain through rare-book dealers. Prices on Bookfinder.com range from \$97.68 to \$498.99. The Krainiks would be happy to answer questions; they may be reached via e-mail at ckrainik@aol.com.

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