

Swann Galleries, New York City

## First Ever African-American Art Auction Sets 17 Artist Records

by Jeanne Schinto

Swann Galleries, preparing to launch its first auction dedicated exclusively to African-American fine art, told reporters that it estimated its February 6 sale would bring approximately \$500,000. That number was issued six months before the auction was scheduled to take place. In the end, some major consignments were landed, estimates grew, and the final results tallied more than four times that preliminary projection, \$2,368,358.

There were prints, drawings, collages, paintings, and sculptures by artists ranging from 19th-century landscapist Edward Mitchell Bannister to Kara Walker (b. 1969), who employs the antique practice of cutting paper portrait silhouettes to make artistic statements about racial identity in the antebellum South.

The new department of African-American fine art was a logical next step for the auction house that alone has offered regular sales of printed and manuscript African-Americana, starting a dozen years ago under the direction of Wyatt H. Day, a book expert. Nigel Freeman, Swann's associate director of prints and drawings, was chosen to lead this new venture, which, like Day's department, will hold an annual sale during Black History Month.

Even without a separate department, Swann was gaining a reputation for having success with artworks by African-Americans, having broken price records for works by Lois Mailou Jones, Dox Thrash, and Hale Aspacio Woodruff in 2005-06. At this sale Swann broke the records again for Jones and Woodruff and for 15 others: Norman Lewis, Beauford Delaney, Palmer Hayden, Walter Williams, James A. Porter, Benny Andrews, Claude Clark, David Driskell, Leroy Foster, Whitfield Lovell, Richard Mayhew, Sam Middleton, Lenwood Morris, Faith Ringgold, and Renée Stout.

Sixteen price records were also exceeded for fine prints by artists Lewis, Woodruff, and Williams from the previous list along with Romare Bearden, Camille Billops, Ernest Crichlow, Robert Blackburn, Samuel Brown, Elizabeth Catlett, Sam Gilliam, Hughie Lee-Smith, Lloyd McNeil, Keith Morrison, Vincent Smith, Charles White, and Hartwell Yeargans.

In addition, price records were surpassed for certain types of objects. Two of these were works by one of the most important names in 20th-century African-American fine art, Jacob Lawrence. *The Legend of John Brown*, a set of 22 screenprints in color with stark, poem-like captions written by Lawrence, sold to a collector for \$156,000 (includes buyer's premium), making it not only a record but the auction's top lot.

Based on Lawrence's 1941 series of gouache and tempera paintings, *The Life of John Brown*, which was commissioned by the Detroit Institute of Arts, the series set was issued in an edition of 60 in 1977. Lawrence's *Eight Studies for "The Book of Genesis,"* a set of eight color screenprints, one of 50 such signed and numbered sets issued in 1989 and 1990, also achieved a record-setting price when it sold to the trade for \$48,000.

The second-highest price of the sale was achieved by Elizabeth Catlett's carved mahogany sculpture from 1976, *Nude Torso*, which brought \$120,000 from a collector. Catlett (b. 1915) has made sculpture in wood, mostly of the female nude, since the mid-1950's. This consignment from a private New York collection is believed to be the first Catlett sculpture to have come to auction. Likewise, Lenwood Morris's circa 1913 *Self-Portrait* achieved an artist's record by default, when it sold for \$15,600, because it was the first known Morris work of any kind to come to auction.

This sale featured 32 works by Romare Bearden, whose renown seems to grow by the day. Some of the Bearden lots were extremely rare. His *Conjur Woman as Angel*, one of the artist's first photomontages, dated 1964, sold to a collector for \$26,400. The only other known impression is owned by the Romare Bearden Foundation in New York City. Another collector bought Bearden's *Baptism*, a color screenprint from 1975, for \$31,200. One of only two known impressions brought to auction in the past 20 years, it is the artist's largest print, based on the collage *Of the Blues: Carolina Shout*, and its price the highest paid for any Bearden print.

There were also more than a dozen lots by the prolific Charles White. One of those lots was a unique collection of 31 drawings from sketchbooks from the early years of his career, 1935-38. They had come to the sale from Benjamin Horowitz of Los Angeles, who was White's friend and dealer. According to the catalog, museum curator Lucinda Gedeon identified the numbered drawings in this group as having come from White's first known notebook. Nonetheless, the market value of items without comparables is difficult to gauge, and the lot sold at \$38,400 (est. \$40,000/ 60,000).

In all, 222 lots were offered; 12% went unsold, a few major pieces among them. White's *William Warfield*, a circa 1954 charcoal and pencil portrait of the concert baritone (est. \$40,000/ 60,000), was one. So was Leslie Garland Bolling's *Beautiful Womanhood*, a 1931 poplar wood sculpture (est. \$20,000/30,000). Bolling's 1933 *New Moon*, in the same wood and carrying the same estimate, did not sell either. Nor did Palmer Hayden's watercolor from 1925-26, *Ocean Point, Maine* (est. \$40,000/60,000), or John Wilson's 1944 charcoal portrait *Untitled (Farm Boy)* (est. \$30,000/50,000). A third screenprint set in color by Lawrence, *The Life of Toussaint L'Ouverture*, also failed to find a buyer (est. \$130,000/160,000).

Judging from the rest of the results, however, it will be only a matter of time before the secondary market comes to terms with some of the more ambitious numbers projected for this sale.

Beyond prices, there is evidence that the public understood the significance of this historic occasion. All of the approximately 3000 copies of the catalog, with full-color images (rarely more than one to a page) and extensive biographical notes ("subject to revision and expansion," as new and needed scholarship is completed), have been sold, said Swann spokesperson Rebecca Weiss. Officially out of print, it is itself a collector's item.

The catalog's arrangement is chronological rather than according to artist, genre, or some other scheme. At first we found this frustrating, since works by the same artist were not sequential and had to be hunted for, if comparisons were needed. Then, gradually, we came to the same realization that Swann apparently did. The historical arrangement makes the most sense. A new field such as this one requires a temporal survey as a guide.

It's also true that the life of each individual represented by artworks in this sale fits into a larger, historical context, one that has been characterized by the struggle for civil rights, as well as the typical struggles of the creative artist. Lois Mailou Jones is a case in point. In 1941, when Jones submitted *Indian Shops, Gay Head, Massachusetts*, to a competition organized by the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., she did so via a friend, Céline Tabary, in order to bypass the museum's ban on submissions by Black artists. It won the prestigious Robert Woods Bliss Prize for Landscape.

"I felt it was best to hold my niche, win several awards, and then appear-all to be sure that I would be accepted," Jones once told an interviewer for the literary magazine *Callaloo*. "So I received the award in the mail. I owed very much to my white friend Céline, who would take my paintings to the juries...That was very much in my favor. It's been a very unusual career...I was exhibiting at all of the big museums, but they never knew that I was black because I either shipped my works or had a white person deliver them. Now you see how difficult it was."

At this sale, five Jones artworks were sold, including *Circus Tents*, completed in the year she won the Bliss Prize. It sold for \$31,200, a new price record for Jones, who almost 20 years after her death is now beginning to be fully appreciated.

For more information, contact Nigel Freeman at Swann Galleries at (212) 254-4710, ext. 33, or visit the Web site ([www.swannalleries.com](http://www.swannalleries.com)).