

Skinner, Inc., Boston, Massachusetts

From Dauntless to Dreadnought: The Skinner Americana Sale

by Jeanne Schinto

What's the old saying? Everyone's entitled to an opinion? Maybe so, but some people's opinions matter more than others. Of the opinions offered about the unsigned yachting picture that sold at Skinner's Americana sale in Boston on February 19, the one that mattered most in the end was that of the private collector in the front row bidding Statue of Liberty style until his competition on the phone (dealer Alan Granby) stopped saying yes.

What exactly did the collector buy for \$281,000 (including buyer's premium)? Annals will have it down as a 28¾" x 49-7/8" oil on canvas of the schooner yacht *Dreadnought*, probably competing for the Cape May Challenge Cup on October 10, 1872. The artist attribution will go to Antonio Jacobsen (1850-1921). The price will be noted as a new public-auction record, more than three times the \$86,121 that a signed Jacobsen brought at Bonhams in London on September 16, 2003.

Late last June, however, after the consignor, Patsy Anderson of Pine Island, Florida, had squeezed the painting into a friend's car and driven it to Tampa to have it valued by appraisers for PBS's *Antiques Roadshow*, she had been led to believe it was by another artist, James E. Buttersworth (1817-1894), and possibly worth half a million dollars or more. Debra Force of Debra Force Fine Art Inc., New York City, had given Anderson the news on camera. Force had stipulated, however, that more research needed to be done. Among other things, the yacht needed to be identified.

By late summer, Anderson was contacting auction houses. She wanted to sell. Eventually, the painting, which her husband's grandfather had bought in New York City in the 1880's, came to Skinner and was scheduled for this sale. The initial research of Skinner's marine-art consultant, longtime collector Charles Lanagan, corroborated Force's cursory appraisal, and he named the yacht. The picture was a Buttersworth, and the *Dauntless* was his subject. It was labeled as such in ads for the upcoming auction that ran in the January 2006 issue of *The Magazine Antiques* and the February 2006 issue of *M.A.D.*

It was given a Buttersworth-size estimate—\$300,000/500,000—according to the PBS Web site where a follow-up story was posted about the find. This was shortly after January 9, when PBS aired the *Roadshow* segment showing Force giving her qualified appraisal and Anderson her elated response ("Oh my Lord in heaven!").

Almost immediately, Force told us, she started getting phone calls. Stephen L. Fletcher of Skinner said he started getting them too. "Are you sure that's a Buttersworth?" asked these callers, who included dealers, museum people, and collectors, some or all of them potential buyers. "It looks more like a Jacobsen to me."

How to make short the story of what came next? It is a familiar one in the antiques and fine arts worlds. An initial identification was made—a quick one, after maybe 15 minutes of looking, by Force's recollection. Now it was being evaluated and reconsidered by others. The only difference was that the initial identification had been shared with nearly 12 million people.

Lanagan's research had been thorough. Considering the onslaught of questions, however, he dug in anew, with even more rigor. "Charlie went back to the drawing board," said Fletcher. After he had completed his cataloging and identified the flags, which in turn had identified the vessel as the *Dauntless*, he found out that the flags he had researched with currently available books were erroneously identified. "So he went back to the original records of the New York Yacht Club and found out that it was the *Dreadnought*. And during the course of that reexamination, we came up with other examples of Jacobsen's really best work, and the more comparisons we made, and the more we thought about it, the more it seemed as though we might be better off attributing it to Jacobsen. And it would seem now, out there in the larger world, the consensus is that we're right. We've heard from all kinds of people at this point."

When we asked Force if she had changed her own opinion, she reiterated what she had said on the Roadshow. The painting needed more research, and that was what it was getting. "One of the beauties of the *Roadshow* is that nothing is cut and dried," she said. "It has my take, as well as that of the others at my table, who thought one way." Now we were learning the takes of others.

How did a *Roadshow* opinion differ from one that Force would give at her gallery? "If it were brought to me at my gallery, I would do extensive research," she said, "whether that meant going to an expert, although, in this case, unfortunately, the expert on Buttersworth [Rudolph J. Schaefer] and the expert on Jacobsen [Harold Sniffen] are both deceased.

"There are other people, however, art scholars in the field, who have handled works like this. So it would be a matter of consulting with other people, as well as actually taking the painting and studying it in conjunction with works by [the artists in question]. I would not offer something in my gallery unless I could determine who it was by. At auction it's different. They have a different mission. It's a wonderful painting, and they'll let the market decide."

We asked Fletcher how the consignor felt about the change that had occurred. "As you know, Jacobsen's paintings traditionally don't bring as much money as Buttersworth's do," he said. The estimate would have to be lowered. Who called Anderson to give her the news? "I had a conversation with her, as did Charlie. Those are not easy calls to make." Understandably, she really wanted it to be a Buttersworth. "But we tried very sincerely and with a great deal of effort to get this right, and I think she could see that. It's been a long process."

The process was so protracted, with Anderson's Florida lawyer hiring another here in Boston, that the catalog was published while the estimate was still a work in progress, so to speak. "Estimate available upon request," read the note at the bottom of the lot entry, and those who called to inquire about it were directed to Fletcher or his Skinner colleague, Martha Hamilton, for the explanation. "In this situation one has to be sympathetic to the feelings of the consignor," Fletcher said. "This was her shot. She had never consigned anything to an auction before...It was a real exercise in patience."

By the time of Skinner's previews, the estimate was finally settled at \$200,000/300,000. It was an unprecedented sum for a Jacobsen, but Fletcher was sounding confident. "It's going to turn out all right," he told us, "because I think there is an opinion that this is a superior work by Jacobsen, an early work."

Did Fletcher think some other auction house would have let it go as a Buttersworth? "You know what? People out there are very smart. They are very well informed. There is, particularly, a group of collectors who love yachting. They are knowledgeable, they are moneyed, and they have done their homework. In this marketplace, with communication being what it is, you can't get away with stuff like that. I certainly wouldn't want to try."

On the evening of Skinner's presale gallery walk, Lanagan gave a short talk on the painting, now titled Fetching the Mark. He pointed out the shadows on the sails and the translucent water. He noted that no rigging line was straight, true to the force of gravity bearing down. These were all Jacobsen characteristics. And while portraying the exhilaration of the race was not typical of Jacobsen, Lanagan said he now believed, after comparing this work to dozens by Buttersworth and Jacobsen, that the painting represented the Danish-born artist's best work, done in the early period of his career, circa 1873, shortly after his arrival in the United States and before he had become a more formulaic painter. "Regardless of who painted this," he concluded, "it's a masterpiece of marine art."

A private collector, a regular at Skinner's Americana sales, had come to the gallery walk with his young family. He was seen by us speaking to Lanagan after the gallery walk had moved on to other highlights presented by Fletcher and Hamilton. The next morning, not too surprisingly, the collector (who later asked us for anonymity) was the one who bought the work at a hammer price halfway between the estimates and exactly at the lower number that Force had ventured on the Roadshow.

There were more happy endings at this sale, which, it was sometimes easy to forget, featured 782 other lots besides the yacht-race painting, 703 of which sold, for a gross of \$2,024,818.80.

About 125 of those lots were folk art works from the collection of Barbara Braman and her late husband, Edwin. There were numerous miniature folk portraits, full-scale folk portraits, weathervanes, whirligigs, a slew of wallpaper-covered handboxes, and more.

The top lot of the Braman group, many pieces of which had impressive exhibition and publication histories, was an early 19th-century fireboard in extremely good condition. The picture on the three-board panel was of a Federal farmhouse with two smoking chimneys and a line of soldierly, bright green poplar trees running alongside it. The piece was in a frame that hid its outer edges. Some previewers were wondering if it had been cut down. There was only one way to find out. On Sunday morning, the day of the sale, at least one person, a Massachusetts dealer, examined it for a second time without that frame. The unpainted, uncut edges of the piece were revealed. When the bidding opened, it was lively. Three phones and the dealer competed. One of the phone bidders was the eventual victor at \$82,250.

For the same price a different phone bidder took a Chippendale mahogany slant-front desk that was labeled John Townsend of Newport, Rhode Island. At this point, all that could be read of that label, pasted to the bottom of the top drawer, was "ewport." We'll never know if that would have been enough to make the piece a headliner because there was another problem: replaced feet. We saw Leigh Keno previewing it, but he did not win it, Fletcher said.

Collectors of folk portraits look for strong characterizations. One of the best portraits from the Braman consignment had that special component. Attributed to Micah Williams (1782-1837), circa 1820, it was a portrait of an elderly woman in a ruffled white bonnet holding a book in her hand, one finger holding her place. The catalog picture of it was small and so was the estimate, \$3000/5000. The medium was pastel (Williams's usual medium), not oil. Nonetheless, two bidders on the phones took it to \$49,350.

Crazy? In our opinion, no. True, she wasn't a cute little girl in a pretty red dress with a kitty cat by her side, but she had great charm. She looked wise; she was not wizened. You'd be only half surprised if one day she winked at you. Given the opportunity, would we want to live with this dead relative of somebody else hanging on our wall? The answer is yes.

Like many of these Braman consignments, the Micah-attributed portrait was exhibited at *By and For the American People: American Folk Art from a Private Collection*, organized by the Minneapolis Institute of Arts in 1976. Thirty years later, what was the same museum showing? On the day of this sale, we saw advertised on its Web site *Villa America: American Moderns, 1900-1950* and *Ruth Duckworth, Modernist Sculptor*. Times change. So do tastes. And some of the handboxes exhibited in Minneapolis so long ago represented buying opportunities to the bidders who claimed them at Skinner for \$352.50, \$499.38, and \$998.75.

As usual, however, the best pieces in every category—well, you know the rest of that sentence. Overheard in the gallery during the previews, according to Fletcher, was this statement: "I really resent the fact that these billionaires are pricing us millionaires out of the market." What's a millionaire to do? Maybe what the rest of us do. Learn all you can, buy what your eye loves, and, especially, seize opportunities when they present themselves.

At this sale, people seemed to be doing exactly that, a number of retail customers among them, vying for decent chests of drawers, high chests, blanket chests, and decorative pieces to go with them. A Federal upholstered easy chair, possibly turn of the 19th-century Pennsylvania, was taken away for \$2232.50. A fancy-painted dressing table, retaining what appeared to be its original mustard yellow paint, was bought for \$3525. A miniature portrait of a boy in a green dress with a hammer and nail, an unsigned watercolor on paper, was stolen at \$528.75 by a couple who brought their two teenage daughters to the sale. The parents bought other items for their newly purchased circa 1775 house, including a yellow paint-decorated washstand (\$998.75) and a painted pine spice cabinet (\$1880). It was encouraging to witness their girls able to sit from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., uncomplaining. So what if they were playing a hand-held computerized game for a portion of the time? They were there, inhaling the auction air.

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