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# Heaven and Earth at Americana Sale

by Jeanne Schinto



*Skinner Inc., Boston, Massachusetts*

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Photos courtesy Skinner

Skinner's Americana sale on March 4 in the auction house's Boston gallery proved a few basic truths, again: first, fresh sells; second, unique sells; and third, there'll always be specialized items that only a few understand.

The top lot was fresh and unique, to be sure. It carried the strongest estimate of all the lots (\$250,000/350,000) and inspired the most presale headlines in the general press. An oil on canvas study for Constantino Brumidi's *The Apotheosis of Washington*—the fresco on the ceiling of the rotunda of the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C.—the painting sold to the Smithsonian's American Art Museum for \$539,500 (including buyer's premium). According to the *Washington Post*, the funds came from the American Art Forum, the museum's private support group, made up of a group of art collectors from around the country. Stephen Fletcher, the Americana department's director at Skinner, said an underbidder in the room was from another institution.

The Italian-born Brumidi (1805-1880) completed his fresco of a deified George Washington sitting on high in 1865. After Brumidi's death, the study, the final one of several, went to his son, Laurence Stauros Brumidi (1861-1920). According to Joseph Grano, chair of the Constantino Brumidi Society, Laurence was "a disappointed artist who wanted to continue his father's work, but Congress wouldn't let him." He eventually ended up at St. Elizabeths, a psychiatric hospital in Washington, D.C., where he died.

Barbara Wolanin, whose *Constantino Brumidi: Artist of the Capitol* was published in 1998, wrote that in 1919, a year before Laurence's death, two crates he had placed in storage were discovered at the National Savings & Trust Company. The crates, according to Wolanin, contained 27 oil paintings. All were auctioned in Washington, D.C., by C.G. Sloan & Co. in 1925. Chris Barber, Skinner's Americana department's deputy director, said the consignors of the study are descendants of the person who bought it at Sloan's for \$300. We were unable to confirm that price. In any case, the \$539,500 is a new artist's record for Brumidi.

A circa 1725 portrait of Elizabeth "Betje" Van Dyck Vosburg by the Gansevoort Limner, thought by many to be Pieter Vanderlyn, carried a strong \$200,000/300,000 estimate. The earliest folk art portrait the auction house has ever offered, it had never been lined, was in its original frame, and was accompanied by the family Bible that documented nine generations of the sitter's family. But it was not fresh and paid the price. That is, no one cared to pay the price of its reserve. It was bought in at \$140,000.

"That was a great picture in my opinion, but it was sold recently," said Fletcher, i.e., during Christie's Americana sale in January 2004 for \$175,500. Another possible stopper was that Betje was not considered a beauty by many previewers. Fletcher said he had heard the same opinion expressed. He harked back to Skinner's Americana sale on November 5, 2011, when the 1786 portrait of beautiful Abigail Rose of North Branford, Connecticut, at age 14, brought \$1.27 million, a new auction record for a folk art portrait.

Granted, Fletcher said, the sex appeal of the subject is not the best rationale for valuing a portrait in the marketplace. "But I've often said that [somebody looking to buy] a naïve portrait, or any portrait for that matter, is like somebody going into a singles bar and looking for the handsomest or the prettiest. It's crazy."

Several other lots suffered as a result of having been brought back into the market too soon. They came from the estate of collector Gregory Rubin Reynolds (1937-2011) of Peacham, Vermont. Said Fletcher, "I commented to the people at the hospital [the

Northeastern Vermont Regional Hospital, beneficiary of the sale] that Gregory had bought a lot of that material quite recently. As a result, many people in the trade, people I respect, told me, 'Oh, those! Oh, that!' The familiarity of things can make a difference, like that quirky pair of portraits. Maybe they were like relatives coming to visit too often. Sometimes it's foolishness, but that's the way it is."

Fletcher was referring to a pair of 19th-century American school portraits of Henry and Anna (Bellinger) Ehle of Chittenango Village, New York, that actually didn't do badly, selling to a phone bidder for \$27,255 (est. \$15,000/25,000).

A portrait from the Reynolds estate that did take a jumbo-size hit was a circa 1840 American school example with the given title of *Folk Portrait of a Boy Holding a Book and His Sister Holding a Cat*. Perfectly charming and in good, untouched condition, the unframed oil on canvas was the cover lot of the

182-lot catalog that Skinner produced exclusively for the Reynolds portion of the sale. But the painting had been at auction in March 2010 at Prozzo Auction Gallery in Rutland, Vermont, where it brought \$101,200. (See *M.A.D.*, May 2010, p. 11-A.) Opening from the desk with a bid of \$10,000, Fletcher threatened to pass it when his audience sat mute. Only then did a lone ranger in the room take it for that price, paying just \$11,850. What a fall to earth!

Reynolds himself did not buy the portrait at Prozzo's. The buyer of record was dealer Joseph Martin of Brownning, Vermont. Said Fletcher, "I think Gregory was a determined bidder, and I think he had people bidding for him at sales. I think he was just like a charming pit bull—he wouldn't give up. So when someone pushes that way...and well, Gregory's not bidding on those things anymore, is he?"

It's a remark that brings to mind another basic truth. Watch out when a player leaves the market.

On the bright side, the estate as a whole realized about \$540,000 hammer by Fletcher's calculations, and many bidders appreciated the great eye that Reynolds had for painted furniture and form. A diminutive cupboard in olive green over earlier red paint from the last half of the 18th century sold to a woman in the room for \$23,700 (est. \$6000/8000). A circa 1825 birch bureau in the most gorgeous blue paint—the color of the sky on a perfect summer day, cerulean-brought \$7110 from a phone bidder. A white-painted arched, louvered wood shutter fetched \$7703 from the same phone bidder, underbid by dealer Stephen Score. (The \$800/1200 estimate on each of these last two pieces was obviously ignored.)

A stoneware face jug that came fresh from a great-granddaughter of pioneer Americana collector Henry Wood Erving (1851-1941) perplexed some previewers, repulsed others, and enthralled an informed few. Erving was a Hartford-based banker and a founding member of the august and secretive collectors' group the Walpole Society. Among other things, he coined the term "Hadley chest."

"I've hauled a few things out of the attic," Fletcher quoted the Erving descendant as saying when she invited him to her house in Marshfield, Massachusetts. While looking at those items, Fletcher spied the jug as something special inside a glass-fronted bookcase. Bussed and a grotesque features, including applied white kaolin eyes that bulged and a mostly toothless mouth that gapes open, it was small enough (4½" tall) for Fletcher to hold in the palm of his hand. The woman pronounced it "ugly" and was happy enough to let it go, Fletcher said.

When he got it back to Skinner, his department assistant, Karen Langberg, found a note inside: "Monkey Jug-made at Bath S.C. 1862 by negro slaves/ Aiken S.C." Erving's inventory number "468" was on the bottom. Authors of an article published by the Chipstone Foundation in the 2006 edition of *Ceramics in America* explained the term Erving used. Mark M. Newell with Peter Lenzo wrote in "Making Faces: Archaeological Evidence of African-American Face Jug Production" that some face jugs larger than this one were used "as water vessels called 'monkey' jugs—after monkeyed, a southern term for the dehydrating effect of the summer heat." (That definition is footnoted as attributed to J.M. Vlach in his 1990 book *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts*.)

That may be so, but the on-line Urban Dictionary ([www.urbandictionary.com](http://www.urbandictionary.com)) mentions a different meaning for the term "monkeybanded" relating to thirst and drinking ("intoxicated, inebriated") and a derogatory one for "monkey."

When the jug's picture was published in the sale's main catalog, the calls started coming in, many from the South. Estimated at \$800/1200, which struck some aficionados as a value you'd put on a fake face jug, it sold for a very real \$56,288 to a phone bidder described by Fletcher as "a scholarly collector."

The main catalog also included textiles and other items from the estate of antiques dealer Susan Parrish (d. 2011). They came from two locations, said Fletcher. "Many were in storage in upstate New York [Stanfordville]. Others were in her apartment way down in the Village in New York City—a very cool place where she had lived for years and years."

One quilt from the Parrish estate stood out. It was a suffragette fundraising quilt, cataloged as probably New York state from the late 19th century. The star-bordered red, white, and blue design was embroidered with numerous names, including Susan B. Anthony's. The composition wasn't spectacular—the names were in unevenly spaced, diagonal columns—but that was part of its message in Fletcher's opinion. "I thought placing the names on the diagonal was quirky, but ultimately I thought it was very visually compelling," he said. "The quilt was almost like the representation of a rally. The quilt was almost shouting out to you." It sold in the room for \$16,590 (est. \$3000/5000).

Bidders also liked one of Parrish's hooked rugs. It had a distinctly Modernist look befitting its date of 1923, incorporated in the design featuring a large central star surrounded by sun and moon faces, cloverleaves, and geometric elements. The winning bidder paid \$11,258 (est. \$2000/3000) for the rug.

Some of the furniture, it was heartening to see, did fairly well. There was definitely improvement in that quarter of the marketplace. The cover lot of the main catalog—a 1740-60 Queen Anne fair-carved walnut and maple scroll-top chest, described as possibly Salem, Massachusetts—sold to a phone bidder for \$53,325 (est. \$10,000/15,000). It was freshly deaccessioned by Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts, and had its original brasses and old refinish. Bidders also went for a circa 1815 carved mahogany and bird's-eye maple veneer sofa attributed to John and Thomas Seymour of Boston; it fetched \$17,775. Another good seller was a circa 1800 Federal inlaid mahogany breakfast table, described as probably Charleston, which made \$20,145.

All told, the Sunday sale grossed approximately \$2,167,559 with an impressive sell-through rate of 92%. Only 61 of the 786 lots were unsold at day's end. But what a long day it was. For one thing, the auction started 30 minutes late because of a computer error. After the close of the final preview, it was discovered that the computer had eaten the phone bids for the phone bid takers. They all had to be re-created.

Maybe next time taking phone bids during the final preview won't be permitted, Fletcher mused. Phone bids in general, he felt, slowed the pace of the sale. He wants to find a way to speed the phone bidders along. "I do not want to give anyone the impression that the phone bidders have an advantage over those valued souls who come to the auction and sit there," he said.

Time does move more slowly for the live audience, all phone bidders need to keep in mind. As Fletcher observed, all too often someone at the other end of a phone bid taker's line, being asked to raise his or her bid, is calling into the next room, "What do you think, honey? Should we go one more?"

The next Americana sale at Skinner is scheduled for August 11 and 12 at its corporate headquarters in Marlborough, Massachusetts. The auction house will feature the collection of William L. Hubbard (1919-2011), antiquarian and auctioneer from Sunderland, Massachusetts, and a collection of Shaker furniture from Tyringham, Massachusetts. For more information, phone (617) 350-5400 or see the Web site ([www.skinnerinc.com](http://www.skinnerinc.com)).



**A diminutive (71½" x 22½" x 18½") New England cupboard in olive green paint from the last half of the 18th century sold for \$23,700. Reynolds estate.**



**A mid-19th-century stoneware face jug, attributed to Bath in Aiken County, South Carolina, once owned by early antiquarian Henry Wood Erving, sold to a collector for \$56,288.**



**A circa 1815 American school portrait of Lucy Bentley Wheeler of Stonington, Connecticut, cataloged as possibly by J. Brown (1772-1872), sold on the phone for \$22,515 (est. \$15,000/25,000). From the Reynolds estate, it had previously sold at a Sotheby's auction on February 1, 1986, for \$71,500.**



**A landscape, *Celebration around the Flagpole at Winnepesaukee Lake, Mercedith, New Hampshire* by Edmund C. Coates (1816-1871), went to a room bidder at \$20,145 (est. \$4000/6000). Signed and dated 1869, the 24" x 36" oil on canvas was in a period molded giltwood frame. Reynolds estate.**



**A happy bidder left with this single item, a mid-19th-century quarter-plate ambrotype of a street scene in Littleton, New Hampshire, including Thayers Inn. Estimated at \$400/600, the photo opened at \$1500. The buyer paid \$5333. Reynolds estate.**



**A circa 1800 Federal inlaid mahogany breakfast table, cataloged as "probably" Charleston, South Carolina, sold for \$20,145 (est. \$3000/5000). For a similar example, see *The Furniture of Charleston, 1680-1820* by Bradford Rauschenberg and John Bivins Jr., pp. 699-700.**

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