

Hermann Estate Sale

by Jeanne Schinto

"I saw the estate before Bonhams and Butterfields did," said John Sweeney, executive director of the Larz Anderson Auto Museum in Brookline, Massachusetts, where the auction house sold that estate on May 2. It belonged to Françoise Hermann (1919-2003) of Falmouth Heights, Massachusetts, on Cape Cod. Because the estate planned to donate eight classic cars to the museum, Sweeney was at the Hermann house to "facilitate the discussions." That's when he first glimpsed, as he put it, "all the rest."

Up in the attic there were "paintings, significant paintings, stacked on edge," he said. "There were Oriental carpets, rolled. And the Louis Vuitton travel cases were in the attic too. Other things were all over the house"—silver, bronzes, glass. In a bank vault, he was told, there was jewelry.

When Sweeney heard that the executor was preparing to auction the estate on the Cape, he gave them some advice. "I said, 'Gee, you really need some international players involved here. Let me help you set this up.'"

Since the auto museum had already been scheduled to host the third annual Bonhams & Butterfields classic car auction in Brookline, Sweeney called Malcolm Barber, CEO of Bonhams & Butterfields. The result of the referral, for Barber and his staff, was two sales of Hermann materials with a combined gross of over \$7.8 million (including the buyers' premiums). That is about \$1,515,000 for the 673 lots of house contents offered in Brookline and a bit over \$6,285,000 for the 135 lots of jewelry sold on April 27 at the auction house's gallery in Los Angeles (and simulcast in San Francisco).

Add to that the \$2,475,000 gross for the cars sold in Brookline on May 1; then add another \$1,120,000 from the Bonhams & Butterfields sale of modern, contemporary, and Latin American art in Los Angeles (also simulcast in San Francisco) on the same day as its sale of the Hermann estate. The grand total of just over \$11,395,000 from four sales in six days makes one think that by now Sotheby's and Christie's must be taking at least a little notice of the third-largest auction house in the world, just two years old on July 31.

After eBay bought Butterfields in 1999, the two California-based entities found they couldn't successfully mate a traditional auction house with the technology and attitude of on-line sales. Within three years, Bonhams bought eBay's castoff for an undisclosed sum. The alliance between Butterfields and the British firm—an antique itself, established in 1793, making it eBay's senior by 202 years—seems to be a much more congenial one.

Barber likes people to know that Bonhams & Butterfields sells everything, from antiquities to collectibles. But his firm's reputation as the world's largest auctioneer of specialty and collector cars helped to motor this sale beyond the initial consignment agreement.

At the Saturday session of cars Barber told the women in his audience, "The bigger the boy, the bigger toy," as the prices that their husbands were paying for roadsters and runabouts climbed. He assured the wives that they would have their own fun with the Hermann items on Sunday. "And they did, indeed," Barber said.

"The car people were definitely buying [estate items] on Sunday," John Sweeney said, "because I know most of them." (They, however, asked us for anonymity.) "And if you're buying a two-hundred-thousand-dollar car, which is not a huge amount for an antique car, when you pay twenty thousand for a painting, it doesn't seem like a whole lot of money."

Like the auction house, the estate being sold was itself a hybrid, containing both European and American elements with dates spanning the 17th through 20th centuries. Françoise Hermann inherited much of it from her father, mother, and stepmother. She collected the rest. Whose taste was whose? At the preview, American paintings expert Aaron Bastian said he and his colleagues could only guess. Even the paintings had come with no bills of sale, no documentation. "They are what they are," Bastian said.

That turned out to be quite enough. The top-dollar lot of the house contents was an American painting, *The Dance of the Troubadours* by Edwin Austin Abbey. Going to a phone bidder at \$211,875, it became an auction record for the artist.

The sale also featured what was probably the largest collection of works by John Whorf ever to be offered outside a gallery setting. Marveling as he counted 23, a dealer at the preview doubted he would buy any, saying, "I don't want to spend twenty thousand. I already spent twenty thousand at Sotheby's last week." In fact, he predicted correctly the approximate price point for the best of them. *Siesta* (Self-Portrait), a signed 15 inches x 22 inches watercolor on paper, was the first Whorf to go up, and it made \$20,562.50. The top Whorf lot of the day, *The Ballerinas*, a signed 30 inches x 40 inches pencil and watercolor on paper, broke the Whorf auction record when it went to a phone bidder at \$30,550. The total for all 23 Whorfs was over \$289,000.

Although he was not a contender for *The Ballerinas*, Whorf's grandson and namesake, who lives in Weston, Massachusetts, was the winner of half a dozen of the artist's works. We got the impression from his *Statue of Liberty* style of bidding that he intended to buy what he wanted at almost any price. (A dealer said, "The grandson likes to make a show of paying a lot so that the dealers will come to him with their material.")

We asked this John Whorf how were his choices made. "I have a pretty good collection. I have a fair amount of them," he said, declining to give an exact number, which in the collector world often means too many to count. "So some of these subjects I'm more partial to than others. That little beach scene of Provincetown was phenomenal." (He bought the watercolor of his hometown, *A Sunny Day on the Province Town [sic] Shore*, for \$12,925.) "And then there are the painterly qualities of the pictures. I thought those pheasants were beautifully done, so I bought that one." (*Pheasants in Flight* brought \$9400.) "The city scene is unique and chronicles Old Boston, so I thought that was something of value." (*Winter Day, Quincy Market, Faneuil Hall, Boston* sold for \$22,325.) "The loggers is the same." (*Men Moving Logs Downstream* sold for \$11,750.) "I think that chronicles a time, an era gone by. I think being able to capture things like that is part of what makes art."

There were about 100 other American paintings in the sale. There were multiple works by Anthony Thieme and John Joseph Enneking as well as the contemporary Cape Cod artist Karen Rinaldo (b. 1952). And there were about 60 European paintings, mostly 19th-century works of ecclesiastical themes, pastorals, landscapes, genre scenes, and portraits.

Local contenders for what amounted to a painting sale surmised that the Continental material was collected by the Hermanns while they were living in Europe. Françoise's father, Dr. Leon Hermann, was born in France in 1881. He married Fernande Font in 1917. The family lived a high-style life in Paris, Malaga, Lugano, and elsewhere before settling in New York City in 1939. They became U.S. citizens in 1942.

The list of picture dealers who attended the sale is long. If Malcolm Barber had thrown a pebble from the podium in any direction, his chances of hitting one would have been very good. Sighted were Roy Mennell of the Bradford Trust in Harwich Port, Massachusetts; Mark Brock of Brock & Company Fine Art, Carlisle, Massachusetts; George Comenos of Comenos Fine Arts, Boston; Ernest Kramer of Ernest S. Kramer Fine Arts & Prints, Wellesley, Massachusetts; several dealers from Boston; and several more from New Hampshire.

Not that all of them stayed for long. Grogan's sale in Dedham, Massachusetts, started at noon, two hours later than this one. "Everybody kind of drifted from one sale to the other when they realized that the prices at Bonhams were going to go so high," one of the dealers said. Those who did stay had obviously decided to wrangle with the deep-pocketed collectors in the audience and aggressive bidders on the phones—for the pictures, that is.

The furniture section of the sale featured mostly reproductions of Renaissance styles from the late 19th or early 20th century. They were large, dark, heavy, ponderous. If the paintings were smiles on a summer evening, the furniture was a series of furrowed brows. One general antiques dealer from New Hampshire didn't mince words. "Here's this woman who had all this wonderful artwork, light and airy, and her furniture was in such contrast—really terrible."

Maybe it just wasn't to the taste of New Englanders. After the sale, furniture and decorative arts expert Jon King said that much of it was going to Florida and Los Angeles.

The quality of those items was one reason why local auctioneers who attended the Bonhams & Butterfields inaugural sale of antiques in Brookline in May 2003 (the estate of Edward C. Jameson Jr.) didn't show up en masse at this one. Another reason, perhaps, was that their curiosity already had been sated. They had seen how the out-of-townners operated on what they naturally thought of as their turf. "Bonhams and Butterfields is sticking their nose into New England now," as one of them had put it. Another wag said, "If they buy Skinner, they can be Bonhams, Butterfields & Skinner—Skin 'em, for short."

Get used to it, guys. Barber said his company planned to have its fourth annual car auction in Brookline in May 2005. As of this writing, he was still searching for the next estate to sell alongside it.

Where else besides Brookline would the company hold U.S. sales outside of California? "Very soon we'll give you that announcement," Barber said. After being subjected to pleading, he shared at least this: "I said last year that our aim is to move East. We have one sale in Hershey [Pennsylvania] that is car related, as you know. We have this one. We have just announced the Kansas sale [of the Jasper Wiglesworth car collection, scheduled for September in Shawnee Mission, a suburb of Kansas City]. As far as the East Coast goes, it is our ambition to have a series of sales within the next year. Paintings, jewelry, silver, twentieth-century things. And that [schedule] will be announced soon."

For more information, see the Web sites (www.mot.org) or (www.butterfields.com).