

# November 20th, 2008

## Institutions Buy Big at African-American Art Sale

by Jeanne Schinto

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Swann Auction Galleries, New York City

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Photos courtesy Swann

"We've had institutional participation in our previous three auctions, but this was unprecedented," Swann African-American fine art specialist Nigel Freeman said after his department's fourth semiannual sale, held in New York City on October 7. Of the top 11 lots, all but four went to institutions. They did not go cheaply.

Three of those institutional purchases—works by Norman Lewis, Charles White, and Alvin D. Loving Jr.—were in the six figures. The price for the Lewis broke the artist's record, according to Swann. The auction house's research shows that one other price, for a lot of eight prints by Jacob Lawrence, broke the record previously achieved by that particular series of images. Institutions also spent money on works by Hughie Lee-Smith, Charles Alston, and Lois Mailou Jones.

"These were exceptional pieces from private collections, and they couldn't be passed up," said Freeman. "It was a relief, frankly, to find in this economy so many bidders at the top end. We're thrilled. These were great examples, characteristic of the artists' best, and I think that's what is most desirable in this market."

The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA) was the buyer of the record-breaking Lewis, paying \$312,000 (including buyer's premium). Freeman said he was especially pleased by the success of that lot. "African-American Abstract Expressionist artists needed that record in order to be brought into the [critical] discussion. Finally, we got a great, important piece by Lewis, and the price really reflects that."

Lewis's untitled oil on canvas dates from 1960-64, his mid-career period. The palette is smoky lavenders, magentas, blacks, and touches of oranges and blues, while the emotional values are much darker than the color choices by themselves would suggest. The lack of a title allows one to see content; its black verticals, for example, could suggest figures. Given Lewis's political activism of the time, particularly with the Spiral Group, they could be meant to evoke civil rights protest marchers. For more information about the Spiral Group, see the National Gallery of Art Web site ([www.nga.gov/education/classroom/bearden/lead1.shtm](http://www.nga.gov/education/classroom/bearden/lead1.shtm)).

The size of the Lewis painting, approximately 5' x 4', means that it needs a large wall, which the museum undoubtedly will give it. Yet for many years it hung in an apartment in Harlem, the home of Judge Edward R. Dudley (1911-2005) and his wife, Rae O. Dudley (1908-2007), whose descendants consigned a total of seven works to the sale.

Judge Dudley, who began his career as a teacher in a one-room schoolhouse in Virginia and ended it on the bench of the State Supreme Court of New York, made history as the first African-American to be appointed a U.S. ambassador, when he was posted to Liberia by Harry S. Truman in 1948. Later in life Dudley became the first African-American to run for statewide office in New York, when he was nominated for attorney general. (Republican incumbent Louis J. Lefkowitz won that 1962 race.)

Mrs. Dudley was a painter and arts supporter, so perhaps she, rather than her husband, was chiefly responsible for what was chosen for their walls. According to Swann, she personally knew the artists represented in the collection and championed their careers.

Another large Lewis from the Dudley collection, estimated at \$40,000/60,000, was passed. Painted in murky colors that matched its gloomy mood, it was less emotionally charged than the other. It also had a ¼" puncture in its lower left and an uninspired title, *Sunset #2*.

From another New York City collection came Hughie Lee-Smith's *The Juggler #1*. The MFA paid \$90,000 for it. Dating from circa 1964, the brooding dreamscape in oil on canvas shows three figures on a surreally lit concrete pier. Forty years ago the painting was exhibited at the museum in a show titled *Reality Expanded*. In 1997 it was part of the Lee-Smith retrospective at the Ogunquit Museum of American Art, Ogunquit, Maine.

The Sheldon Museum of Art, on the campus of the University of Nebraska in Lincoln, was the only other institutional buyer that Swann was given permission to identify. The Sheldon's biggest purchase was Charles White's pen, ink, and pencil cross-hatched depiction of the celebrated victims of the Jim Crow era trials, towered over by a larger-than-life Frederick Douglass. The price was \$204,000. The museum also paid \$156,000 for Alvin D. Loving Jr.'s abstract acrylic on shaped canvas. The design resembles a large, colorful hexagonal quilt section with a sophisticated color play.

Because so many important African-American artists remain underappreciated, the themes of discovery and record-breaking prices will surely dominate reports about these sales for years to come. By the same token, values for works by the relatively few well-established artists in this category continue to climb.

At Swann's African-American art sale on February 19, James Vanderzee's series "Eighteen Photographs," a portfolio of early 20th-century studio portraits of families, Harlem Renaissance figures, and others, sold for \$26,400. At this sale another copy of the same iconic set sold for \$40,800. Yes, it is a new record, according to Swann.

Still the world's only auction house with a department devoted to African-American art, Swann offered 103 lots at this sale of which 66 sold for a gross of \$1,348,980, close to the top of the sale's aggregate estimate of \$1,577,300. That left 36% unsold—a sign of the times.

In addition to works uncharacteristic of an artist's best, such as *Sunset #2* by Norman Lewis, some overexposed works were rejected. They included *Machine Shop* by Ellis Wilson (1899-1977), a circa 1942 oil on panel showing two African-American drill-press operators—representative of laborers of color who contributed to the Second World War effort at home. On the wall of the shop is a poster, a double portrait of two workers, one Black, one White, aligned.

On February 23, 2002, the Wilson painting was sold by Neal Auction Company in New Orleans for \$29,250. It subsequently spent time with Robert Henry Adams Fine Art, Inc. of Chicago, then in a private collection in that city. On May 16, 2004, it was offered by Wright auctions of Chicago. Estimated at \$35,000/40,000, it was passed. From 2005 to 2008, the painting was on loan in the U.S. Senate office of Barack Obama, now U.S. President elect. When it was consigned to Swann, a photograph of the senator with the painting on the wall behind him was published in the catalog. Perhaps partly because of that association, even greater expectations were heaped upon it. Swann's estimate was \$40,000/60,000. In any case, bidders once again let it go.

The national electorate did not, however, pass up its chance to vote the first African-American presidential nominee into office. As our new First Family prepares to enter the White House in late January, the political ground has shifted, and a cultural shift has taken place as well. Whether the transformation will measurably affect this category of art remains to be seen.

The department's next sale is scheduled for February 17, 2009. For more information, contact Nigel Freeman at (212) 254-4710, ext. 33, or see the Web site ([www.swanngalleries.com](http://www.swanngalleries.com)).

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**Frederick Douglass Lives Again (The Ghost of Frederick Douglass)**, an early (1918-1979), sold to the Sheldon Museum of Art, on the campus of the University of Nebraska in Lincoln, for \$204,000 (est. \$100,000/150,000). What Swann described in its catalog as "a close variant" of the 20" x 30" pen and ink over pencil on illustration board is in another public collection, at the New Jersey State Museum in Trenton.



A set of 18 photographs (one shown) by James Vanderzee (1886-1983) sold to a collector for \$40,800 (est. \$15,000/20,000). The portfolio of 18 mounted silver and sepia-toned silver print photographs from 1905-38, each approximately 7¼" x 9½", was printed by Richard Benson of New York and published in 1974 by Graphics International Ltd., Washington, D.C., in an edition of 75 numbered copies.



Four 8" x 5 ½" woodcuts on Japan paper by Aaron Douglas (1899-1972), **Flight, Bravado, Defiance, and Surrender**, sold for \$22,800 (est. \$10,000/15,000), a record price for these images. These illustrations were for the play *The Emperor Jones* by Eugene O'Neill from the series commissioned by **Theatre Arts Monthly** in 1926. A total of approximately 100 impressions in various editions were printed over the years. Each of the four in the sale was signed, titled, and dated 1972. The buyer was a collector.