

# Martin Johnson Heade

## Redux

by Jeanne Schinto

The Martin Johnson Heade landscape auctioned by John McInnis in December 2003 in Amesbury, Massachusetts, has grown.

"Did you see how the painting has gotten bigger?" Heade expert Theodore E. "Ted" Stebbins Jr. asked us after he learned of our visits to the studio where it is being conserved. "More for your money."

And a lot of money it was, \$1,006,250, the most ever paid for a Heade at public auction. The buyer was Michael Altman, a New York City dealer acting as an agent for a private collector.

The oil on canvas, originally 12 inches x 26 inches, is slightly larger now because of a decision made jointly by Stebbins, a representative of the collector, and the painting's conservator, Jim Wright. Wright added extra canvas to the painting's edges and stretched the whole of it. The original 19th-century frame hid Heade's vermilion signature and some foliage at the bottom, as well as some sky on top.

The painting, whose frame will be resized to fit the new dimensions, was itself hidden for many years. The story of its discovery in the attic of a house in a Boston suburb was featured in two episodes of the Keno brothers' public television program *Find!* and in the national and international press.

Stebbins was featured on both episodes of *Find!*. So was Wright. Before the sale, Wright, who has worked on some 30 other Heades, was widely considered most likely to be chosen to work on this one, but he wasn't at liberty to confirm the guess. Afterwards, with the collector's permission, he invited us to his studio in Somerville, Massachusetts, to see the conservation in progress.

There is always some suspense during a conservation process, some of it more anxiety producing than merely anticipatory. "[Bidders] didn't realize it, I guess, but they were all taking a big chance," said Stebbins, who was speaking to us by phone from his office at Harvard University's Fogg Art Museum. "Pictures don't always clean up well. [The bidders] all just assumed it would. This one is cleaning up very, very well. It really is in wonderful condition and is turning out to be very, very beautiful. And so this one has been very lucky."

In less auspicious situations, there may be a rude awakening—or two. "The painting may not be as good as it was thought to be," Stebbins said. "Also, when there's so much dirt on a painting, it might be covering up damage of various kinds. Paintings can have all sorts of problems that you don't see."

The dirt certainly obscured the subject matter of this Heade, so much so that it was impossible for bidders to determine whether it was a river scene in Florida, a salt marsh in Massachusetts, or perhaps a South American riparian view. Regional collectors are a reality of the market, and many dealers make a living catering to them. There was speculation all along about what locale this Heade depicted. But only Stebbins could speak about it definitively, and he said repeatedly that he would reserve judgment until after the dirt was removed.

Most of the grime is now gone. A definitive answer about locale, however, won't be forthcoming soon, if ever. The fact is, Heade usually did not paint literal places. "That's what distinguishes him from the Hudson River school," said Stebbins. "[Frederick] Church and David Johnson and [John] Kensett painted absolutely `specific,' so if you go stand there you see which rock is which. Often they're painting a well-known mountain or harbor or other landmark. Heade is a more romantic, generalized painter, and you can rarely stand someplace and say, `Oh, this is his vantage.'"

We asked, then, something that probably should have been asked months ago. Is the question of place irrelevant for this painting, considering the nature of the artist? "It's irrelevant, yes," said Stebbins. "Everything's on the quality of the painting."

The date of the composition was another mystery, now narrowed to a decade of Heade's life (1819-1904). "I'm inclined to date it in the 1860's," said Stebbins. The brush strokes, visible after the grime was removed, enabled him to make the approximation.

The time of day depicted by Heade was the final uncertainty. Was it sunrise or sunset? In a painting whose location is specific, it's easy to figure out. In the case of the Heade, the cigar-shaped afternoon cloud formations were the chief clue. "It's now called A River at Twilight," said Stebbins, adding, "One of my jobs was finding a title for it."

The first time we visited Wright in his studio, only a little spot in a corner of the painting had been test-cleaned. He proclaimed it remarkable that the painting had never been cleaned before. He said he has seen many Heades that have been overcleaned. The painting was mainly blackish green and muddy brown.

He put the painting under the binocular microscope for us. "A little micro-tour," he said. A small area of lifting paint looked like a mountain range made of cracked eggshell. Long ago, a blizzard of black grit had covered everything. It sparkled like mica. We could see the little circular brush strokes underneath. One could imagine the movement of Heade's hand.

The stuff that looked like confectioner's sugar would be easily removed, said Wright. "A lot of it isn't actually damage to the paint but things stuck to the paint." The same went for bits of gesso from the frame.

On our second visit, the painting had been transformed. It was a luminous yellow and olive green with coral clouds dramatically lit from below. The people in the boat on Heade's river were much more distinct too. One wore a red shirt, the other yellow—a dot of corresponding color for each.

Wright had saved a little area to clean so we could witness the action. He used handmade cotton swabs dipped in an aqueous solution. Most of the dirt was coal soot that turned the cotton black. He avoided the fragile area of the lifting paint. "I'll run an adhesive up underneath all that paint, very gently heat the paint and relax it, then push it back down into place," he said. "I'll use a needle with a brush and a wicking sort of action. I'll also work from below."

He will not line the canvas. "Many people would attach a new canvas to the back, to secure the lifting paint, and that can be done well, but often it takes a little bit of life out of the painting. It changes the texture in subtle ways, so I tend not to [line] if I can avoid it."

Wright said he would thin the old varnish rather than remove it, then put a new varnish on top. The choice of varnish type, he said, would depend on what he and Stebbins decided the artist's intentions were. "The goal is to keep as close to Heade's original intentions as I can. But I'll also be respecting the painting's age and the fact that these materials do change a little bit over time." Is the ultimate goal to make it look as if it had been perfectly maintained throughout its life? "Yes, exactly," said Wright.

Stebbins told us he should have expected that one result of his appearances on *Find!* would be "several dozen inquiries by mail and e-mail from people who think they have Heades." Asked if they were all from people who had never heard of him until his television appearances, he said, "They may never have heard of Heade or me before."

Most of those pictures were not Heades—need it be said. Nor were they even close approximations. "They're either thunderstorms that look a little like Heade or flowers that look a little like Heade." Were they by any artists that we might know? "No. I try to be helpful, but there are some disappointed people out there now."

Stebbins may be the expert, but he has always declined to speak about Heade values. When asked to suggest someone who could address the Heade market and whether it has been affected by the record-breaking sale and all the publicity, he named another set of twins, Robert C. "Terry" Vose III and Abbot W. "Bill" Vose, co-presidents of Vose Galleries in Boston.

Established in 1841 and the oldest family-owned art gallery in the country, Vose has a long history of selling Heade works. Indeed, Bill Vose said, they have sold hundreds of his pictures, starting during Heade's lifetime. "We've had a long association with the artist. We were one of his primary agents. We have a letter from Heade to our great-grandfather from back in the 1860's saying, 'Dear Seth, Please don't sell my larger paintings,' which would be thirty by sixty inches, 'for under a hundred and fifty dollars.' In the 1930's, '40's, and '50's, [the values] were back down to what they were in the 1860's."

Vose obliged us with an overview of the market. In the 1860's, he said, the gallery sold a Heade scene of duck hunters in a Massachusetts marsh at sunrise for something over that Heade-prescribed \$150. They resold the same painting in the 1960's "in the seven- to ten-thousand-dollar bracket." They sold it again at the end of that decade for \$25,000 to a major collector on the West Coast. "And then it was sold again at auction in New York City in the early eighties. It was purchased by a conglomerate for way up in the six figures."

Since the record-breaking Heade sale last December, the market has been affected by the publicity, he said. "I can't put a percentage on it, but it certainly has increased values."

In terms of the hierarchical values of Heade subject matter, Vose said, "Hummingbirds would be the most popular and most valuable. Those that are fourteen by twenty inches, say, will bring a million dollars easily. Then I'd say his flowers, his orchids, painted late in life, when he was in Saint Augustine. They would go for maybe a third less than the hummingbirds. I'd say his [Massachusetts] marsh scenes would be next in order of desirability. After that, it's hard to say."

Vose did not have any Heades in stock on the April morning of our phone conversation. "They're gone—in museums and major collections. There are very few on the market anywhere."

Stebbins said that a couple of new Heades have been discovered through other more usual channels than misses from *Find!* watchers. "There was recently a little still life of orange blossoms at a California auction, and someone has bought a nice little Heade to McInnis." Only 6 inches x 12 inches, it is a thunderstorm scene reminiscent of *Approaching Thunder Storm*, owned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City. (It was auctioned at the McInnis sale on May 28 and 29. Look for the story in a future issue.) "But neither is on the order of the now-famous picture."

Leigh Keno, reached by phone in New York City, admitted that he and Leslie were, likewise, still searching for a find of any sort comparable to the Heade found in the attic. "That's going to be a tough act to follow, but we're going to keep looking. The great thing about this [process] is that you just never know. As you can see from the Heade, anything can happen."