

McInnis Sells Another Heade

by Jeanne Schinto

"I'd rather have that little drip of water than what I saw out there last night," auctioneer John McInnis said when rain started leaking through his tin ceiling on the first day of his May 28 and 29 sale.

About ten o'clock the previous evening a seven-alarm fire broke out across the street from McInnis's building at 76 Main Street in Amesbury, Massachusetts. At ten o'clock the following day, as auction-goers began to arrive, firefighters were still at work. So were demolition crews. The neighboring building was a total loss, leaving 11 people homeless and destroying several businesses.

"There were a hundred and fifty firemen right outside my door," McInnis told his audience. "I didn't get home until three in the morning. No one was injured, thank God." McInnis told *M.A.D.* he had been ready to run out the rear exit with the best things if his own building had caught fire. "It's been a real roller-coaster ride this week—the week of all weeks."

The auction was rightly billed as McInnis's most important one since December 7, 2003, when he made international headlines with the sale of a Martin Johnson Heade landscape for \$1,006,250. The now-famous attic discovery was featured on the PBS-TV show *Find!* by Leigh and Leslie Keno. Because of that publicity, McInnis received another Heade for consignment this time.

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The new Heade was the property of a 75-year-old New Hampshire woman, who asked for anonymity. She said her late husband bought

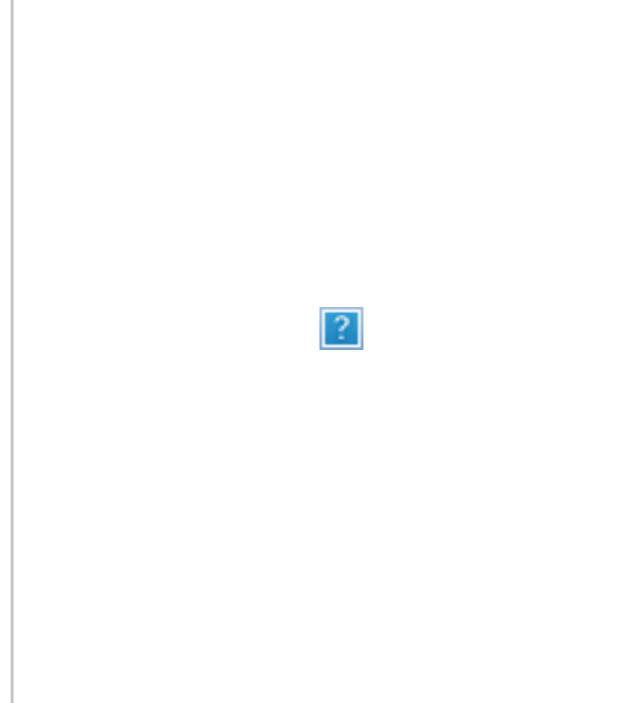
the painting in St. Augustine, Florida, at either a flea market or a yard sale in the 1970's for a few dollars. It hung for years in the couple's living room along with other pictures with nautical themes. "I repainted the frame," she said, "because I didn't want it to fall apart." She brought the painting to McInnis after her son and daughter-in-law, who live not ten miles from McInnis's home in Hampton Falls, New Hampshire, read about the success of the first Heade in *Unravel the Gavel*, a free auction news newspaper published in Belmont, New Hampshire.

The woman's son, a volunteer firefighter, got the fire news early. "A four-story brick building on Main Street in Amesbury was burning. Hmmm," he said. "The McInnis building is only two stories." He slept soundly. But when he and his mother arrived for the sale, there was thick ash on a bench on McInnis's side of the narrow street. Everywhere was that acrid after-fire smell.

Several months before the auction, Heade expert Theodore E. "Ted" Stebbins authenticated the painting. "It's one he did late in his life," he told us. "It's a kind of reminiscence of the famous thunderstorm painting in the [Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City]. So it's like a reverse sketch, although it's not a sketch. It's almost thirty years later, and he painted a little version of it." (The painting is just 6 inches x 12 inches.) "It's not something I've seen him do before." Although not a significant work, it was "not just a routine painting," either, Stebbins said, "because it adds to our knowledge of the artist, which is what you hope for when a painting is newly discovered."

The Heade painting was presented early on the sale's first day. A phone bidder opened at the high estimate of \$150,000. A dealer in the back of the room bid twice but not again, despite McInnis's repeated invitations, and it was over at \$190,000 on the hammer. McInnis said a "private collector and dealer" who is "probably going to keep it for himself" was the one who got the bill for \$218,500 (including buyer's premium).

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The Heade did not earn the top-dollar amount of the sale. One hundred lots after it was sold, a Tiffany & Company cased silver flatware service in the Olympian pattern made \$247,250 (est. \$90,000/120,000). "That's more than the Heade!" said McInnis on a break from the podium as he watched the bidding climb. The following day, he told us

that the buyer was a member of the trade, one of several phone bidders from New York, Florida, and elsewhere.

Prices otherwise were respectable but not remarkable. To us McInnis acknowledged "some soft spots." While silver and many specialized items sold very well, the paintings were mixed, and furniture struggled. Passed furniture included an English pine wardrobe; two separately offered high-post beds; a Queen Anne mahogany wing chair; an assembled set of 11 New Jersey maple ladder-back side chairs; a pair of William and Mary side chairs; and a set of four New England thumb-backs.

Decorative pieces across the categories got the good prices they have been inspiring for years now. One dealer in the audience said she deplored the trend: "They're buying the look of a thing." She missed the customer who appreciated an object for its intrinsic value as an antique.

One of those favored lots seemed to be both authentic and beautiful. A dovetailed domed box, 8 inches x 18 1/4 inches, it was found in an attic in West Newbury, Massachusetts, according to McInnis. The outside was painted greenish gray with an arrow-and-dot pattern in dark green and salmon, punctuated by stenciled birds. The interior was papered and painted to match. On the inside lid were watercolored folk art images of houses, figures, animals, and trees. The box sold to an absentee bidder for \$2300 (est. \$1000/1500).

There were eight paintings by folk artist Maud Lewis (1903-1970) of Nova Scotia, Canada in the sale. Most of them far exceeded their estimates. One determined bidder bought five, including a 26 inches x 37 1/2 inches (overall) oil on board, *The Blacksmith*, a portrait of the artist's grandfather, for \$9200 (est. \$1500/2500). Together the eight Lewises brought \$51,117.50.

McInnis sales usually play to packed houses—not this one. Weather rarely stops determined buyers, especially members of the trade. Besides, the rain went away on the second day. Maybe there were too many other sales or shows scheduled for the Memorial Day weekend. More likely, unseen bidders were taking advantage of alternative ways to participate.

For the first time, McInnis availed himself of eBay Live Auctions, an Internet company. "It's not something we're going to do at every auction," he said. "We did it this time because of the quantity [over 1200 lots] and quality of the items." He credited the service with bringing in "an entirely new group of purchasers."

Martin Willis, McInnis's Internet consultant, and Becky Evans, business development manager for eBay Live Auctions, worked their laptops at the back of the salesroom. At the end of the sale Willis told us they'd had 720 registered bidders who bought about 22% of each day's lots. These bidders were not heavies. Few got carried away by the bidding process, although any auctioneer would have to love them for all the underbidding they did.

Beyond certain niche collectibles (early harpoons, a Quaker marriage certificate), what they liked best was a bargain. They won many of the unsigned paintings and stock furniture at prices below estimates. One exception to the rule was the \$1380 (est. \$600/900) that an Internet bidder paid for a 20th-century scene of the South by J.E. Baker of an African-American family fishing by a creek.

A second reason why McInnis's salesroom wasn't crowded may have been his seven-day preview, another first for him, which enabled more people to come and leave absentee bids or plan to bid by phone. The process was a "long and tedious" one for his staff, he admitted.

McInnis has TV monitors in his salesroom, but runners usually hoist the pieces anyway. This time they didn't. The auctioneer had hoped that the auction would go more quickly as a result. Due to all the non-live bidding, however, the pace remained slow, no greater than 70 lots an hour. That was true especially on the first dark, rainy day that felt like a perpetual midnight or an all-nighter in a college dorm. People wandered around, eating, drinking coffee, trying to stay awake. They chatted with each other or on their cell phones. The phone that belongs to dealer Luanne Meader, a strong buyer at all McInnis sales, repeatedly played Offenbach's Can-Can to announce her incoming calls.

At the start of the second day McInnis apologized to his audience for "the slow spots." Never mind that they were an almost entirely different group from the first day—many fewer dealers, many more retail buyers out on the weekend's sunny Saturday.

In the end, were results better, worse, or the same because of the Internet participation? It's impossible to say. One general comment we can make confidently is this. For live bidders there seems to be a noticeable chilling effect when Internet bidding is part of the auction process because it puts the live audience at an even farther remove from the action than absentee and phone bidding does. For his part, McInnis said he had heard a few complaints, "but in the auction business, you work for the seller." It's not the first time he has expressed the sentiment.

Matt King, a dealer from Marshfield, Massachusetts, sat through the Native American jewelry section of the sale, which did very well but clearly did not interest him. King offered a different, more positive attitude about the wait. "Maybe I can learn something," he said.

For more information, call (978) 388-0400 or see the Web site (www.johnmcinnisauctioneers.com).