

Miami Heat: Florida Paintings Set Records at Skinner

by Jeanne Schinto

It didn't turn out the way we thought it would. Judging from the estimates in the catalog at least, the top lot of Skinner's latest painting sale in its Boston gallery on September 15 was supposed to have been a marble sculpture of Adam and Eve by the 19th-century American Neoclassical sculptor Thomas Crawford. Or else, we imagined, the two Daniel Ridgway Knight paintings, along with the one by Knight's son, Louis Aston Knight, all fresh from a North Carolina collection, would be the story to tell. Or maybe it would be about another sculpture estimated strongly, Diego Giacometti's whimsical Chat maitre d'hotel, a bronze cat standing on its hind legs proffering a tray.

Instead, two Florida pictures got the applause when their buyers broke the artists' auction records, giving yet more weight to the idea that the market for material of the South, particularly Sunshine State material, is scorching hot right now and perhaps getting hotter.

Frank Henry Shapleigh's oil on canvas *The Plaza Basin, St. Augustine, Florida*, dated 1890, was the first of the two to go up, with an opening bid coming from the desk at \$7000, the low estimate. It was a reasonable enough starting point for the artist, who is better known for his White Mountains landscapes, two of which sold on July 1, 2006, for \$17,825 and \$24,150 at Cobbs in Peterborough, New Hampshire. (See *M.A.D. October 2006, p. 16-E.*) Then from the back of the room a jump bid came. "Sixty thousand."

Everybody turned. The voice belonged to Arthur T. Garrity of A.T. Garrity Fine Art Services, Hingham, Massachusetts, whose ear was pressed to a cell phone. Garrity had an answer for every raised increment, most of them coming at him through Skinner phone-bid takers. In the end, the painting of a boat landing with signage that clearly states "Florida" was hammered to him for an astonishing \$140,000, \$160,000 with buyer's premium.

The very next lot was *Fishing in the Everglades* by Hermann Herzog, who began to spend his winters in Florida beginning in the late 1880's. The opening bid from the desk was \$15,000, and once again Garrity immediately jumped it to the same level as he had the Shapleigh. "Sixty thousand." Two dealers in the room, J. Grier Clarke of Stowe, Vermont, and Palm Beach, Florida, and Seth Thayer of Northport, Maine, wrestled with Garrity and with the phone bidders for a while. But even Garrity gave up this time, and the picture went to a phone bidder at another stunning price, \$226,000, almost six and a half times its high estimate.

We spoke with Garrity afterward. He certainly grabbed everybody's attention when he made those jump bids, we said. Was he just trying to save time? "Jump bids get everyone out except for the serious players," he replied. We asked if he would agree they also send a message that the jump bidder is the most serious of all. "I guess that's so," said Garrity, who confirmed that the actual new owner of the painting had been at the other end of his cell phone. "I act in many cases to purchase at auction for private clients."

Was he surprised by what he ended up paying for the Shapleigh? There is no higher-priced image by Shapleigh listed that we could find. The one that comes closest is another Florida subject, *Watch Tower, Fort Marion, St. Augustine*, that sold at Sotheby's in New York City on September 16, 2005, for \$90,000. The one that follows it, *Ruin of Old Spanish Fort at Mantanzas, Florida*, was sold at Northeast Auctions in Manchester, New Hampshire, on August 5, 2006, for \$62,640.

"Yes, I was hoping it would not exceed eighty or ninety thousand," he said, "but in this case, my client and I decided to keep going until we got it. It's a good picture, and it's part of that Florida mystique."

The Herzog was an even better picture, by many accounts, and previous auction records did justify six-figure bidding. At Christie's in New York City on December 1, 2005, Herzog's *Mountain Lake Camp* (not a Florida view, it's safe to presume) brought \$180,000, while the German-born artist's *Alpine Lake Scene* made \$96,000 in the same auction gallery on May 25, 2006.

Garrity's client's last word was \$190,000 on the Everglades picture. "Two hundred thousand is a level that makes people think more," Garrity said. So he left it to the phone bidder to break the record on that one.

Florida has been Garrity's focus only for the past year. Will this profitable activity of his continue for much longer? "More and more, as Florida material becomes available, you may see the prices go up or you may start to see them level off," he said. "It may not get bigger, because you've got to wonder when these collectors are going to say, 'OK, I've had enough.'" There are a lot of empty walls in Florida, but are there limited attention spans too? "Yes, and if a few people drop out of the market-people who were originally making the market-then who's to say what will happen? People may end up with a lot of high-priced pictures."

Colleene Fesko, Skinner's paintings department head, puts these record-breaking sales into a larger context than the latest market trend. "I see them as evidence of a demographic shift," she said. "The baby boomers are growing up and moving South, and with that is coming a shift in their collecting interests."

"Southern material in general is very strong," Fesko continued, naming artists from the Carolinas, "while some of the demand for things like the Pennsylvania Impressionists is cooling off. It's location driven. Like real estate. Waterfront property?" Indeed, Fesko said, her chosen topic for her lecture at the 2006 national conference of the Appraisers Association of America in New York City is titled "Moon over Miami: 19th- and 20th-Century Artwork of the American South."

The Shapleigh and the Herzog were among about 870 lots offered by Skinner in two sessions at this lengthy sale that began at noon and still wasn't over when we left for home eight hours later. Prints and photographs began it; paintings and sculpture followed. All told, the gross was \$2,037,703, representing just over 71% sold by volume. That's a higher than usual percentage of unsold material, and we asked Fesko about it.

"We're selling a lot of things after the sale," she said. We then told her of a conversation between two dealers that we had overheard at the preview. One of them, who usually sits and buys dozens of the lower-priced pictures, said his summer had been "bad." The other dealer had echoed his assessment. Neither attended the auction.

It wasn't only lower-priced pieces that had been passed or been bought in. The Crawford marble (est. \$75,000/150,000) and the Giacometti Chat (est. \$60,000/80,000) failed to find buyers. A John Constable study of a male nude (est. \$8000/10,000) also went unsold; so did Cornelius Raaphort's kitten picture (est. \$8000/ 12,000); an Eastman Johnson pencil sketch (est. \$12,000/18,000); Caleb Arnold Slade's Arab City (est. \$5000/ 7000); a female nude by Leon Kroll (est. \$30,000/50,000); and a beautifully executed allegorical image of a woman mending fishing nets by self-taught artist Pinckney Marcus Simons (est. \$10,000/15,000). Other no-sales are noted in the captions, along with many of the sale's overachievers.

"There was interest in price ranges across the board, but it wasn't very deep," Fesko said to conclude her thoughts. "There wasn't the dealer participation that we've had in the past. I've heard from a number of dealers that things have been soft. At every sale you hope to learn things, and maybe that will lead to presenting things differently next time. This may be a momentary lesson, that retail sales are a little slow, from the summer. But the market has been so strong in the past, and things are apt to change quickly again in a volatile market like this one."

For more information, contact Skinner by phone in Bolton at (978) 779-6241, in Boston at (617) 350-5400, or see its Web site (www.skinnerinc.com).