

Skinner, Inc., Boston, Massachusetts

Museum Deaccessions: Easy Come, Easy Go

by Jeanne Schinto

Those who attended the preview of the Skinner paintings sale at the auction house's Boston gallery only on the day of the sale, May 19, arrived too late to see Frank Weston Benson's portrait of Atherton Loring Jr. at age six. It had been withdrawn the day before.

The catalog said the portrait had descended in the family of the sitter. It had never before been on the market. Unsigned and in a 1906 Carrig-Rohane frame, it was nothing if not authentic, proclaimed those who had seen it at earlier previews. "It had Benson written all over it," said a local dealer who is a Benson authority.

The withdrawal, then, would seem to have had nothing to do with authenticity. Maybe its consignors were afraid it wouldn't bring its price, but the estimate was a not unreasonable \$60,000/80,000.

When that lot came up, all was revealed by auctioneer and Skinner executive vice-president Stephen L. Fletcher, who told his audience that the family had pulled it out of the auction on the previous day because they had decided to donate it to a museum. So it was a happy ending to a very short story. Skinner would get its withdrawal fee; the public would be able to enjoy the painting; but only the auction-goers were deprived of the opportunity to see a bidding war.

There were plenty of other battles at this sale whose gross was \$2,406,975.60 (including buyers' premiums) on 483 lots, 78 of which remained unsold. Ironically, the artworks that inspired the most spirited competition were from the storage bins of museums. It's easy come, easy go in the museum world, or so it would seem.

Once again the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA) was deaccessioning material through Skinner—26 works in all—and there were 42 more works from the Fuller Craft Museum (formerly the Fuller Museum of Art) in Brockton, Massachusetts. Since the Fuller decided to change its mission a couple of years ago, it has been sending paintings to auction at Skinner, and bidders frequently have been breaking price records in order to buy them. Many of the MFA castoffs that were sold at Skinner's previous paintings sale realized record-breaking prices too.

This time was no different. The price bar was raised for Henry Bayley Snell and Josephine Paddock, courtesy of the Fuller, and for Walter Launt Palmer, thanks to the MFA's decision to jettison one of his light-filled winter scenes from its vast, underground holdings.

Perhaps the most dramatic record-breaking moment of the evening came when MFA reject *Windward Oahu*, Hawaii by David Howard Hitchcock went on the block. There are few auction results posted on the Internet for this artist, the highest one being from a Butterfields' sale on February 7, 1990, when a very late work from 1942 made \$5225.

The one at this sale, cataloged as being pre-1890, had been given a \$4000/6000 estimate, which reflected that previous Hitchcock record and the growing enthusiasm and spending habits of Hawaiiana collectors. It wasn't enough. The 12" x 18" oil on canvas made \$82,250. In all, five phone bidders had tried to buy it.

Another piece of Hawaiiana, not a museum consignment, spectacularly outgrew its \$4000/6000 estimate. The oil on board was a near miniature, just 3½" x 2½", framed in an ornate shadow box. The subject was a portrait of a Hawaiian child by Grace Carpenter Hudson, who spent only part of one year, 1901, in Hawaii. When Skinner CEO Karen Keane got ready to offer the work, she pronounced it her favorite lot of the sale. The audience clapped when a young couple won it at \$27,025 against competition from three insistent phone bidders. In the next instant, the couple had paid their bill and left the gallery at a gallop, the woman cradling their unwrapped prize in her arms.

After the sale, we phoned the Grace Hudson Museum in Ukiah, California. Was it, by any chance, being given the painting by these, perhaps, museum emissaries? Sadly not, said the museum's director, Sherrie Smith-Ferri, who had this message for the buyers. The museum is planning to mount an exhibit of Grace Hudson's Hawaiian works, of which there are 26 known. She would love to have the couple loan the portrait for that show. (So, buyers, are you reading this? If so, contact Smith-Ferri at (707) 467-2836.)

The sale of the catalog cover lot, *Flowers of Hope* by Martin Johnson Heade, provided one of the most anticlimactic moments of the evening. Some weeks before, we had been told by Skinner painting department head Colleene Fesko, "It's a recently rediscovered masterpiece of a Heade. It is a painting that he did in the 1860's that [Boston publisher] Louis Prang bought and made a chromolithograph of. The painting had disappeared until very recently."

When we got the catalog, we read more impressive details about the Heade. Its consignors were descendants of the family member who had bought it in a Prang sale of 1899, and the lot included the original bill of sale. The subject of the piece, unusual for Heade, was a rare wildflower. Known as trailing arbutus, the fragrant state flower of Massachusetts, it is known colloquially as mayflower. A species that was plentiful in 19th-century forests, it is now hard to find, owing to the misplaced zeal of generations of wildflower pickers. In the center of the 10 1/8" x 14¼" oil on canvas, Heade painted a nacreous nautilus shell.

The catalog's illustration of this one was a nearly full-size foldout reproduction. The oil had been researched with help from Heade authority of authorities, Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr. of the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Signed twice by the artist, it was in fine, stable condition, ready to be hung. The Heade that Skinner had sold for \$402,000 on November 18, 2005, *Still Life with Cherokee Roses*, had been in dire need of a restorer.

Given all that information, and after seeing the beauty of the picture ourselves, we didn't think the \$300,000/500,000 estimate was out of line. Nonetheless, after an opening desk bid of \$240,000 and a subsequent phone bid of \$250,000, no other bids were forthcoming, and the work was declared sold. The final bill, paid by a private collector, was \$281,000.

"I thought it was an extraordinary painting," Fesko said later, "and the new owner, who has a very fabulous and sophisticated eye, now has a jewel in the crown of his collection."

Was Fesko disappointed by the price it brought? She wasn't, though she was "a little disappointed that the Jessie Willcox Smith didn't realize more."

The Smith was *April Shower*, a 19" x 12" charcoal with watercolor and gouache on board that was bought by another private collector on the phone for \$31,725, just a shade above its low estimate. But that's the auction business, she said in essence. That's how it works. "As with the Heade," Fesko explained, "there's no better way than an auction to find out what something is worth. In each case, a private collector got a masterpiece. And on that Friday evening of the sale, that must have been what each of them was worth."

We asked the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston if it would go into detail about a few of the choices it had made regarding the deaccessioned material in this sale. Mary Keith of the press office wrote in an e-mail: "I spoke to the department chair from Art of the Americas and she doesn't feel comfortable giving any details on specific works being deaccessioned, especially as the painting curator is out of the country. We have to refer to the general statement: 'Researching the collection and making recommendations for acquisition as well as deaccession are part of a curator's ongoing responsibility, and part of collections management.'"

Some readers may not realize that it actually costs a museum substantially to keep a painting in storage. We asked Keith if she could tell us what the annual cost was to keep and insure a painting at the MFA. Her reply, "In regard to the storage and insurance costs, we don't give out that type of information."

Fesko said that no more MFA works were on her department's roster at the moment, but there were more from the Fuller Craft Museum. As to which museum will receive the Benson portrait, that has not yet been made public.

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).