

Welcome Subscriber 75667 (Logout or View Account)

March 16th, 2011

N.C. Wyeth Illustration Tops Paintings and Prints Auction

by Jeanne Schinto

FacebookTwitter

Skinner, Inc., Boston, Massachusetts

by Jeanne Schinto

Photos courtesy Skinner

An N.C. Wyeth illustration commissioned for a 1905 *Saturday Evening Post* story about the Hudson's Bay Company topped Skinner's paintings, prints, and sculpture auction in Boston on Friday, January 28. It shows Cree Indians trading with the French over a high stockade fence. One Cree has just cloaked himself with a Hudson's Bay blanket in the familiar stripes, and alongside him is a sack stenciled with the company's initials. The 23-year-old Wyeth cropped the composition to emphasize the action, thus drawing the viewer right into the scene.

While the story's writer, Arthur E. McFarland, did not leave much of a Googleable mark on posterity, the trajectory of his illustrator's fame traced quite a different arc. The oil on canvas painting sold on the phone for \$457,000 (including buyer's premium), close to its \$500,000 high estimate.

Skinner's department head, Robin S.R. Starr, identified the painting's buyer as "a dealer not from New York" and its source as four siblings from a northern New England family whose father acquired it "sixty years ago or more." The siblings were in the audience for the sale and were "very pleased with the results" of their single, singular consignment, said Starr.

This and other fresh-to-the-market material, mostly from numerous New England collections, made the sale a solid one. Not counting any post-auction deals, the auction house reported a gross of \$2,578,618 on 488 of the 572 lots offered (85.3%).

"We had a lot of material that had been hidden away in collections for decades, and that's what the market wants right now," said Starr. "As you saw, things went hot and cold," she added. "People are being very cautious. They are not buying just to buy. They are less willing to compromise. When they're spending their money, they really mean it and are going gangbusters. But when it's just not quite The One, a lot of people are holding back."

One European painting in particular was in the hot category. Bidding for the turn-of-the-20th-century view of Leander's Tower on the coast of Istanbul by Fausto Zonaro (est. \$20,000/40,000) opened with an absentee's \$70,000 bid. That number from the desk muted several would-be phone bidders, but three rose to the challenge, one of whom won it at \$225,150.

"[The price] was not a record, but certainly up there," Starr observed. "Again, the painting was from a private [collector] and off the market for decades. We had bidders locally as well as from Europe, including ones that were Italian and Turkish." The buyer was a Turkish dealer, she said.

Another European work, *Lesende Frau (Woman Reading)* by the Hungarian artist Mihály Munkácsy, who lived, worked, and moved in high social circles in Paris, rose above its \$70,000/90,000 expectation to bring \$118,500. The circa 1880 oil on panel came to the sale from a New England collection, where it had been since about 1970. "We had a crazy number of phone bidders on that one too-some from New York, a lot from Central Europe. It was just the kind of hullabaloo we love to see," said Starr, who identified the winner as an East Coast dealer.

Old Timer, a portrait of an aging Iowa barn by Marvin Cone, rang up \$118,500 after being hammered down at its \$100,000 low estimate. The 1941 oil on canvas had descended in the Reginald B. Figge family, well known in the Midwest for banking and cultural philanthropy. Some family members apparently took better care of the painting than others. The resulting damage may have held it back a bit, but allowed somebody to take the opportunity that presented itself.

"Cone is a regionalist, and regionalist pictures are almost impossible for most people to afford, but here is a first-quality picture that is, relative to a Thomas Hart Benton or Grant Wood, a bargain," said Starr. "The condition was a problem, but the biggest issues were out toward the edges." A conservator whom Skinner consulted said the damage was "utterly repairable," in Starr's paraphrase, and the buyer on the phone was a New York dealer.

Out of what Starr characterized as "sort of a corporate-collection situation" came Edward Darley Boit's *Cotuit View*, which sold on the phone for \$16,590 (est. \$3000/5000). "The name has real cachet around here," said Starr. "When you hear it, you think of the Sargent picture of the daughters," i.e., John Singer Sargent's *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit*, the group portrait of girls in white pinafores in a dark Paris apartment that has come to symbolize its owner, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. That painting has an inscription on the back: "To Lucy/ In remembrance of her untiring kindness during the trying summer of 1890/ E.D. Boit...th Oct. '90."

It was a simple thing to look up what Boit was referring to. That's because MFA curator Erica Hirshler wrote a book about that painting, *Sargent's Daughters: The Biography of a Painting* (2009), which amounts to a group biography of the Boits (see *M.A.D.*, January 2010, p. 30-C).

What the book reveals is that Boit's mother died in May 1890, and his father died that fall. Boit's career was not going well, either. He painted a large (reportedly 4½' x 6') oil of nearly the same Cotuit scene intended for exhibition at the spring 1891 Paris Salon, but it was refused. *Cliffs at Cotuit*, pictured in Hirshler's book, is now lost. Meanwhile, the new owner of Cotuit View is a Boston-area collector, according to Starr.

All over the news before the auction were stories about a yard-sale find in New Hampshire, an oil on canvas by the American expatriate artist Frederick Carl Frieseke (est. \$50,000/70,000). As the story went, a picker paid under \$100 for the landscape of an olive tree grove in southern France. "He didn't really know what it was, but he knew it was good," Starr said the night before the auction. Push, however, did not come to shove. When it came time to bid on it, there wasn't even a nudge. After a suggested opener of \$25,000 was rejected, the landscape was bought in at \$18,000. We know it's a real Frieseke because it's going into the catalogue raisonné.

Had the presale media exposure killed it? "I wondered that as well, and there's no way to know for sure," said Starr. "I think probably the exposure scared off a few bidders, more from the dealer end of things. Privates don't tend to care that much about that sort of thing because they're not looking to turn it over." Perhaps, she continued, the obstacle was that, unlike the Cone, it was not a "quintessential" Frieseke. "It's a beautiful picture, but it was not a woman in a garden in Giverny."

Regarding its fate, Starr said, "If we get a reasonable post-sale offer, I'll bring it to the consignor. Otherwise, I think he's going to live with it awhile. It's not a picture of a woman in a garden, but it's not a bad thing to be saddled with." She laughed.

The sale closed with some strong 20th-century works, including *The Mad Clown*, a small, enigmatic Robert Motherwell that was fresh to the market, though it had been exhibited sporadically between the time it was painted in 1944 and 2004. The unsigned 8" x 5½" ink and watercolor on paper was estimated at \$10,000/15,000. With competition from the room and the phones, it sold to an Internet bidder for \$25,725.

"It was a collector's piece, a little gem—one of those works you want to get really up close to and study," said Starr of the work. "It's fairly early for him," from before he started doing his "large-scale, calligraphic images. When somebody says 'Motherwell,' this is not what you think of. And it's interesting that two dealers said to me, 'I want this for me. I'm not selling it. I'm keeping it.' And I think that's very telling in terms of what a collector's piece it really is." The buyer was, indeed, a midwestern collector.

Two mid-20th-century abstract paintings by Harley Manlius Perkins, one of the Modernist "Boston Five," might have gone into a Discovery sale, but Starr decided to take a chance with them in this the first of her three major auctions of the year. Consigned by a print dealer, the oils on board-one horizontal, the other vertical-were composed of geometric squares, neither was signed, and each carried an estimate of \$400/600. Skinner CEO Karen Keane, auctioneering at the time they came up, said the horizontal Interior was her favorite item in the sale.

"Given the artist's record and what the artist is known for—more representational work—that was the appropriate level," said Starr. But nobody bidding got the memo. Related Intervals, II, 1955, went at \$1126, and Interior made \$3081, which is a new auction record for the artist, according to Skinner's research.

"They weren't in the print dealer's area [of expertise], but he just couldn't stop himself [from buying them]," said Starr. "They have a great look. It seems to happen fairly regularly that people gravitate to certain works and just find something about them. This seems to be one of those instances. I put them into a major sale, gave them a shot." The rest is history.

For more information, contact Skinner at (617) 350-5400 or (978) 508-3000; Web site (www.skinnerinc.com).



And They Did Their Trading from the Top of



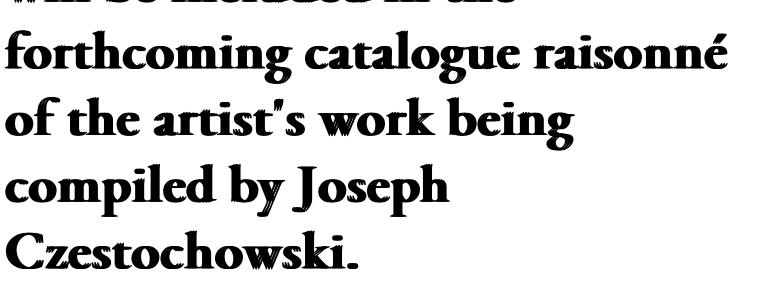
Battlemented Walls, a 38" x 26" signed oil on canvas, was one of four illustrations by Newell Convers Wyeth (1882-1945) that accompanied a story by Arthur E. McFarland, "An Antientie Greate Companie," published in the November 11, 1905, issue of the Saturday Evening Post. Wyeth wrote to his mother that "...H.P. [his teacher Howard Pyle] says it's one of the most realistic pictures ever done in the school." That documentation (in letters published in 1971), plus the freshness of the consignment to the marketplace, helped to make this catalog cover lot a winner at \$457,000.



Torre de Leandro/ A View of Salacak and Kiz Kulesi [Leander's Tower], Istanbul, Turkey by Fausto Zonaro (1854-1929) fetched \$225,150 (est. \$20,000/40,000). The signed 15¾" x 26" oil on canvas came from the collection of a New England family.



Old Timer, 1941, by Marvin Cone (1891-1964) made \$118,500. The 16" x 38 1/8" oil on canvas, signed and identified by exhibition labels on the reverse, is inscribed "OLD TIMER/ MARVIN CONE/ ARTIST/ CEDAR RAPIDS IOWA/ 1721 5th AVE S.E." in the artist's hand on the Carnegie Institute labels affixed to the reverse. It had been stored in a closet for the last eight years and will be included in the forthcoming catalogue raisonné of the artist's work being compiled by Joseph Czestochowski.



"The print section did particularly well," said Robin Starr. "If it wasn't Skinner's strongest print sale ever, it certainly had the highest lot-price level. There again [as in the paintings section], we had things from great private collections, including the Rembrandts."

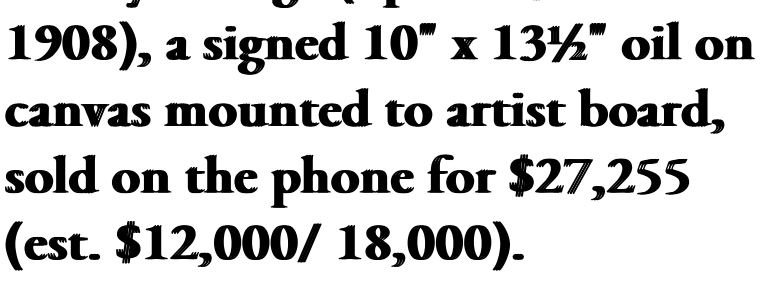
This 5" x 8½" drypoint by Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669), *Christ Disputing with the Doctors: A Sketch*, is an early (1652) impression on laid paper. Signed and dated in the plate, it sold for \$29,625 (est. \$3500/5500), a record price, according to Skinner's research. It was one of eight Rembrandt etchings from a Rhode Island estate, all of which went over their estimates. The other seven brought \$6518, \$7703, \$11,258, \$17,775, \$18,960, \$22,515, and \$27,255.



The famous 1955 image by Robert Vick (b. 1924) of a car accident victim covered with a blanket, on U.S. Route 66 between Winslow and Flagstaff, Arizona, is included in his seminal book *The Americans*. Skinner, however, offered this 8½" x 12¾" gelatin silver print from the same period, Arizona, printed in 1978 and signed and dated "R. Frank 1956." Teasingly estimated at \$400/600, it sold for \$5629.



Venetian Canal View by Martin Rico y Ortega (Spanish, 1833-1908), a signed 10" x 13½" oil on canvas mounted to artist board, sold on the phone for \$27,255 (est. \$12,000/ 18,000).





Senza Titolo (Untitled) by Tancredi Parmeggiani (1927-1964) sold on the phone to an Italian buyer for \$27,255 (est. \$10,000/15,000). The circa 1954 pastel and tempera on paper, 27½" x 39 5/8" (sheet size), came from a New England institutional collection, the same one that consigned *Lesende Frau (Woman Reading)* by Mihály Munkácsy.



- **No Cost** until you Sell
- **9.9% Commission** on Sales
- **Easy Setup**
- **Most Trusted Marketplace**

www.RubyLane.com





[WWW.AAAWT.COM](http://www.AAAWT.COM)

5,000 + Constantly Changing Offerings of Exceptional Quality

