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New Record Set for Automata at Skinner Sci-Tech

by Jeanne Schinto



Skinner, Inc., Bolton, Massachusetts

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An agent for a Russian billionaire came to the Skinner science and technology auction in Bolton, Massachusetts, on Sunday, October 28, 2007, and bought 16 lots of mechanical music boxes and automata for \$1,041,960.50 (including buyer's premium). One of his purchases, a pair of life-size blackamoor musicians by Jean Rouillet, for which he paid \$501,000, set a world record for automata at auction. The agent, who asked that we not publish the Russian's name, said the objects were bought for an overseas museum still in the planning stages.

"The pair came from a U.S. collector who's been active for about fifteen years, so a lot of the things he bought a long time ago in Europe," said Skinner's Nick Hawkins. The young expert, a 1999 graduate of Corpus Christi College, Oxford University, writes catalog copy renowned for its precision and erudition.

Hawkins assembled more than 50 automata from various collectors here and abroad for this sale. They included jugglers, gymnasts, singers, and whistlers; a couple of turbaned Turkish smokers, capable of blowing real smoke; a Chinese magician, who causes his two assistants to disappear and reappear; and a rare example of an automata inspired by an actual person, English comedian Harry Relp (1867-1928), known as Little Tich, who takes deep bows, taps his long-toed feet, winks, and doffs his hat.

Their makers all were French, but their market was worldwide. One of the automata in this sale was rented out as a marketing tool to department stores in Indiana in the 1930's. Five family firms were dominant from the 1850's to the start of the First World War, the height of popularity for this form of entertainment. Besides Jean Rouillet (later Rouillet et Decamps), they were owned by Blaise Bontems, Jean Phalibois, Leopold Lambert, and Gustave Vichy. All were located in the Marais district of Paris in the Fourth Arrondissement, where they could call on the skills of neighboring clockmakers, costumers, and the other artisans to help create these whimsical delights that combine artistry with mechanical genius.

Every winner needs underbidders to make an auction memorable. A phone bidder, identified by Hawkins as an American, took the cover lot automaton for \$281,000 and no other. The purchase by that focused private collector was a Cambodian dancer with articulated elbows and wrists, who sways sinuously from side to side while performing her graceful dance's gestures. Only one of two examples known to have been made by Rouillet et Decamps, she is still dressed in her original exotic brocade costume, jeweled headdress, and ankle bracelets.

"In the past, automata have often been redressed and repainted by collectors," said Hawkins. "Now they're becoming more discerning about originality." And they're paying commensurate prices for that quality.

The other known Cambodian dancer was sold by Galerie de Chartres, France, on December 3, 2006, for €333,500 (approximately \$445,002). That was the record price until the blackamoor pair surpassed it.

A private European collector, bidding by phone, was most frequently the Russian agent's underbidder. Successful on five lots, he spent \$345,000. His most expensive purchase at \$110,500 was a rare coin-operated gymnast made by Vichy. The gymnast performs with two chairs, one of which he releases into the air and catches.

According to the catalog, only one other 19th-century automata, a weightlifter by Phalibois, employs an independent object as part of its routine. "The majority of gymnasts have been redressed and made up to look modern," said Hawkins, noting this one's spangled gold and satin costume. "This is one of only two gymnasts I know of that are in original condition. And the buyer is going to respect that and not restore anything unnecessarily."

Collectors new to the field are part of what's driving the top end of the market. While the American buyer of the Cambodian dancer has been on the scene for many years, the Russian and the European started collecting in the past three or four years. "I think the new collectors are going after the very dramatic, large automata, and they're being very selective with what they buy," Hawkins said.

Stephen H. Ryder of Summit, New Jersey, an automata and musical-box specialist who attended the sale, believes that reference books, unavailable to the older generation of collectors, are enabling new ones to be more discerning. "New collectors will also have exposure to examples in museums like the Morris."

He was speaking of the Morris Museum in Morristown, New Jersey. A week after this sale, on November 6, 2007, the museum opened its permanent exhibit of selections from Murtoth D. Guinness's lifelong collection of automata and mechanical music in a brand-new 4300-square-foot gallery (see www.morrismuseum.org).

"Automata collectors almost always also collect mechanical music," Ryder said. "That's because ninety-five percent of automata are musical to begin with. Plus they came from the same period, before recorded sound-the phonograph-gained a foothold. They are nearly all spring-driven. And they were all intended for a listening public that was less distracted by background noise and visual stimulation than it is today."

While the automata obviously accounted for a significant portion of the sale's \$2,900,868 gross, an entirely different specialty generated excitement at the beginning of the day-antique autos. Skinner's Jane Prentiss was in charge of the consignment from the late, well-loved collecting couple Marion and Warren Higgins of Shrewsbury, Massachusetts. Longtime members of the New England Packard Club, the Higginses owned two Packards. One of them is a cerulean blue 1930 Packard Deluxe Eight phaeton with tan top that was the catalog's back cover lot. A standing-phoenix-only watched a local collector pay \$99,500 for it. The couple's gray 1934 Packard Standard Eight sedan went to another bidder in the room at \$31,725.

The Higginses also owned a 1916 Briscoe touring car (\$7050), a 1937 Ford delivery sedan used for Marion's flower business (\$31,725), and a 1959 Cadillac convertible Series 62 DeVille that went at \$44,062.50 to a phone bidder identified by Prentiss as a collector in Austria.

The cars were on exhibit under a big white tent in the parking lot of Skinner's Bolton gallery, about 35 miles west of its Boston location. The gallery walls inside were decked with 49 lots of Higgins collection automobilia: polychrome painted metal signs for products such as Diamond Squeegee Tread tires and Sky Chief gasoline; license plates; prints; photographs; and even a yellow electric "walk-don't walk" unit.

A Kentucky lawyer's 1916 Harley-Davidson twin motorcycle, unsuccessfully offered at Skinner's sci-tech sale on July 29, 2006, sold this time. A model known as the "Silent Gray Fellow" (because it's quiet and came only in gray) made \$35,250 on an absentee's bid (est. \$28,000/32,000). The estimate at the previous sale was \$30,000/50,000. "I think it sold this time because it was offered with the car collection," said Hawkins.

The sheer variety of objects at sci-tech sales fascinates. Many are reasonably priced. The elusive young collector may well find an entry into collecting through them. This 1132-lot sale, 87% of which sold, featured a coin-operated gramophone; two washing machine patent models; a selection of marine chronometers, kaleidoscopes, and microscopes; a Venetian megalithoscope; a musical cigar dispenser; numerous pairs of 19th-century spectacles; dozens upon dozens of Leica and Leitz cameras; and a couple of disguised squirt cameras by DeMoulin & Bros. of Greenville, Illinois, who specialized in practical joke devices, which they sold to lodge and fraternal organizations in the early 20th century. (They also made an exploding telephone. Maybe we'll see one of those as a future sci-tech offering at Skinner.)

The sale concluded with an extensive selection of toys and dolls. Most notably, a German doll, attributed to the Munich art doll studio of Marion Kaulitz, circa 1909, sold for \$12,337.50. According to the catalog, Kaulitz dolls were modeled on actual children. That realism was heightened by their costumes, often exact imitations of clothing worn by children from the German provinces, whom Kaulitz would observe visiting Munich on Sundays and market days. The Kaulitz studio made dolls into the 1920's but didn't enjoy commercial success after an initial period of fame. Her dolls were said not to appeal to children. As a result, few Kaulitz examples survive, making those that do a rarity.

For more information, contact Skinner in Bolton at (978) 779-6241, in Boston at (617) 350-5400, or visit (www.skinnerinc.com).

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