

## Newly Found Hale Painting Brings \$161,000

by Jeanne Schinto

"That was quite a battle, wasn't it?" said John McInnis a few days after his estate auction on July 30 and 31 in Amesbury, Massachusetts. He referred to the first night's activities, when he sold nearly 200 lots of rare books, about half of them on Asian subjects, from the collection of a late Harvard professor. The crowd was small. Throughout the evening, two phone bidders dominated; together they took 30% of the offerings. Surely they were dealers? McInnis said that at least one of them was not. "We had a collector out of Alaska, and we also had another guy from, I think, the Midwest. They were absolutely determined on that stuff."

The "stuff" consisted of volumes amassed over a lifetime by the professor, Francis Woodman Cleaves (1911-1995), considered to be the founder of Sino-Mongolian studies in America.

The following day, the gallery on Main Street was filled to standing room only for the major part of the sale, 700 lots of general antiques, some from the Marshall Field estate of Peterborough, New Hampshire. The winning bidders, though, were often either on the phones or absentees. Phone-bid takers on the McInnis staff were stationed in three parts of the room. One of them was on a stepladder, the better for McInnis to see and hear him. One live bidder, trying to pay the cashier, was told he'd have to wait; the line normally used for credit-card confirmation was being used for phone bids. "It was just insane," McInnis said of the frenzy generated by the off-site buyers.

Total sales on 891 lots for both days were \$1,050,321.15 (includes the buyer's premium).

What the most aggressive bidders seemed to like best was anything Continental, anything decorative, anything but country, unless it was extraordinary. McInnis assessed the sale overall this way: "I thought the paintings were very, very strong. The silver was very strong. And all the decorative things, like the bronzes and especially the Art Nouveau stuff, was extremely strong. But [the auction] had its weak spots. The country stuff was weak or just average. I thought the prices for it were soft on the average lot."

When asked if Leigh and Leslie Keno had been seen slipping in the door at the end of the book sale, McInnis said, "They were both there. They asked if they could come preview [the general antiques] the night before. They were doing a photo shoot for their next show, so they tied it into coming to the sale. I don't know if he [Leigh] bought anything. I think he might have been bidding on the pier table, but I don't think he got it."

That Hepplewhite pier table was the first item off the block on Thursday morning, since McInnis likes to begin with something stellar. Painted, decorated, and stenciled in white, pale yellow, and gold, the slender-legged piece looked something like an elderly fawn, and it came with a formidable provenance. The catalog described it as having descended in the family of Richard Stockton (1730-1781), a signer of the Declaration of Independence from the New Jersey delegation. McInnis's informal estimate was \$8000/12,000, but an absentee bidder paid \$27,600 for it.

Robert C. Cheney of Brimfield, Massachusetts, who paid \$80,500 for an Aaron Willard tall-case clock, said he was much more impressed by the clock itself than "the icing on the cake," as he called its family tree. McInnis had publicized the clock's ties to John, John Quincy, and Charles Francis Adams, but the clock stood on its own merits as far as Cheney was concerned. "The provenance is nice, but the clock is pretty important," said Cheney, a Willard expert who is coauthor with Philip Zea of *Clockmaking in New England, 1725-1825: An Interpretation of the Old Sturbridge Village Collection* (1992), Cheney pointed out these "pretty fine" features: "It's the highest-style Federal case. It has high French feet. It has elaborate and complicated inlays. It's well over eight feet tall. And it's beautifully proportioned."

An original pencil drawing by Lilian Westcott Hale (1881-1963) was the sale's top-dollar lot, and the one that attracted the most attention even before it brought \$161,000. McInnis said it had been found in the closet of a home on the North Shore of Boston three weeks earlier. Signed and dated December 1907, it showed a beguiling young woman lounging on a sofa with a teacup in her hand. The screen in the background gave it a pleasing hint of Orientalism. Stephen Score of Stephen Score, Inc. of Boston described it during the preview as "a very painterly drawing, very beautiful." Asked what he thought it might bring, he shrugged: "It's a mystery what things go for these days. They can bring enormous prices, or they can go for nothing."

McInnis himself was surprised at the outcome. "I didn't think it would bring that kind of money," he said. The auction house's informal estimate was reportedly \$30,000/40,000. "It's a big number. But everybody loved it. Everybody thought it was just as sweet as could be."

At the unremarkable end of the scale, many pieces of big brown 19th-century American furniture went to dealers buying stock. Richard W. Oliver of Kennebunk, Maine, who took Score's front-row seat shortly after the Hale was sold, also bought a host of artworks and decorative items, including a pair of fishing scenes on oil by the Italian artist Attilio Pratella (1856-1949) for \$3737.50.

Luanne and Daniel Meader, owners of Elmwood Antiques, Haverhill and Georgetown, Massachusetts, were front-row bidders too. They bought all day long in almost every category. Among the items going back to their shop were a pair of Sandwich glass lamps (\$1265); a 19th-century Aesthetic period walnut easel (\$1035); a KPM porcelain plaque of a peasant woman with wheat sheaves under her arm (\$3680); and a 19th-century Continental carved and gilt angel mounted on a 20th-century shelf (\$1380).

As the second day's purchases were being made, the rare-book buyers were evaluating their wins of the night before. On-site purchasers included David Bromer of Bromer Booksellers, Boston, who bought several lots of 16th-century books, and John O'Mara, a staff member of James and Devon Gray Booksellers, Cambridge, Massachusetts, which sells exclusively books printed before 1700. Why is that date the cutoff? O'Mara's boss, James Gray, answered the question on the phone: "After 1700, the freedom of the printing press flooded the market with books. Before 1700, it was very hard to publish a book; therefore there are a limited number of books and a limited number of authors. So we wanted to make it a nice, little, knowable segment of the history of learning, and it seemed like 1700 was a place to draw the line."

Stephen Feldman, owner of Asian Rare Books, New York City, stepped off the bus at 4:30 a.m. on the morning after the book sale and was at his desk four hours later. Feldman, who bought a few things from the Cleaves collection some years ago, was successful on eight lots at McInnis. "I made happy one client in mainland China—Beijing—by getting two things he wanted," said Feldman, who sells mostly to libraries and institutions. In business for nearly 30 years, he characterized the book prices overall as "quite brisk," adding, "but actually, one or two went way, way below."

David Meikle of Archway Books, Dover, New Hampshire, whose specialties are eastern Europe, Russia, the Middle East, and central Asia, bought eight lots too. "I thought prices were pretty strong, to say the least," he said, "but some of the highest-priced things went for reasonable numbers. I'd say that the high spots went about right, while a lot of the books in the five-hundred-to one-thousand-dollar retail range seemed to be going for retail."

Meikle was the underbidder on a book by Athanasius Kircher (1602-1680), the Jesuit polymath who published illustrated volumes about many ancient civilizations, including China's. "Kircher pretty much knew everything about everything there was to know at the time," Meikle said. "He put together a museum at the Vatican, the kind that's often called a Wunderkammer [room of wonders]. His books all have that kind of Wunderkammer flavor."

The buyer of the Kircher for \$2875 was 29-year-old Patrick O'Neil of Boston. A self-described "fledgling private collector," he makes his living as a motorcycle mechanic, specializing in "semi-exotic" Ducatis at the moment. His collecting specialty is early German books ("I grew up there and know the language," he said). He also buys in other categories for a little dealing on the side. In the darkened parking lot after the sale he said he was very pleased with himself, having come away with "three good buys," despite the pair of phone bidders "who were swallowing up everything."

O'Neil acknowledged that he is unusual for being a bibliophile without gray hair. "I've been going to every book fair within one hundred fifty miles or so, and I'm always the youngest person there." He wasn't the youngest person at this sale, though. At both sessions, McInnis's sons, 16-year-old Jonathan and ten-year-old Joey, were working for dad. Jonathan, acting as runner and phone-bid taker, was businesslike and reserved; Joey, the opposite, often provided the audience with comic relief.

"People tell me, 'You know, you shouldn't have [Joey] at the auction,'" McInnis said. "And I say, 'He wouldn't talk to me for a week if I kept him away.' I also say, 'You know, if my father [86-year-old Donald] had kept me away from the business when I was that age, I wouldn't be where I am today.'"

For more information, call (978) 388-0400 or see the McInnis Web site ([www.johnmcinnisauctioneers.com](http://www.johnmcinnisauctioneers.com)).