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# Norman Lewis Painting Sells for a New Record

by Jeanne Schinto



Swann Auction Galleries Inc., New York City

Photos courtesy Swann

Swann's African-American fine art department was up to its old tricks on October 3, 2013, in New York—offering previously unknown artworks, selling them and others for record prices, and helping to establish solid reputations for artists we all should know better.

The auction house chose a large (49" x 63") oil on canvas by Norman Lewis for the catalog cover of this sale. An untitled circa 1957 Abstract Expressionist work, confidently estimated at \$250,000/350,000, it got to that level and then went right past it to \$581,000 (including buyer's premium). The price is significantly higher than the previous Lewis benchmark, set at Swann almost exactly five years before this sale, on October 7, 2008, when another untitled Abstract Expressionist oil by the Harlem native sold to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston for \$312,000. The record-setting buyer this time was a private collector, said Swann's department specialist, Nigel Freeman, who executed the bids.

The painting features groups of Lewis's characteristically calligraphic figures. He positioned them against a background of brilliant and darker blues interspersed with swatches of gold, pink, and red. The family of the original owner provided Swann with a possible back story for the painting. They said Lewis's inspiration came from Morocco, where he witnessed city dwellers after sunset lighting little charcoal fires to prepare their evening meal. In 1957, Lewis spent several months traveling in France, Italy, Spain, and North Africa.

The unnamed original owner was more than just an art buyer. She once was Lewis's student while living in New York, and the two remained lifelong friends even after she moved to Chicago. According to the consignors, she visited him in the 1950's, intending to acquire a painting. She bought this one out of Lewis's studio. All these years later, it came to the market as a fresh discovery, having never been publicly exhibited until the Swann previews.

Unlike many auctions today, those organized by this department attract active room bidders, and they like to applaud. Auctioneer Nicholas D. Lowry's introduction was applauded. (His announcement of the 25% buyer's premium, new since the last African-American fine art auction at Swann last February, was met with "What?") Big prices were applauded. Even the auction's conclusion was applauded, as if the proceedings had been a stage performance, which of course good auctioneers, like Lowry, actually do provide. Such enthusiasm is a refreshing departure.

One of those room bidders, representing an unnamed institution, bought a top lot. Going at \$173,000 (est. \$80,000/120,000), it was a terra-cotta sculpture of a woman's head by Elizabeth Catlett. Acquired directly from the artist in the mid-1960's by Joe and Reva Bernstein in Mexico, where they and Catlett lived, *Head* descended to the consignors, who live in New Mexico. The artist and the owner's family often visited each other in Mexico City and in San Miguel de Allende, the catalog said.

*Head* represents a turning point in Catlett's evolution as an artist. In 1947, when it was made, she had just begun studying terra-cotta technique with Francisco Zúñiga, a sculptor. Previously she had been utilizing the lessons she had learned at the University of Iowa (she studied with Grant Wood) and in New York. As quoted in the catalog, Catlett wrote that she preferred Zúñiga's "pre-Hispanic method" of coiling the clay to build up the hollow structure because it was "more connected to cultural traditions that had existed for centuries. Like the stone carving or the ceramics of the pre-Columbian period. And the woodcarving of the Africans."

A second anonymous institutional purchaser got another terra-cotta sculpture, *Dancer* by Sargent Claude Johnson. Through the 1930's, Johnson was known for exhibiting naturalistic figures. This piece, however, executed in the period 1938-40, is one of his scarce Modernist works. Created in California, where Johnson lived and became one of the first African-American artists in the state to achieve a national reputation, it was consigned by a private San Francisco collection and sold for just over the low estimate, at \$37,500.

One hopes that Johnson's name and work is better recognized than it was in 2009 when the University of California at Berkeley sold a set of eight carved redwood relief panels by Johnson out of its surplus store for \$164.63 (including tax). Designed and executed by Johnson for the W.P.A. to cover organ pipes at what was then known as the California School for the Deaf and Blind in Berkeley, they measure 22" wide when assembled. Later affixed to a wall, the panels remained hanging until 1980 when the school moved and Berkeley took over the property. Greg Favors, a dealer in art and furniture, was their buyer/rescuer. A *New York Times* story quotes him as saying he didn't know what they were or who had created them but thought they were "amazing and cool." Identified by Gray Brechin, a specialist in New Deal art, they were restored by Dennis Boses of Off the Wall Antiques in Los Angeles.

Subsequently valued at \$215,000, they went for a reported \$225,000 to dealer Michael Rosenfeld of New York City. A week later, Rosenfeld sold them for an undisclosed sum to the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. They had never even made it to the East Coast. On October 12, 2013, the panels went on display in the Huntington's newly opened Virginia Steele Scott Galleries of American Art.

We've seen many works by Alvin D. Loving Jr. since 2007, when we covered the first of this department's sales, but nothing like the one offered this time. A collage of painted and torn paper, it was the first significant Loving collage from the 1970's to come to auction, according to Swann's research, and it sold to a collector in the room for \$56,250 (est. \$15,000/25,000).

Another collector paid \$17,500 (est. \$7000/10,000) for *Refugees*, a circa 1938 lithograph by Robert Blackburn. Signed, titled, and numbered 8/8, it is a true scarcity, and the price is a new record for that artist. Blackburn, who was born in 1920, printed *Refugees* at the Harlem Community Art Center, where he studied lithography with Riva Helfond when he was a teenager. Titled as *People in a Boat*, the work was published in the *Magpie*, the literary magazine of DeWitt Clinton High School, which Blackburn attended with James Baldwin and Richard Avedon. While other impressions are in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, and the North Carolina Central University Art Museum, Durham, North Carolina, this was, according to Swann, the first known one of the eight to appear at auction.

Blackburn became a force in the printmaking world of New York City and well beyond. In 1948, with the help of his teacher-mentor Will Barnet, he founded his own print shop, where he printed for Catlett and Charles White, among others. In the 1970's, his nonprofit printmaking workshop served as the model for the many cooperative print shops founded in the United States and abroad in a period when community-based arts flourished. Today, a direct descendant of that influential shop is the Robert Blackburn Printmaking Workshop, founded by the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts in 2005.

Two other new record prices for artists were achieved at this sale. These were for works by Mavis Pusey and Frank Bowling, both of whom are living. Pusey's *Nuvae*, a circa 1968 oil on canvas composition of her signature geometric forms, went to a collector in the room for \$33,750, more than three times the high estimate. Bowling's

1972 *Karters Choice* went for a mid-estimate \$50,000 to a collector on the phone with a very large wall or making a donation to a museum. The abstract acrylic and spray paint on canvas is 99" x 63".

Charles White's untitled conté crayon, ink, and oil wash on board of a head of a man went to the trade, selling for \$55,000, just over the high estimate. The 1967-68 painting, which has Nat King Cole provenance, came to the sale from a private Florida collection. According to Swann, this was the first oil wash work by White to come to auction. White's 1946 *Hope Imprisoned*, although one of the top price earners of the day, went at well under the mark when a dealer on the phone paid \$62,500 for the tempera on paper (est. \$100,000/150,000). The painting is dark in palette and in mood. A stylized portrait of a woman whose features are literally stretched and strained by her sorrows, it had been offered previously but unsuccessfully by Swann at its February 17, 2009, sale with the same estimate.

Among passed lots (the sell-through rate on 149 lots was 74%) were major works by William T. Williams (est. \$75,000/100,000), Robert Colescott (est. \$50,000/75,000), and Beauford Delaney (est. \$50,000/75,000).

The most successful contemporary work at this sale was Howardena Pindell's untitled #56, a 2010 mixed-media collage composed mostly of punched paper circles. Estimated at \$3000/5000, it went all the way to \$43,750.

An artist's statement on the Web site of the Brooklyn Museum reveals something about whom Pindell credits for helping her find her artistic way: "I found my true voice through the African American movement but received my training wheels in the women's movement in the late 1960's and early 1970's. I feel that this is true because I was shy and did not have my original family and community roots in the black community in New York City, but in Philadelphia. I was invited by the white feminist community to join them, whereas the African American community in general at the time was highly critical of abstract African American artists."

If Pindell's statement rings true, then on the evidence of the last half-dozen years of these sales alone, the African-American community of artists and the art world at large has come clear around.

For more information about this auction, see the Web site ([www.swanngalleries.com](#)) or phone (212) 254-4710.

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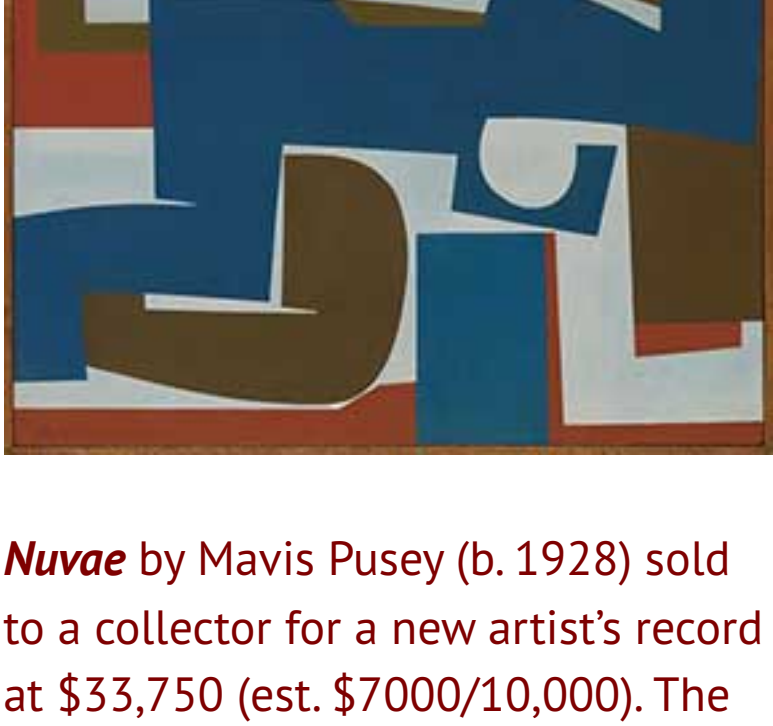
A new price record for the artist was set for Norman Lewis (1909-1979) when this circa 1957 untitled 49" x 63" oil on linen canvas sold to a collector for \$581,000 (est. \$250,000/350,000).



*Christ Healing the Sick* by Romare Bearden (1911-1988) sold to a collector for \$32,500 (est. \$15,000/25,000). The 11 3/4" x 9 3/4" oil on panel was part of Bearden's 1945 "Passion of Christ" series of 11 watercolors and 11 oils.



*Karin and Janie Talking* by Alvin D. Loving Jr. (1935-2005) sold to a collector for \$56,250 (est. \$15,000/25,000). The collage of painted and torn paper dates from 1976 and measures approximately 40" x 30".



*Nuvae* by Mavis Pusey (b. 1928) sold to a collector for a new artist's record at \$33,750 (est. \$7000/10,000). The 30" x 40" oil on burlap canvas dates from circa 1968. A recipient of the Pollock-Krasner Foundation Award, Pusey included this very painting in her application.



Untitled (*Head of a Man*) by Charles White went to a dealer for \$55,000 (est. \$30,000/50,000). The 24" x 30" conté crayon, ink, and oil wash on gessoed board dates from about 1967-68.



*The Train* by Romare Bearden (1911-1988) sold for \$17,500 (est. \$7000/10,000). The price is a new record for this 1975 print, which is a 17 3/8" x 22" color etching and aquatint on Arches paper. The buyer also paid an artist's record price for Robert Blackburn's *Refugees* (not shown).



Untitled #56 by Howardena Pindell (b. 1943) sold to a collector for \$43,750 (est. \$3000/5000). The 2010 mixed-media collage on rag board measures 11 1/2" x 13 1/2" and is composed of punched paper, watercolor, gouache, open-bite etching, archival glue, and Swiss thread.