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Of Fishing, Fysshynge, and Other Sports

by Jeanne Schinto



Lang's Sporting Collectables, Inc., Boxborough, Massachusetts

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Photos courtesy Lang's

Izaak Walton's *The Compleat Angler* (1653) may be the best-known example of early angling literature, but *A Treatyse of Fysshynge wyth an Angle* (1496) is considered to be the earliest. I learned about *Fysshynge* author Juliana Berners, a 15th-century British noblewoman and nun, while previewing Lang's fall auction, held at the Holiday Inn in Boxborough, Massachusetts, on November 7 and 8, 2008.

A short biography and an image of Berners in nun's habit are in Lyla Foggia's *Reel Women: The World of Women Who Fish* (1995), a copy of which sold to a bidder in the room for \$115 (including buyer's premium). New copies of Foggia's book are available through Internet sources for half that or less, but this copy was signed by the author to Helen Elizabeth Shaw (1910-2007). "To Helen - For blazing a trail for all Reel Women to Follow!" Foggia wrote on December 1, 1995.

Foggia's book and Lang's catalog convincingly portray Shaw as having played a central role in popularizing the complex skill of fly-tying. Shaw, a Wisconsin native, did it with a book of her own, *Fly-Tying: Materials, Tools, Technique* (1963). One key to the book's success was its emphasis on methods rather than specific patterns. Another was its clarity and beautiful writing. She wrote of tinsel, for example, in these two perfectly balanced sentences: "[It] is the sparkle and flash that is added to many an otherwise drab fly, providing the glitter which will help attract attention to the fly under water. Light in weight and quite tough because of its tensile strength, tinsel adds protection to fly bodies when it is wrapped over other materials in an open spiral."

The Shaw consignment, 288 lots from her estate, was but a small part of Lang's 3954-lot sale of tackle, lures, rods, and related fishing collectibles that brought in a little over \$1.4 million in three days. Lang's seventh consecutive \$1 million-plus auction, it still represents a relatively modest result for them.

"We tried to go through the results and identify trends," said Lang's Debbie Ganung, who owns the business with her husband, John. "More than at any other time, condition was huge. I'd say it was ten times more important than ever. An item had to be in excellent or excellent-plus or near-mint condition for it to go for the estimate or above. The rest fell, and I mean really fell."

The only category that actually saw gains was lures, said Ganung, with bidders paying the most for the bodied ones, including bodied ones made by Shaw.

Before Shaw became an author, she made a living tying flies, and the auction offered hundreds of them in single lots and in groups. Many were accompanied by her pattern sketches. Prices ranged from \$1041.25 to \$28.75. The former was paid by an Internet bidder for three Ozark flies plus a sketch; the latter was a room bidder's bill for six ¾" dry flies in a box, labeled "Helen Shaw, Fly Tyer" plus her New York City apartment's address. The top price for a single fly, \$551, was paid by an Internet bidder who bought a bass hawk in canary yellow, accompanied by a design sketch showing 12 colors in all.

"My husband said he has never seen any flies tied as meticulously as Helen Shaw's," said Ganung.

Just as important as the text of Shaw's book were the more than 25 black-and-white photographs taken by Shaw's husband, Hermann Kessler, showing Shaw's nimble fingers at work. A tour de force, the how-to book remains "the definitive text on the art of tying," Lang's catalog states.

Shaw and Kessler, who also had a country home in East Chatham, New York, published a second book in 1989. Kessler died in 1993 while the couple was working on a third; it was never finished. As a widow, Shaw reportedly never tied another fly.

She apparently never threw anything away, either. In addition to the flies, Lang's sold her correspondence, rough drafts, sketchbooks, Kessler's photo negatives and slides, and much, much more in small parcels. The couple's personal library went on the block in yet more lots—one, two, three books at a time, many of them author-signed. The couple had maintained friendships with many of their colleagues. Three lots of ephemera relating to Alfred Miller, whose wonderful pseudonym was Sparse Grey Hackle, went at a total of \$1236.

Shaw and Kessler also befriended many of the great sporting artists of the day by virtue of Kessler's longtime position as art director at *Field & Stream*. One lot of letters and other materials relating to artist Lynne Bogue Hunt made \$172.50 in the room, while a Hunt painting signed "For Helen Kessler" brought \$2760. The subject of the oil on canvas board was the Goodpond Gooseville Gun Club, Cape Hatteras, North Carolina.

Arnold Gingrich, *Esquire* magazine's founder and an ardent fly fisherman, dubbed Shaw the "First Lady of Fly-Tying." Dick Talleur wrote a 1989 profile of Shaw for *American Angler* and called her "the Greta Garbo of Fly-Tying." Of Shaw's fly-tying, Talleur wrote that she was able to produce "a book so utterly devoid of pretense or condescension, because this is exactly the sort of person she is."

She and Kessler had no children. Her only heir, and the consignor of the material, was her neighbor/caretaker, said Ganung, adding that Shaw in her last years donated some items to the American Museum of Fly Fishing, established in Manchester, Vermont, in 1968. Kessler had been its first president.

After the Shaw material, bidders were offered a wealth of material from the heirs of Eugene V. Connett III, founding publisher of the famed Derrydale Press. From that consignment came the sale's best seller. It wasn't a lure, reel, or rod. It was a sporting landscape in oil on board by John "Jack" Frost (1890-1937), son of A.B. Frost (1851-1928). Signed "To My Friend Eugene Connett from John Frost 1934," the painting sold to a phone bidder for \$29,900.

Lang's sold a slew of Derrydale Press titles last year. (See "[Lang's \\$2.7 Million Sale, Its Best Ever, Breaks Angling Book Record](#)," *M.A.D.*, February 2008, p. 36-C.) At this sale, they were selling some of Connett's collection of art, along with a selection of personal effects, including his orange and black Princeton jacket (class of 1912), one of his old hunting jackets, his sailing cap, and the Derrydale Press trade sign. The sign hung outside the company building until the business, founded in 1926, was liquidated in 1942. Thereafter, it was displayed in the family home, according to Lang's.

In addition to the Jack Frost piece, other artworks with a Connett provenance (by Lynn Bogue Hunt, Aiden Lassell Ripley, Maud Earl, and lesser-known Edgar Burke) drew strong prices, mostly from bidders on the phones. The jackets didn't excite all that much interest, going at \$345 and \$316.25, respectively, but the sign went at \$4887.50, more than six times its high estimate.

Like Shaw, Connett and his family seemed to have saved everything. There were numerous lots of ephemera, including mountains of correspondence—even his rejection slips from various magazines. ("Dr. Connett," Barbara Heilman of *Sports Illustrated* wrote him on February 3, 1960, "I am afraid I do not find a feature for us in....") In 1964 Connett donated the archives of Derrydale Press itself to the Princeton University Library.

An early autograph album, found among the Connett items but apparently not directly related to him, was one of the sale's sleepers, selling to an Internet bidder for \$11,637.50 on a pipsqueak estimate of \$75/125. On the album's inside cover was the name "Maude Gallimore." A Google search turned up nothing that identified her. The Lang's catalog description said the book contained inscriptions to Gallimore from 1917 to 1924, along with original art and cartoon images, penned in locations such as Tasmania and Australia.

"Before the auction, we had a number of international inquiries," said Ganung, "but we still don't know why the thing took off silly the way it did."

The runner-up for top seller—an important early American wooden minnow-fetched \$24,150 (est. \$15,000/20,000). Another lure, a Hosmer Mechanical Froggie, went at \$17,250 (est. \$6000/ 9000). The sale's two top reels made \$16,100 (est. \$14,000/16,000) and \$9775 (est. \$10,000/12,000), showing the market's softness there.

One unique item bears special mention: the loose-leaf archives of a 1923 photo contest sponsored by South Bend Tackle Company that sold for \$3220 (est. \$800/1200). Some of the pages were torn, others were water stained, but consider the content: over 500 pages of entries, with original accompanying photographs, sent by participants (men, women, and children) to what was, according to Internet sources, the company's first contest of its kind.

The contest rules stated that each photo had to show prominently the South Bend products with which the catch was made. The grand prize was \$300 in gold pieces. What the company got in return, besides the initial publicity, were hundreds of images of its products for use as a marketing tool. What posterity got is a snapshot of the fishing world at that time, such as fishing habits, fishing costumes, and rich related cultural information.

"Everybody on staff here went through it, just amazed. It was really, really cool," said Ganung, adding that the competitors on the lot were "serious South Bend collectors."



**The more than 500-page loose-leaf archives of the South Bend Tackle Company's 1923 photo contest sold for \$3220 (est. \$800/1200). Pictured here is the entry form of J.C. Allen of West Lafayette, Indiana. Martha Jane Allen of the same address also submitted an entry (not shown). "She hooked while trolling," a note in script on Martha Jane's contest entry ballot states.**

Kip Blanchard of Blanchard's Auction Service, Potsdam, New York, and Doug Stinson of Carl W. Stinson, Inc., Reading, Massachusetts, do the auctioneering for Lang's. They are both at the top of their game. Each kept up a pace of an astounding 150 lots per hour that somehow didn't seem rushed. Blanchard, for his part, won the 2007 Auctioneer of the Year award from the New York State Auctioneers Association.

Lang's next sale is scheduled for mid-April. For more information, contact the auction house at (315) 841-4623; Web site ([www.LangsAuction.com](#)).

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