

Peto and (Perhaps) Coorte Still Lifes Top Paintings Auction

by Jeanne Schinto

At Skinner's latest paintings auction, held November 17, 2006, at its Boston gallery, a contingent of dealers from both sides of the Atlantic converged to compete for the first lot on offer, an oil on canvas still life cataloged unobtrusively as "Dutch School, 17th Century Style." The signature and date on the painting read "A:Coorte 1685."

Was it truly a newly discovered work by the old master Adriaen Coorte? The peaches and cherries, the single chestnut, and the butterfly would be his logical, spare compositional choices, since unlike other Dutch still life paintings of the period, which are characteristically sumptuous, his works are spare, more like today's nouvelle cuisine. Skinner, however, wasn't calling it a Coorte outright. There must have been doubt.

We asked Robin S.R. Starr of the paintings department if the auction house had considered it to be a genuine Coorte and then dismissed the idea. "We certainly considered it," she said after the sale, "and even now people are still arguing about whether it's right or not. There was a lot of discussion and 'scuttlebutt' during previews—'Yes, it is.' 'No, it isn't.' 'Yes, it is.'—and that's fine. Mystery is good. But we actually have an old master consultant who looks at paintings for us, and that consultant wasn't convinced." Thus the auction house, whose spokesperson said the painting had come to the sale from a private collection, along with a few other items, erred on the side of caution and let the bidders decide how excited they should get about it.

Bidding opened at the desk at \$16,000. The phones gave chase, galvanizing the most serious bidder in the room, a dealer who had come to the auction from overseas. The Internet also participated when it had the chance, but the overseas dealer prevailed against all comers, paying \$149,000 (including buyer's premium) against a generic estimate of \$2000/4000. Immediately afterward, the price was characterized as "a steal" by restorer James Wright of Somerville, Massachusetts, who was obviously a believer.

A dealer who was a bystander and not involved in the bidding said the only question left for him was, "Will it stay on the market long enough to last until the next Maastricht?" (the European Fine Art Fair, held every March in Maastricht, the Netherlands). He too was convinced that it was a bargain.

Tying with the controversial still life for top lot of the 517-lot auction, 82% of which sold, was a signed and dated 19th-century American oil on canvas *Still Life with Books and Pipe* by John Frederick Peto. Dealer Jeffrey R. Brown of Brown-Corbin Fine Art, Milton, Massachusetts, was the winner at \$149,000, underbid by someone on the phone.

"It's a very, very choice picture," Brown said afterward. "It has everything that I was looking for in that kind of painting. The composition was a pinwheel, both in the vertical plane and in the horizontal plane, so he really worked it out."

Brown pointed out one element, a matchstick used as a bookmark, one tip facing the viewer, that carries the pinwheel forward into our space. "It's an extremely complex composition," he said.

Starr said the Peto was "found in the attic of a building that had belonged to a relatively local family since the 1920's or so. It was an industrial building being readied for sale. We don't know for sure how long it had been up there, but judging from the painting's condition, it was probably a very long time."

The catalog's description of the Peto noted these imperfections: "losses, retouch, varnish inconsistencies, craqueleur with flaking and alligating, surface grime." Sometimes, however, benign neglect is better than a botched cleaning, and Brown may consider himself lucky that some of his competition made their judgments about the painting without having seen it in person.

True, the estimate was puny, \$18,000/ 22,000, and Peto's trompe l'oeils command higher prices than his still lifes. *Old Time Letter Rack*, offered on October 17, 2006, by John Moran Antique & Fine Art Auctioneers, Altadena, California, brought \$805,000, an auction record. Still, one could safely call Brown's purchase another "steal."

In contrast to the Coorte and the Peto, the catalog's cover lot, *Young Girl with Mirror* by American Impressionist Frederick Carl Frieseke, failed to elicit any bids at all. The oil was fresh to the market from a family with branches in Texas and Massachusetts, it was beautifully painted, and the mood of the contemplative subject was infectious, but collectors seem to prefer Frieseke's sun-dappled Giverny gardens to his gray-brown interiors. Nor, at \$300,000/500,000, was this one conservatively estimated. A more reasonable, post-sale deal may be in its future. "We've actually already had a phone call," Starr said, "and we're going to do our best with that and see if we can't make something happen."

Colleene Fesko, Skinner's paintings department head, said in her 20 years at Skinner she had never before had a Frieseke consignment, but at this sale she actually had two. The second one, *Sewing*, a 9" x 10¼" watercolor on paper, came from a different consignor. Here again was one of the artist's contemplative women, purportedly the artist's wife, Sadie O'Bryan, but the palette was lively blues, pinks, and purples, and the whole composition had an air of spontaneity, as well as great charm. Cataloged as "...perhaps a preparatory sketch for Frieseke's *Blue Curtains*," and destined to be included in the forthcoming catalogue raisonné being prepared by Frieseke's grandson Nicholas Kilmer, *Sewing* nearly double its high estimate to bring \$17,625 from a dealer.

Of the failed sale on the large Frieseke portrait, Fesko said, "I think it signals the fact that there has been a shift away from the ladies-in-white-dresses school of collecting and more towards Modernism."

The rest of the auction, which realized a total of about \$1.8 million, followed the usual script. Phone bidders took the lion's share, and dealers in the room jumped in at just below retail when they could. A dealer who usually sits in the front row buying lower-priced works, absent last time, was back buying up dozens of works. The one little painting we wanted, H.D. Murphy's *Dutch Fishing Boats* (est. \$700/900), was claimed by another bidder in the room at \$8812.50. We didn't even get to enjoy the bittersweet pleasure of getting our paddle up once.

For more information, contact Skinner by phone in Boston at (617) 350-5400, in Bolton at (978) 779-6241, or through its Web site (www.skinnerinc.com).