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April 6th, 2010

## Poe, Dickens, George Washington, and an Olivetti Typewriter

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Christie's, New York City

by Jeanne Schinto

Photos courtesy Christie's

Works by Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) set two new world records in the gloaming of the bicentennial year of his birth, eclipsing everyone from Austen to Zola at the sale of part II of the William E. Self library of important English and American literature that took place December 4, 2009, at Christie's in New York City. Of the total \$4,896,625 (including buyers' premiums), a little more than 47%—or \$2,313,313—was realized by fewer than two dozen Poe books, manuscripts, and other items in the 197.

Featured on the catalog cover, Bill Self's copy of *Tamerlane* sold to an American collector on the phone for \$662,500. It is the new top auction price paid for any 19th-century American book of poetry. The old record was set by a copy of *Tamerlane* that sold at Sotheby's in New York City on June 7, 1988, for \$198,000 to collector Richard Manney. On October 11, 1991, it sold again at Sotheby's, to Baltimore book dealer Stephan Loewentheil, for \$143,000. It is now in the Susan Jaffe Tane collection.

At the Self sale, Tane, who lives in Connecticut and New York City, sat in the back row of the gallery, next to a book-dealer friend. "Being a kindred spirit, I was in no way going to miss this auction," she later wrote in an e-mail. "I'd heard about Bill and his fabulous Poe collection for years. It rivaled mine, having the only other *Tamerlane* in private hands. Now and again, I've indirectly approached Bill through a third party, inquiring if he would be interested in a private sale of any of his items, especially his manuscript material. Poe manuscripts are incredibly scarce, and whenever something comes to market, it creates a great stir. So, after having all my overtures turned down, I thought this would be my big chance to get one of his 'treasures.'"

Tane recognized many people in the room, including dealers talking on cell phones to their clients. She also picked out the octogenarian Bill Self (b. 1921), with his silver hair and black-framed glasses, seated next to his daughter Barbara. A Hollywood producer whose credits include such popular TV shows as *The Twilight Zone*, *M\*A\*S\*H*, *Batman*, and *Peyton Place*, Self is profiled in Nicholas Basbanes's *A Gentle Madness: Bibliophiles, Bibliomanes, and the Eternal Passion for Books*. On April 2, 2008, Christie's held part I of his library sale—all Dickens.

Tane waited anxiously through works by Austen, the Brontë family, Samuel Clemens, Dickens, and George Eliot. Finally, the traditional alphabetical arrangement of the sale came to works by Poe.

The first lot was one of Poe's earliest autograph manuscripts of two poems, "In an Album- To-" and "In an Album- To the river." Dating from circa 1827, it had once been part of a much greater whole, the Wilmer manuscript, so-called because it was owned by Poe's friend Lambert A. Wilmer, editor of the *Baltimore Saturday Visitor* [sic] and publisher in 1833 of Poe's tale "Ms. Found in a Bottle."

Tane already owns one leaf of the few from the Wilmer manuscript that are extant today. She thought another would make an important addition to her collection. Her bidding attempt, however, ended quickly. On an estimate of \$60,000/80,000, the two pages brought a phenomenal \$362,500 from a buyer on the phone.

Next, the *Tamerlane* went up. "Whenever I contribute to an exhibit, it is always the *Tamerlane*—the rarest book in American literature—that generates the greatest interest," she wrote in an e-mail. "It is the prized centerpiece of my collection and coveted by book collectors all over the world." "Trumpets should have sounded, but as often happens, the bidding process flattened the impact of the moment. "All of the anticipation, all of the hype, and it was over in minutes," Tane noted.

Before the sale, she had expressed some doubts that the book would reach its \$500,000/700,000 estimate. In the end, she did seem astounded by its \$662,500 price tag ("And mine is in better condition!"). By contrast, Francis Wahlgren, international head of the books and manuscripts department for Christie's, said he thought "it brought the price it deserved—at least! I'm a big believer in that book. It was the kind of book that could have gone [for] more, but it's a little more obscure than some books of equal rarity. So he was a tough one to predict. But we were very, very pleased."

After the *Tamerlane*, a first edition of Poe's only novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, sold for \$6875 (est. \$3000/4000). A first printing of his story "The Tell-Tale Heart," in its original salmon wrappers, fetched \$4750 (est. \$1500/2500).

A first edition of *The Opal: A Pure Gift for the Holy Days* made \$11,250 (est. \$6000/8000). Signed "E.A.P. to T.H.C.," the Opal had been presented by Poe to Thomas Holley Chivers, a Georgian doctor-turned-poet whose verses, such as "Death," "The Grave," and "On Hearing of the Death of My Mother," dwelt on themes dear to Poe's own heart.

Then came a copy of the book that made Poe's name famous. A first edition, first issue of *The Raven and Other Poems* was described in the Christie's catalog as "a superb unsophisticated copy." Still in the original tan wrappers in which it was published in New York in 1845, it sold to the U.S. trade for \$182,500 (est. \$100,000/150,000).

"These high prices were making me nervous as I impatiently waited for 'For Annie' to come up," Tane wrote in an e-mail. A unique item, "For Annie" is a very late (circa 1849) two-page autograph manuscript of verses. The first half of the poem's 16 stanzas, along with instructions by Poe's publisher N.P. Willis to the printer, it also includes Poe's own comment on his work: "I think the lines for Annie much the best I have ever written."

The poem, whose speaker is near death because of self-poisoning, opens with these lines: "Thank Heaven! the crisis -/ The danger is past./ And the lingering illness/ Is over at last -/ And the fever called 'Living'/ Is conquered at last..." Poe wrote the poem for Nancy L. Richmond, known as "Annie," whom he courted after the death of his wife, Virginia, in 1847. Poe met Annie at a poetry lecture he gave while visiting Lowell, Massachusetts; it was she who is thought to have arranged and paid for Poe's sitting for what is known as the "Annie Richmond" daguerreotype.

Tane owns a recently discovered, laterally reversed, copy-plate daguerreotype of the image. The manuscript would complement it beautifully. Nonetheless, before she could even get her paddle up, the bidding had already reached \$300,000. No chance at that price, and it was only the beginning. An unprecedented \$830,500 was its final price, nearly a dozen times the high estimate and a new world-auction record for any 19th-century American literary manuscript.

"He creamed some of the best Poe offered in the sale," said Wahlgren, confirming that the same phone buyer, an American collector, had also bought the *Tamerlane* and "In an Album." "It was pretty impressive what he did. That's where you really see passion going at it. The buyer's collection is not specifically focused on Poe, but he must have seen something that touched him, to go that strong."

After the sale, Tane said, Bill Self and his daughter came over and introduced themselves to her and expressed their disappointment that the poem wouldn't be in her collection. "But Bill was very pleased that Rudolph Evans's inscribed bust of Poe would be."

A 17" tall bronze, it was based on a Poe daguerreotype known as the "Ultima Thule." The life-size likeness was commissioned in the centennial year of Poe's birth by Chicago art collector Patrick Valentine. The signed edition was limited to two busts, one of which went to Valentine; the other was retained by the artist. "Bill said it was one of his and his late wife's favorite pieces, and he had fond memories of them buying it together twenty years ago."

A few days after the sale, Tane's *Tamerlane* was being delivered to the Boston Public Library for an exhibit, *The Raven in the Frog Pond: Edgar Allan Poe and the City of Boston*. It had just come back from another exhibit, at the Library of Virginia in Richmond, *Poe: Man, Myth, or Monster?* Once it comes home again, Tane said in a phone call, it's "definitely staying home for a while." In light of the Self sale, she has to have it reevaluated for insurance purposes. "It will probably be prohibitive to put it out on loan again except, well, it all depends. I like to share. I feel a responsibility that all [collectors] should share."

In hindsight, Tane said, she "really was the overall winner" at the Self sale. "The value of my collection had doubled within an hour, and as Bill and I traded catalogs, and I read his inscription to me, it put a smile on my face." It read: "From one Poe collector to a greater one. Bill Self."

Of the sale in general, Wahlgren said, "We were obviously pleased. Overall the number of records across the board was quite remarkable." These included not only the two Poe benchmarks, but a new world record for Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, which now stands at \$218,500, and one for any Dickens book at auction, set by *A Christmas Carol*, which sold for \$290,500.

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He added, "We've seen that twice now. When we sold the all-Dickens Part I [of the Self library] we saw that narrowing taking place, and now we have seen it again."

This relatively new style of icon-collecting contrasts sharply with the older styles of Self and Tane, each of whom has gone for depth. Self's collection, for example, included a two-page autograph letter written by Poe on September 11, 1839, to his physician, Joseph Evans Snodgrass of Baltimore, who edited *The American Museum of Science, Literature and the Arts* and ministered to Poe in the last days before his death. It now belongs to Tane. She also bought Self's two folio broadsheets advertising Poe's proposed literary magazine, "Prospectus of the Penn Magazine," published in two 1840 issues of the *Daily Chronicle*, and *General Advertiser*.

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Four pages long, the letter expresses Washington's unequivocal support for the new Constitution, which was opposed by many special-interest groups. Washington himself professed neutrality in public, but to Bushrod, he declared that despite its imperfections, there were, built into it, ways to amend it. "I do not conceive that we are more inspired—have more wisdom—or possess more virtue than those who will come after us," he wrote. "The power under the Constitution will always be with the people."

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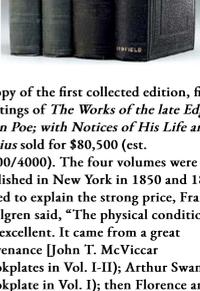
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Originally published in the April 2010 issue of *Maine Antique Digest*. (c) 2009 Maine Antique Digest

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A copy of the first collected edition, first printings of *The Works of the late Edgar Allan Poe; with Notices of His Life and Genius* sold for \$80,500 (est. \$3000/4000). The four volumes were published in New York in 1850 and 1856. Asked to explain the strong price, Francis Wahlgren said, "The physical condition was excellent. It came from a great provenance [John T. McVicar (bookplates in Vol. I-II); Arthur Swann (bookplate in Vol. I); then Florence and Edward Kaye (bookplates in all four volumes)]. I believe what they really wanted was the ultimate set of his collected works. Published over several years, it is his whole corpus of work. And it was posthumous, so you're not going to get one inscribed."

A first edition of Poe's legendary first book, *Tamerlane and Other Poems*, sold for \$662,500 (est. \$500,000/700,000). The price is a new world-auction record for a 19th-century book of American poetry. Published in Boston in 1827, it is the only book known to have been issued by the printer, Calvin F.S. Thomas. Both he and Poe were 18 years old at the time. Only 50 copies are thought to have been printed; only 12 are known. This copy, offered in its original printed tan wrappers, was purchased by Bill Self for \$165,000 on January 30, 1990, at the H. Bradley Martin sale at Sotheby's in New York City. The only other copy in private hands is Susan Tane's. The institutions that own a *Tamerlane* include London's the British Library; The Huntington Library, San Marino, California; University of Texas, Austin; New York Public Library; Indiana University; Free Library of Philadelphia; and the University of Chicago. The University of Virginia had one, but it was stolen circa 1974.

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