

November 16th, 2012

Prolonged Bidding Takes Dutch Still Life to \$666,000

by Jeanne Schinto



Skinner, Inc., Boston, Massachusetts

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Photos courtesy Skinner

Skinner's art department head, Robin S.R. Starr, spent almost 20 minutes drawing out the bids for 17th-century Dutch artist Willem Claeszoon Heda's *Still Life with Tazza, Peeled Lemon, and Roemer*. The time was well spent. The oil on cradled panel went all the way past its \$30,000/50,000 estimate to a final bid of \$666,000 (including buyer's premium) and formed a healthy percentage of the whole sale's tally of slightly more than \$2,773,000.

The painting came to the September 7 sale at the auction house's Boston gallery from a private collection in Maine. The provenance, provided by Fred G. Meijer, a curator at the Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische (Netherlands Institute for Art History), could be tracked unbroken from 1890 to the present. Meijer also authenticated the painting and dated it as 1630.

Fruit as rendered by Heda doesn't look exactly edible. The spiraling peel of the lemon in this picture is a silvery gold that harmonizes with the rest of the painting's palette of subdued grays, greens, and bronzes. Nourishment isn't the point.

Like precious metals, lemons were a status symbol for the period. This slightly desiccated lemon is a reminder of mortality, just like the overturned silver tazza in the arrangement.

Heda, one of the most important members of the Haarlem school, often used the same objects in different still lifes. For example, the tazza appears to be the one pictured in two Heda works owned by Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum. It's possibly the same tazza in a Heda painting acquired in 2005 by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. A similar tazza is in Heda's *Still Life: Pewter and Silver Vessels and a Crab*, owned by Britain's National Gallery.

Members of the live audience, having plenty of time to converse as the phone bidding dragged on, speculated that the contenders were museums wanting their own Heda. They were not, said Starr, who identified them as collectors and dealers, mainly in Europe, not all of them good English speakers. In fact, as Starr knew but live audience members didn't, one of the final two spoke no English at all. The person on the other end of the phone-bid taker's line was relaying the translated numbers to him, then retranslating them back to Skinner. That's why the bidding took so long.

The Heda contrasted in interesting ways with an American still life in the sale, Robert Spear Dunning's late 19th-century *Tabletop Still Life with Fruit*, that sold to another phone bidder for a mid-estimate \$41,475. The subject is naturalistic fruit, unambiguous peaches, grapes, and so forth. Dunning, a cofounder and leader of the Fall River school, was capable of much more, and those more elaborate artworks bring commensurately bigger prices.

On November 16, 2001, for instance, Skinner sold Dunning's *Cherries: A still life with self portrait reflected in a silver compote* for \$233,500. It not only depicts luscious fruits. In hall of mirrors style, it shows Dunning reflected in the compote in the act of painting the painting. A couple of years later, on November 21, 2003, Skinner sold another Dunning, *Opulent Still Life with Peaches and Honeycomb*, that features a self-portrait of the artist reflected in the shine of a table leg. It was that sale's top lot at \$248,000.

Although the Heda was unsigned, there was obviously no question in any serious contender's mind that this still life was by his hand. In the case of other unsigned works in this sale, bidders gambled to varying degrees, depending on their knowledge, wits, and temperament. Cataloged as 18th-century French or Italian school, a conté crayon on paper drawing of *Jacob and the Angel*, estimated at \$700/900, sold to a phone bidder for \$27,255. A 17th-century school of Guido Reni oil portrait of Saint Paul, his bald head painted to reflect a halo-like light, brought \$20,145 from another phone bidder on an estimate of \$1500/2000.

Some people wanted to believe that a small American school painting, *A Looker On*, inscribed "Chase 127..." on its reverse, was a Shinnecock Hills scene by William Merritt Chase. It shows a farmer and his horse-driven wagon on a seaside roadway under a turquoise sky. He's passing by a small sailboat breezing along the inlet. Yes, it could be turn-of-the-20th-century Long Island, but another inscription on the back states that the painting was bought at auction by a man named Chase. It was not painted by someone of that name. The oil on panel sold to a phone bidder for \$9480 (est. \$2500/3500).

"It's a roller coaster," Starr said of how it felt to be privy to presale conversations about the unsigned works. "I'm more of a merry-go-round person." Happy to provide the available facts, she keeps her opinions to herself.

Two unsigned oil on canvas marine paintings, consigned as part of a group of sea-themed works from "a prominent Cincinnati, Ohio, collector," carried six-figure hopes. *Queen of the Seas*, identified as being by William Bradford, was estimated at \$120,000/180,000. *The U.S. Frigate United States versus Macedonia in the War of 1812*, attributed to Thomas Birch, was up for \$150,000/200,000. Bidders were unmoved. Both paintings were bought in.

They were consigned by the collector's estate, but that didn't mean they could be assigned low reserves, Starr said. The family wanted them to be valued as much as the collector had valued them. "Setting an estimate isn't always as simple as deciding what the painting will go for. There are sentimental attachments that have to be considered and weighed. My favorite kind of consignor is a woman who comes in with a painting and says, 'This belonged to my ex-husband, and I never want to see it again.'"

In fairness, marine paintings from other collections offered in this sale did not always do swimmingly. It simply may not have been a marine scene kind of night. And two portraits from the Cincinnati collection did bring good prices. One was by Thomas Sully, an oil on canvas portrait of General George Cadwalader of the Philadelphia Cadwaladers. It went to a Stuart bidder at \$11,850 (est. \$5000/7000). The other was a Gilbert Stuart oil portrait of an 18th-century Royal Navy officer named Captain John MacBride. Someone in the room bought it for \$44,438 (est. \$15,000/25,000).

At the last couple of art sales at Skinner, fewer chairs than usual have been set out, as live attendance has dwindled. Given today's array of absentee-bidding modes, a skimpily populated room is no indication of a seller's potential success. At this sale, according to Skinner statistics, 1039 Internet bidders signed up, and several spent major money. One bought an unsigned 17th-century Continental school portrait of a man in a ruff, in oil on an oval panel, for \$79,625 (est. \$3000/5000). Another took an unsigned 18th-century French school portrait of an aristocratic woman with a dog for \$21,870 (est. \$3000/5000).

"Many people think of Skinner as a regional auction house, but that's no longer true," said Starr. "The Internet makes our reach global, and many of the phone bidders are calling from a six-hour plane ride away."

Like the Heda, the second-most successful lot went to a phone bidder. It was a 1966 Abstract Expressionist painting by Chinese-American Walase Ting that hung behind the podium during the sale. The large (63½" x 72½") acrylic on canvas, composed completely of tiny dots of sunny, Day-Glo-like colors, has the ironic title of *Milky Way*. Fresh to the market, it had been bought from the artist and sold for \$93,615 (est. \$30,000/40,000).

One of the sweetest works in the sale was a drawing of a female head by Henri Matisse. Initialed "HM," *Tête de femme* is composed of just a few lines depicting her face and her two hands cupping it in reverie. Matisse executed it in conté crayon on spiral-bound paper—from a sketchbook, one presumes. A model of economy, I would call it. Perhaps because it wasn't one of Matisse's female heads with curved hair and so forth, the sketch sold to a phone bidder for just \$24,885 (est. \$40,000/60,000).

Sculpture offerings were spotty at this sale, as they are at most every fine art sale. Harriet Frishmuth's *Play Days* sold for its low estimate, \$14,220. Paul Manship's *Marietta* (or *Young Minerva*) failed to sell on the day but appears as having sold soon after the auction for \$20,000 (est. \$30,000/50,000). Two 19th-century works, one by Daumier and one by William Couper, were bought in.

What sculpture buyers did get excited about were more recent works, including British artist Lynn Russell Chadwick's 1986 bronze *Sitting Woman III*, which sold for \$10,073 (est. \$1500/2000), and Harold Tovish's *Passage*, a 1964-65 bronze (one of an edition of two), which brought \$10,665 (est. \$4000/6000).

The paintings and sculpture section of this sale was preceded by offerings of prints and photographs. It may not be a trend, but I noticed a fair number of prints and photographs of nudes that sold for big numbers. German photographer Erwin Blumenfeld's sensuous female nude *Aubade* (1937-38) brought \$8295 (est. \$2500/3500). Duane Michals's 1969 photo narrative *The Young Girl's Dream (in Five Parts)* made \$5925 (est. \$1200/1800). Edward Weston's classic *Charis, Santa Monica/Nude* from 1936, in a later print by the photographer's youngest son, Cole Weston, realized \$8295 (est. \$4000/6000).

Not to be outdone by the women, some male nudes did well. Rembrandt's 1646 etching of a nude man seated on the ground with one leg extended fetched \$23,700, making it the top lot of that 258-lot section of the sale.

Because big prices are the news, I've highlighted them, but there were plenty of worthy items to be had under \$3000. Someone paid \$2607 (est. \$2000/4000) for George Luks's watercolor and graphite portrait of his elderly landlady. She's no paragon of female beauty in this depiction, but with her boozy red nose and little gray bun on top of her head, she's got her own insouciant charm. The way Luks posed her, in profile and hand on her hip, adds to her timeless appeal.

Two Sheep, an uncannily anthropomorphic double portrait in oil by the great animal painter Rosa Bonheur, sold to an absentee bidder for \$2370 (est. \$1000/1500). A small (9½" x 13¾"), sunlit Charles Woodbury oil on board, *Cliffs, Late Afternoon*, went to the Internet at \$2673 (est. \$2500/3500). Another Internet bidder bought Hayley Lever's 1902 oil on canvas *St. Ives, Cornwall*, an animated scene of sailing ships at a busy harbor, for \$2818 (est. \$1200/1800). And a room bidder walked away with John Whorf's watercolor *Abandoned Farm, no. 2* for \$1659 (est. \$1500/2000).

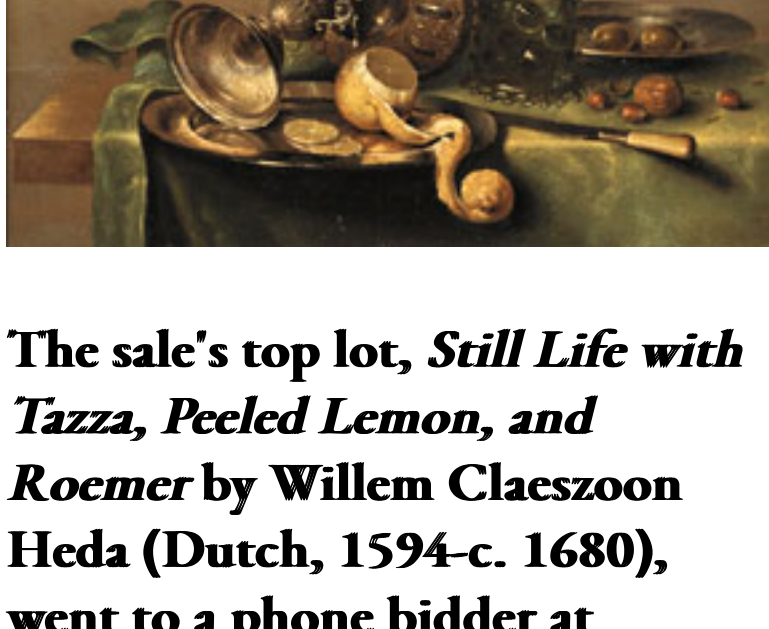
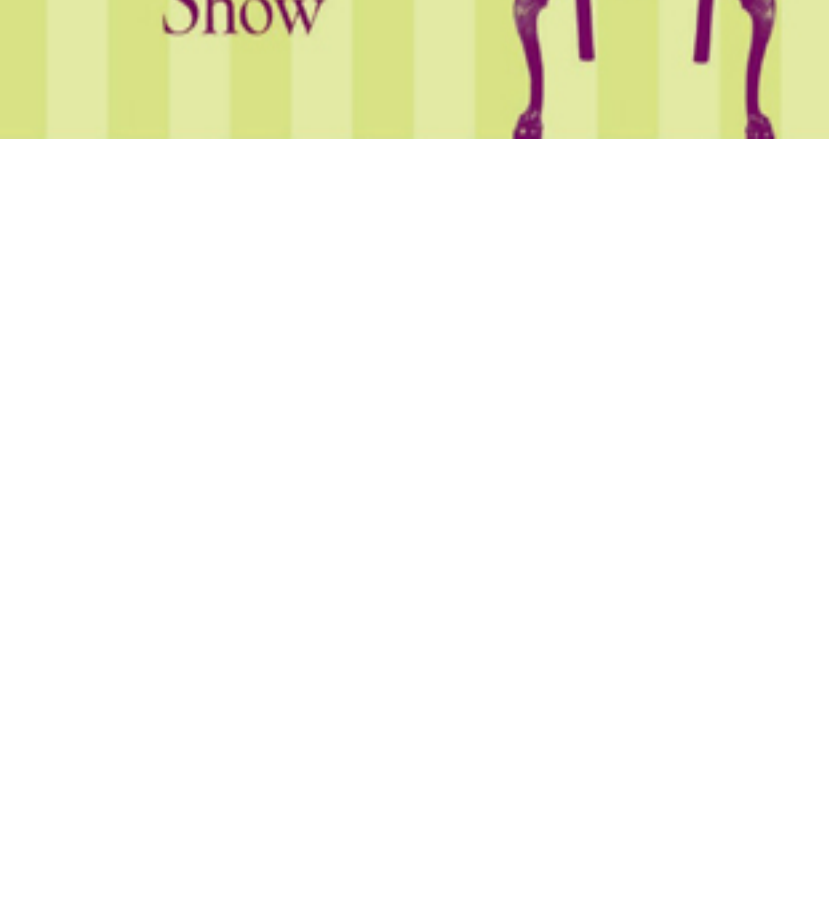
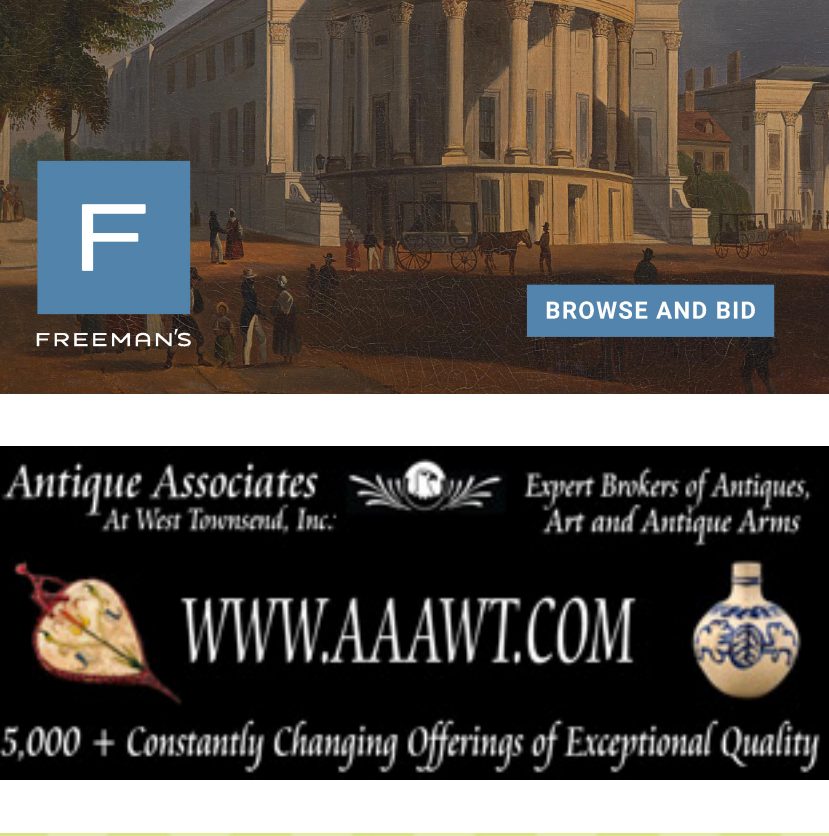
The Whorf buyer was my husband, clock dealer and restorer Bob Frishman. Stephen Fletcher, auctioneering at that moment, was nonplussed by Frishman's bids. Then he looked more closely at the painting on the laptop image on the podium. "Oh, I get it. There's a clock in it."

Frishman has been working for some years on a project, "Horology in Art." He has lectured on the subject and begun writing about examples for *Watch & Clock Bulletin*, the magazine of the National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors. Selections include works by Titian, Jamie Wyeth, Munch, and David. Although he now has 424 digital images, he was happy finally to have an example for our living room wall, not just his computer screen.

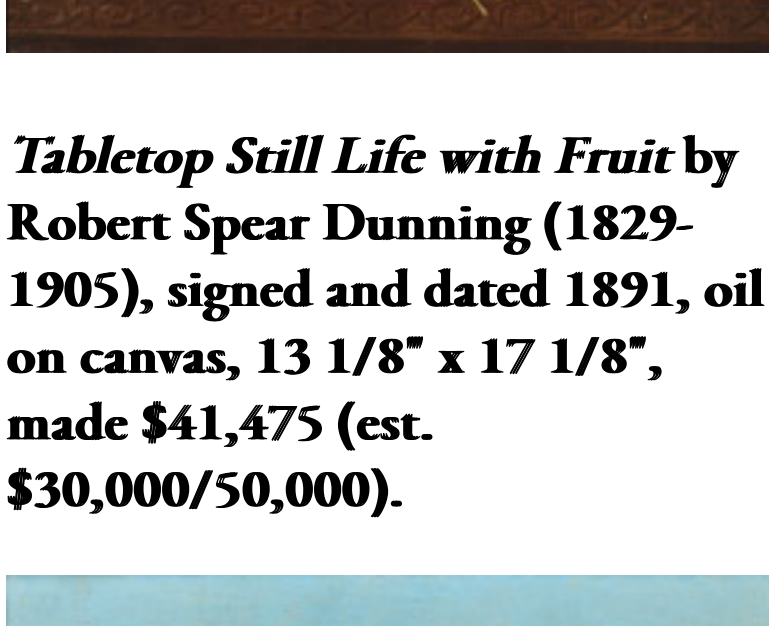
For more information, contact Skinner in Boston at (617) 350-5400 or in Marlborough at (508) 970-3100; Web site (www.skinnerinc.com).

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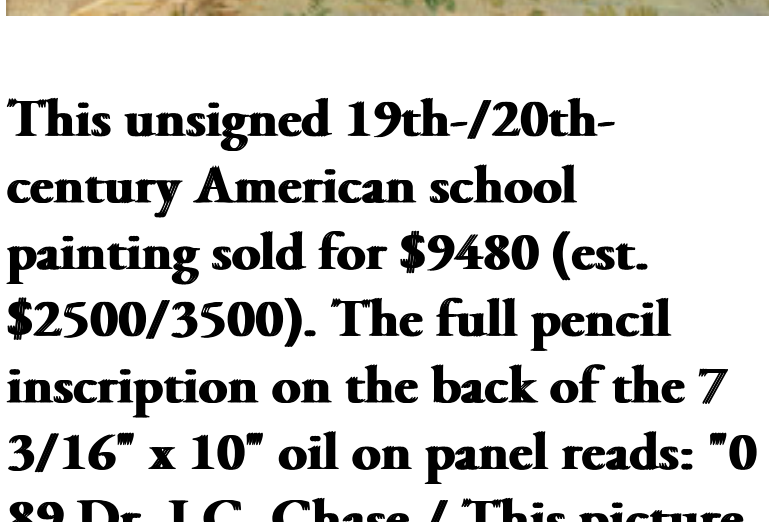
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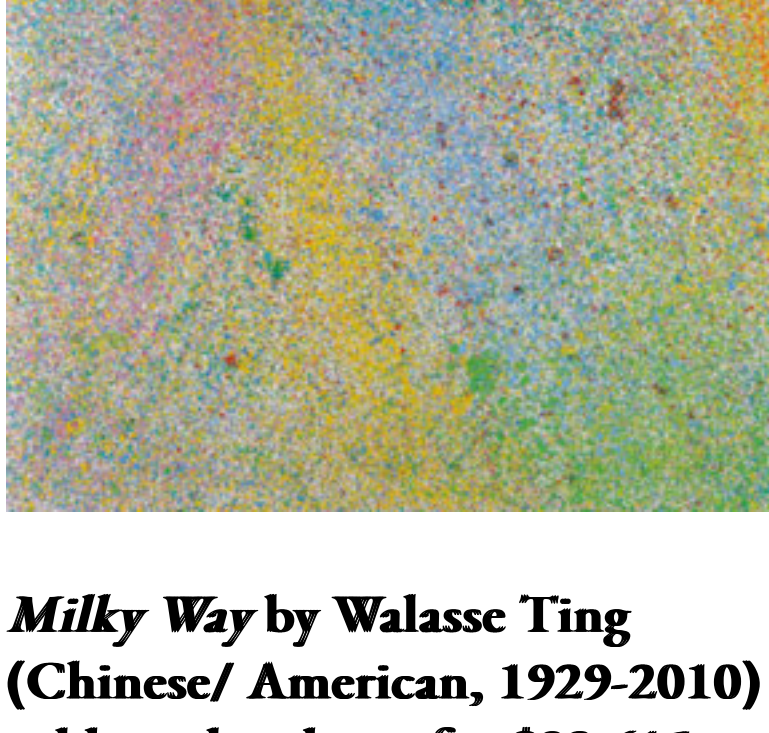
The sale's top lot, *Still Life with Tazza, Peeled Lemon, and Roemer* by Willem Claeszoon Heda (Dutch, 1594-c. 1680), went to a phone bidder at \$666,000 (est. \$30,000/50,000). The 15½" x 22½" oil on cradled panel dates from 1630.



***Tabletop Still Life with Fruit* by Robert Spear Dunning (1829-1905), signed and dated 1891, oil on canvas, 13 1/8" x 17 1/8", made \$41,475 (est. \$30,000/50,000).**



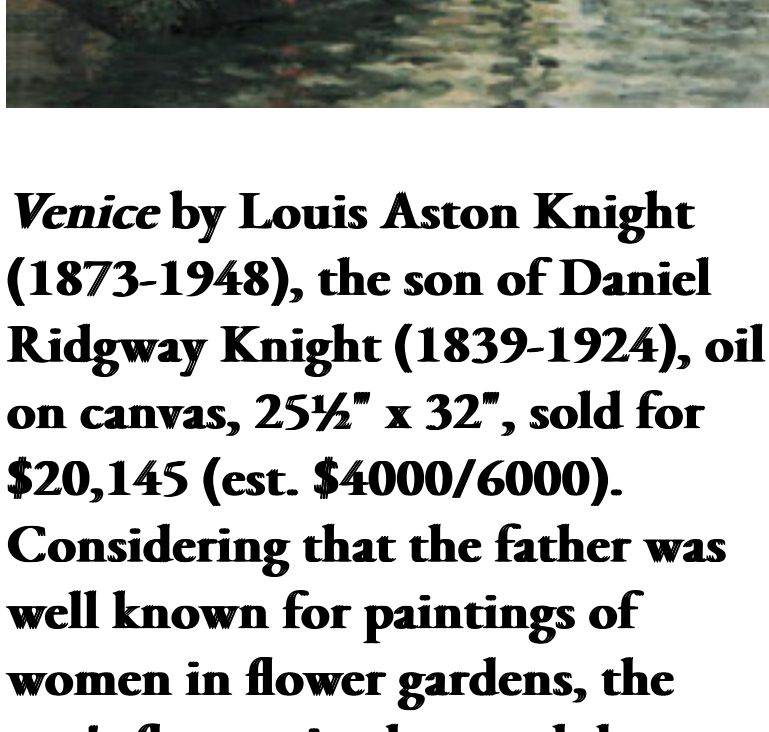
This unsigned 19th-/20th-century American school painting sold for \$9480 (est. \$2500/3500). The full pencil inscription on the back of the 7 3/16" x 10" oil on panel reads: "0 89 Dr. J.C. Chase./ This picture has been pronounced/ By competent judges as being a/ work of art./ This picture was purchased at the Auction Room/ by Dr. Chase for small 'Amt.' of 18.00 which he prises verry [sic] highly./ 'A Looker On.'"



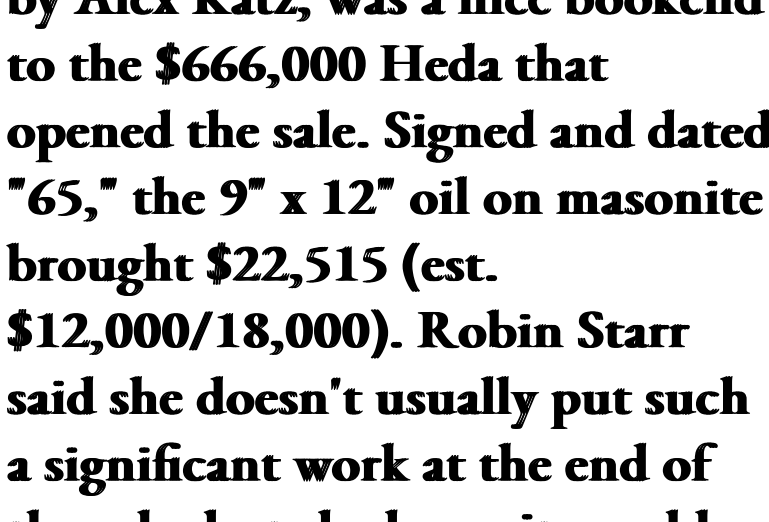
***Milky Way* by Walase Ting (Chinese/ American, 1929-2010) sold on the phone for \$93,615 (est. \$30,000/40,000). Titled, signed, and dated "...Ting 66" on the reverse, the 63½" x 72½" acrylic on canvas was fresh to the market, having been purchased from the artist. The buyer was a New York dealer, Robin Starr said.**



This etching of a nude man seated on the ground with one leg extended was by Rembrandt van Rijn (Dutch, 1606-1669). The 1646 etching on laid paper is tiny, with a plate/sheet size of 3¾" x 6". Signed and dated within the plate, it brought \$23,700 (est. \$4000/ 6000).



***Venice* by Louis Aston Knight (1873-1948), the son of Daniel Ridgway Knight (1839-1924), oil on canvas, 25½" x 32", sold for \$20,145 (est. \$4000/6000). Considering that the father was well known for paintings of women in flower gardens, the son's flowers in the gondola are an interesting detail.**



The last lot, *The Yellow House* by Alex Katz, was a nice bookend to the \$666,000 Heda that opened the sale. Signed and dated "65," the 9" x 12" oil on masonite brought \$22,515 (est. \$12,000/18,000). Robin Starr said she doesn't usually put such a significant work at the end of the sale, but she knew it would do well in Boston, considering the successful retrospective of Alex Katz prints that was on view at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, through July 29.