

November 14th, 2008

Queen Anne and Cape Ann Lead Anniversary Sale

by Jeanne Schinto



Blackwood/March Auctioneers & Appraisers, Essex, Massachusetts

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"It's an accident that you end up walking into the right house call," said Michael March, owner of Blackwood/March Auctioneers & Appraisers in Essex, Massachusetts. This was to explain how a major piece of Americana was consigned to the 29th anniversary sale of his "little, tiny country auction company" on October 15.

The circa 1730 Boston Queen Anne easy chair with so-called Spanish feet had spent the last few years in an unremarkable condominium in Marblehead, Massachusetts, where it was the property of a woman whose estate was being settled by heirs. "When I took it and the rest of the furniture, it was the day before Labor Day," March recalled. "What I really wanted to do was race around in my sailboat. So I asked the guy, 'Can't we do this some other time?' He said, 'I'll help you put the things in your van right now.' I still didn't know what it was when I brought it home."

March was speaking before the sale took place in the function hall of Woodman's, a well-known Essex seafood restaurant ("inventor" of fried clams). By then, he did have an inkling that the chair was significant, "but I didn't know how significant."

The auctioneer credits his longtime friend and colleague Roger Pheulpin of Gloucester, Massachusetts, with educating him on the chair's potential. A full-time dealer, Pheulpin is head of the runners during

Blackwood/March's five auction nights a year. "I also like to say that Roger is head of my Americana department, head of my silver department, head of my...,," quipped

March, whose own specialty is Cape Ann art. It's his niche, and he does well by it, but Pheulpin's research convinced March that the chair was something to tell the big boys (and girls) about.

"I don't want to mention any names, but the response has been startling," March said in the same pre-auction conversation. "Some of the most prominent collectors in America have come to see it. Right now, we don't have an estimate because it's better that way for a small auction house like ours, and the knowledgeable people know what they want to pay."

On the night of the sale, while dealer William Samaha and museum curator Dean Lahikainen looked on, the chair elicited bids from only two contenders. One was Luke Beckerdite of Williamsburg, Virginia, the broker and independent decorative arts consultant who edits the scholarly journal American Furniture, published by Milwaukee's Chipstone Foundation. The other was Arthur T. Garrity of A.T. Garrity Fine Art Services, Hingham, Massachusetts, who was bidding for New York City dealer Leigh Keno.

When Garrity dropped out, Beckerdite was the winner at \$127,650 (including buyer's premium). "And now back to the regular world," said March to announce the next lot. In 29 years he had never before sold a six-figure item.

"For me, that was my personal best," the auctioneer later reflected. "A couple of years ago I sold a sofa table for eighty thousand." It was Seymour attributed. "We were hoping for something north of a hundred thousand on this, and that's what happened."

"It was a very nice piece of furniture," underbidder Garrity said, a bit wistfully. "It was all original except for the crest piece, which was an old repair" -from approximately 150 to 200 years ago by his reckoning. "But it had all of its original finish. It hadn't been monkeyed with."

Beckerdite pointed out its "sawn cabriole form" as being a primary indicator of its earliness. "It's really important because that form is right at the beginning of when that style appears in America. That's versus the more fully rounded pad-foot type we normally think of as being the hallmark of the late baroque or Queen Anne style."

Asked for comparables in public collections, Beckerdite noted a similar chair at Winterthur. It is pictured in Benno M. Forman's American Seating Furniture 1630-1730: An Interpretive Catalogue (1988). (See illustration on p. 367, with explanatory text on p. 369.) It is the classic reference book that March's associate Roger Pheulpin said he consulted. According to Forman's book, there are actually three at Winterthur, each with a different type of stretcher.

"You will see a variety of different turning forms on the stretchers," said Beckerdite. "Part of that is a result of these things being produced in different shops, and part is the result of those shops using piecework. You would have chair makers buying components and then using them in the assembling of their chairs."

Garrity said the crest repair prevented Keno from competing past the point that he did. Yet Beckerdite said it would be rare to find a chair survivor of this type without the same repair having been done at some point in its long life.

Asked whether the chair was destined for a public or private collection, Beckerdite said the latter.

As for the approximately 250 other lots of the evening, March had said beforehand, "It would be a strong sale without the chair," because he had multiple artworks from the estate of artist Gifford Beal (1879-1956). They came from the artist's estate via his granddaughter Edith Beal Tuttle.

The New York City-based Beal had spent numerous summers on Cape Ann, and his untouched, unframed, smallish oil examples at this auction showed both city and seaside locales. At a previous auction, March sold a dozen or so other Gifford paintings, consigned by another of Beal's granddaughters. "My understanding is that this is it-the end," said March.

One of Beal's Cape Ann marine scenes was the artist's top lot, going in the room at \$5060 (est. \$2000/4000). March said that the buyer, who won several other works by Beal, was acting on behalf of a Massachusetts corporation. At least two of the Beal paintings were double-sided with an urban landscape backed by a harbor view. Fetching the second-best Beal price of the evening, one of them sold to an absentee bidder for \$4370.

After the sale we asked March how Beal's prices this time compared with prices fetched by the other Beal granddaughter's consignment. "They brought very similar prices, so they defied gravity, along with the chair. That's because the knowledgeable people say, 'We're never going to get these again. These circumstances will not be happening again.'"

As high as the highs went, the lows went just as low for many of the sale's lesser pieces of furniture and decorative arts from local estates. "How much more trying can the times really be?" March reflected. "So we're not shocked that things under five hundred dollars are weaker than they were a month ago. That's a real reflection of the current market."

Blackwood/March does not have Internet bidding. Phone bids may be arranged for items estimated at \$2000 or above. For more information, contact Blackwood/March at (978) 768-6943 or see the Web site (www.blackwoodauction.com).

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