



Welcome Subscriber 75667 ( [Logout](#) or [View Account](#) )

January 22nd, 2008

## S.R. Gifford Painting Fetches \$831,000

by Jeanne Schinto



*Skinner Inc., Boston, Massachusetts*

by Jeanne Schinto

The bidding for what was to become the unrivaled highlight of Skinner's art sale in its Boston gallery on Friday, November 16, 2007, Sanford R. Gifford's *Sunday Prayers*, opened modestly enough at \$20,000—too modestly, for some. At \$29,000, a jump bid came from one of several phone bidders vying for the 7" x 12¼" sunlit scene of Union soldiers being led in prayer by a preacher on the banks of the Potomac. "Two hundred thousand," said a Skinner phone bid taker.

Skinner's estimate on the painting had been put at \$40,000/60,000; previewers had estimated its value at \$250,000, so only the impatience of the phone bidder was a surprise at that point. Then the bids started to climb, with raises always answered by Richard Rossello of Avery Galleries, Haverford, Pennsylvania, who was sitting in the room. The impatient phone bidder was tapped out at \$400,000. Then another tried his or her luck. Finally, Rossello was declared the winner at an applauded \$831,000 (including buyer's premium).

The catalog described the work as probably a study for Gifford's *Sunday Morning in the Camp of the Seventh Regiment*, which is in the collection of the Union League Club of New York in Manhattan. Gifford himself was a member of the exclusive social club, founded in 1863 to help garner support for the war effort. Other members over the past 144 years have included 15 U.S. presidents, seven senators, many congressmen, cabinet members, and scores of chief executive officers of major corporations. Gifford was also a Seventh Regiment enlistee who "sketched when time allowed," the catalog stated.

There's nothing sketchy about this picture, Rossello said. "It's a very thoughtfully and very completely composed work. As far as I'm concerned, it's a small masterpiece. First of all, it has everything I look for in a painting from that era. It's not just a beautiful painting, luminous and lovely in every aspect, it's also a meaningful picture from a historical perspective. Here Gifford is, a member of the regiment, capturing a moment that is absolutely genuine. With imagination, you can picture Robert E. Lee's family estate on the other side of the Potomac, which is, of course, Arlington [Virginia]. And then you have the whole notion of what this picture means within the context of the Civil War and American history. It helps that the painting is in spectacularly good condition, in its original frame. Everything about it, as far as I'm concerned, is an A-plus.

"I'm a little bit of a sucker for small paintings, anyway," the dealer added.

Asked if he had bought it with a person in mind, Rossello replied, "I bought it with a collection in mind that I think is probably going to be perfect for it, and I suspect that it will wind up there. And they're wonderful people—it's a wonderful collection. I think it will be a perfect home for it."

Rossello left the auction gallery after securing that single painting, to return to his booth at the Boston International Fine Art Show in the city's South End. The rest of the evening's sale of 538 lots, which together with the Gifford grossed \$2,489,773, was far less dramatic. Nearly a quarter (24%) of the lots were passed or bought in. Some of the unsold works were undistinguished estate materials, others were good pieces but overestimated, and then there were the paintings that really should not have gone unclaimed.

"Pourquoi?" asked Skinner CEO Karen Keane, sincerely miffed, when Dwight Blaney's *Geese at Eastham* was passed (est. \$10,000/15,000). No one replied. Offered at a higher estimate (\$25,000/35,000) at Skinner's paintings sale on March 2, 2007, it had been passed that time too. By virtue of that first showing, it was no longer fresh.

Bidders, however, did clamor for *Grain Stacks*, a scene in Giverny, France by American expatriate John Leslie Breck (est. \$20,000/30,000). Robin S.R. Starr of Skinner's paintings department said it was consigned to the sale by a local college professor who had bought it from a neighbor in the late 1960's. A local collector tried for it, but it sold to a dealer on the phone for \$160,000.

Bidders also liked the material that came to the auction from the estates of Frederick and Mary Ann Lippitt. The Lippitts, a brother and sister, lived together for over 50 years in a grand house in Providence, Rhode Island, built in 1873, that spanned the width of the entire block.

The family money came from textiles, and the siblings, neither of whom ever married, were philanthropists. Frederick was also a lawyer and politician, serving from 1961 to 1983 in the Rhode Island House of Representatives, ten of those years as Republican minority leader. His three bids for the Providence mayoralty were unsuccessful. When he died in 2005, the heirs were named as Brown University, the Rhode Island School of Design, his godson, William Howard Taft IV, and his sister, Mary Ann. With Mary Ann's death last year, Skinner was called in.

"They had an entire houseful of lovely things—paintings, objects, furniture," said Starr. "We were asked to come in and check it out for estate purposes, and whatever RISD and others weren't getting came here." This sale featured turn-of-the-20th-century works from their collection by European artists, including Frenchman Adolphe Alexandre Lesrel, and European works by American artists, including George Hitchcock. "We'll be having more of their materials periodically, not only in painting sales, but in English and Continental sales, and Americana too," said Starr.

Speaking of other Skinner specialties, on November 18, a couple of days after this sale, the books and manuscripts department sold 709 lots for \$2,206,624, bringing the auction house's total weekend take to a hefty \$4,696,397.

Like Friday evening's sale, the Sunday morning sale had its lone high flier, a Declaration of Independence broadside, printed in Boston, that sold to Seth Kaller Inc., White Plains, New York, for \$693,000 (including buyer's premium). "Let's all get a drink," Skinner expert and auctioneer Stuart P. Whitehurst said from the podium, "and I'm buying."

"In terms of non-John Dunlap printings, there are something like fourteen or fifteen different ones from the different states, and this would be the highest auction price for any of those," said Will Steere of Seth Kaller. (A full story will appear in a future issue.)

For more information, contact Skinner in Boston at (617) 350-5400 or in Bolton at (978) 779-6241; Web site ([www.skinnerinc.com](http://www.skinnerinc.com)).

comments powered by [Disqus](#)



Advertising | Subscriptions | Billing | Editor  
1 (800) 752-8521 • PO Box 1429

This website uses cookies to ensure you get the best experience on our website. [Learn more](#)

**Got it!**