

Sci-Tech at Skinner: More Than Geek Heaven

by Jeanne Schinto

The top lot of Skinner's science and technology sale in Boston on July 29 was a Kwanon prototype 35 mm camera, the earliest preproduction form of the Canon camera and Japan's more affordable answer to Germany's Leica and Contax of the early 1930's. A consignment from a collector who is a Nikon specialist, it sold after a battle between two phone bidders for \$138,000, more than four and a half times the high estimate and a Canon auction price record. Skinner sci-tech department head Nick Hawkins said the buyer was a collector overseas. (All auction prices include the buyer's premium; estimates do not.)



Kwanon preproduction prototype 35 mm camera, the earliest form of what would become the first Canon camera, was made, in late 1934 or early 1935, only German cameras of this type, unaffordable for most people, were available. Wooden mockups of the Kwanon were photographed for advertisements. There were reportedly other real prototypes made as well, but this may be the only one to have survived. Opening at the desk at \$26,000, it sold for \$138,000 to the same phone bidder who bought the Leica IIIC "Heer." It set a new world record for a Canon product. Skinner photo.

The Kwanon had good provenance. It also could legitimately be called extremely rare, even unique. Hawkins said the consignor acquired it about ten years ago from a family in the Bronx. They'd had it in their household since the 1950's after having received it as a partial rent payment from tenants, Hawkins said. How did the tenants get hold of it? Who knows? But the balance of their rent that month was paid by two other cameras, a Contax I and a Leica II, according to the family.

The numeral 2, stamped into the inner surface of the Kwanon's base plate, lends credence to the idea that it was the second operable prototype made by the company. Its designer, Goro Yoshida (1900-1993), claimed to have completed ten examples of the Kwanon (named after the Buddhist goddess of mercy, Kannon), but there is no other one known. And since the camera never went into production, this may be the lone survivor, an icon of an important moment in modern photographic history.

Another extremely rare piece, from an entirely different sci-tech category and much more distant historical period, an 18th-century American brass surveying compass, sold to a phone bidder, who was competing against a bidder on the Internet, for \$19,975. In fact, according to the eBay Live record, the two bidders bid up to \$17,000 on the hammer. The fine print states that Skinner may decide the winner when there is a tie, and its stated preference, for logistics' sake, is for a non-Internet bidder.

The compass, which has a 5/4" silvered dial, was signed "David Rittenhouse, Philad.," but it was determined not to have been the work of the David Rittenhouse (1732-1796), the astronomer and horological genius who was also the first maker of surveying instruments in America. It was, instead, the product of his nephew and namesake, his brother Benjamin's son, who was active in the late 1790's.

"Had it been a real David Rittenhouse, the final bid could easily have been tripled," said Jeffrey D. Lock of Ohio, a colonial instruments expert, whose article on Rittenhouse compasses in *Professional Surveyor Magazine* (December 2001) was referenced in a footnote in the Skinner catalog description.

"Nobody was bidding on this one naively, thinking it was the real deal," according to Lock, who has close ties to the early American surveying instruments collecting community. "But it is in totally original condition, and if you are a Rittenhouse collector, this would be one of the more difficult pieces to find." Lock said he knows of only one other existing instrument, owned by a private California collector, that was made by David Rittenhouse the younger.

Like the Kwanon, the Rittenhouse compass was market fresh. It also had the benefit of good, convincing provenance that led all the way back to its original owner. Hawkins said its consignor, from Oregon, had it in his possession as the result of smart, Depression-era shopping by a member of an earlier generation of the family, E. Taylor Campbell. Campbell, chief cartographer for the northwest section of Missouri, had bought it in 1931, on a visit to a secondhand store about 60 miles south-southwest of St. Louis. And he had actually used it.

The compass was engraved with the words "Made for Rich. Sherer." Research by the consignor suggests that was Richard Sherer, born in 1767 in Beaver County, Pennsylvania. This seems corroborated by the fact that the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, has in its collection a surveyor's compass by Rittenhouse & Evans, which bears the same name.

Rittenhouse & Evans is a known quantity, the Rittenhouse being Benjamin, David the younger's father, who worked in partnership with, no, not his own son but with his nephew, Benjamin Evans, during the period 1798-1801. Exactly who Richard Sherer was remains a mystery, but as Hawkins pointed out in his catalog notes, it is an invitation to inquiry. Why Sherer had two Rittenhouse instruments-possession that would have conferred a certain status on a prosperous landowner or surveyor of the period-provides an opportunity for future important research either for the compass's new owner or for others.

Besides the many other pieces of serious scientific and technological history offered at this sci-tech sale, there were, as usual, a number of whimsical lots that made us wonder why more collectors of the unspecialized variety don't join in the fun of these auctions. It's our belief that dealers and designers should more frequently be seen buying here, especially if they're looking for items that will appeal to offbeat, adventurous, or under-40 clients who are seeking aesthetic thrills.

Can't afford a weathervane or don't want one? How about a four-light tin-surfaced deep-sea diving helmet with sculptural qualities as interesting as many a copper running horse. Marked "A.J. Morse & Son, Boston," it came with its own wooden custom display stand and had once been part of the personal collection of a former curator of the Higgins Armory Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts. Copious presale interest had led Hawkins to believe this would be a winner, and it ultimately was, selling to yet another determined phone bidder for \$28,200, nearly ten times its high estimate.

An early 19th-century papier-mâché anatomical model of a caterpillar was another of the quirky visual delights among the approximately 600 sci-tech lots on offer. Probably German, 30" long, once meant to be an educational tool-its top half opens horizontally (like a giant, split hoagie) to reveal its innards-it came in its original pine storage case, which undoubtedly was the reason for its good condition. Absentees, phones, the Internet, and dealer Paul DeCoste of West Newbury, Massachusetts, who was bidding in person, all tried for it. In the end, one of the phone bidders paid \$4700 against a \$400/600 estimate.

DeCoste, a regular at these sales, was successful on other lots, including a marine barometer, a globe, and a sandglass. He was also a consignor and seemed pleased all around with his outcomes. Seated next to him was another regular, a collector who bought several early surveying instruments at strong retail prices. There appears to be significant strength in that market in general.

"Surveying instruments are showing a very definite upswing," Lock said, adding that he has noticed it particularly at Skinner, which is the only major auction house in the country that has a sci-tech department. "I think what has happened is that, starting with Nick Hawkins's first auction here [in September 2004], Skinner has moved itself, through his tutelage, to a place where people are more comfortable and confident in consigning instruments there. They know that Nick is very thorough in his research, and buyers know that he doesn't misrepresent anything. Everything I've purchased there I've been totally satisfied with."

We asked Skinner CEO Karen Keane why the auction house decided to develop the department, which is now about eight years old. "There is a tradition of sci-tech in England," she said. (Hawkins is British born and previously worked at Christie's in London before joining Skinner.) "There was trade happening in shows and among dealers in the United States, and, frankly, we saw a niche. It goes along with our whole philosophy, 'If you build it, they will come.' It's the reason why we have a Native American department; why we built a musical instruments department; and why we sell our twentieth-century design material. There was business happening, and we wanted to be part of the mix. Whether we're selling to retail or wholesale buyers, the activity makes the whole collecting area stronger," because, she noted, categories thrive when good material is made available through reliable venues.

When we mentioned that we wished more people would discover sci-tech, Keane said, "This is a place where men, professional men, happen to congregate. It may sound like a cliché, but women more easily get involved in decorations and furniture. That's a place where we feel comfortable and where many women have been able to be successful. Sci-tech is more about 'what does it do' and 'how does it do it.' But crossover is always possible."

It certainly was at this sale, where some 400 lots of dolls and toys followed the sci-tech ones. The number of all lots offered was 1035. Of those, Skinner reported 907 were sold (87.5% by volume, 89% by value) for a total of \$1,589,630.

It was not the first time that the two departments had a joint sale, with automatons the most obvious bridge between the two general areas of interest. It was, however, the first time that sci-tech material was sold in Boston's rather than in Bolton, Massachusetts. Keane said it was Hawkins's idea to move his sale from the country to the city. "He lobbied hard for it," she told us. "It's easier for international customers to get to Boston, and this is an international market."

Hawkins considered the experiment a success, especially in terms of his ability to present the material. "There was more room in Boston than in Bolton, and the Boston gallery staff worked really hard to put the sale together," he said.

Also new to the department this time was the addition of assistant cataloging the renowned clock expert, who helped with identifying the horological items, automatons, and the like. "He is more knowledgeable about clocks than anybody at Skinner," said Keane, who added that he'll be assisting with other auction departments too. Those departments are likely to be Americana, Continental, and discovery. He will be assisting in realms besides the mechanical. It's a little-known fact but, in addition to his work with clocks, Cheney has been quietly dealing in furniture for the last 30 years.

For more information about this sale or others, contact Skinner in Boston at (617) 350-5400, in Bolton at (978) 779-6241, or via its Web site (www.skinnerinc.com).