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Second Copley Library Sale Features Twain Trove and Declaration Broadside

by Jeanne Schinto



Sotheby's, New York City

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Photos courtesy Sotheby's

The second of four scheduled sales offering the contents of the former James S. Copley Library fetched \$2,783,342 at Sotheby's in New York City on June 17.

Featured this time was an extensive collection of Mark Twain manuscripts and letters.

An unpublished Twain manuscript, "A Family Sketch," estimated at \$120,000/ 160,000, was the sale's highlight, selling at \$242,500 (includes buyer's premium) to a representative of Ursus Books, New York City, who was bidding for its client, the University of California at Berkeley. The price established a new world auction record for any autograph manuscript by Twain, Sotheby's press office reported.

Robert H. Hirst, general editor of the Mark Twain Papers & Project at Berkeley, said the University of California Press will eventually publish the 64-page memoir of Twain's family and household, including servants. It will be included in a volume along with "A Record of Small Foolishnesses," which is at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville.

A description of Twain's "Foolishnesses" doesn't sound promising. In Hirst's words, "It's a record of funny things his kids said." Then you remember it's Twain, Twain's kids, Twain's idea of "funny."

Berkeley also bought via Ursus a chapter from *A Tramp Abroad* for \$59,375. The university had hoped for Chapter 8 of *The Gilded Age*, but it went to a private collector at \$68,500. The same private collector also bought three consecutive leaves from *Huck Finn* and *Tom Sawyer Among the Indians*. The price for the piece of the sequel to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was \$46,875.

While these and other manuscripts did exceedingly well, the Twain correspondence results varied. The top Twain letter, ten pages written to cruise ship-mate Emma Beach on February 10, 1868, sold to a private collector for an extraordinary \$41,250 (est. \$10,000/15,000). What made it a standout in a field of nearly 100 other letter lots was its subject—the art of writing. "To get the right word in the right place is a rare achievement," he wrote Beach. "... *Any*body can have ideas—the difficulty is to *express* them, without squandering a quire of paper on an idea that ought to be reduced to one glittering paragraph."

Writers' family letters generally don't do as well as ones in which they discuss their art, careers, or colleagues. Twain family letters showed no exception, although Sotheby's estimates showed the auction house thought otherwise. A nine-page letter in which the author defends his personal qualities to his future father-in-law brought \$25,000 (est. \$30,000/40,000). A pair of letters to his daughter Jean, in which he talks about his famous wardrobe of white suits, fetched just \$3750 (est. \$5000/7000). An eight-page letter to his daughter Olivia ("Susy") discussing his visit to a palm reader, illustrated with two cartoonish drawings of thumbs, went to a private collector at \$6875 (est. \$8000/12,000). That price included the (torn) envelope.

Kevin Mac Donnell of Austin, Texas, a Twain collector and scholar who is also owner of the rare-book firm that bears his name, said he thought the correspondence results reflected several factors other than subject. First, the state of the economy ("the times in which we live"). Second, the letters' relative lack of freshness. "Nearly all these letters have appeared at auction within the last twenty years," he said. "For example, all the letters to Jean and Susy and [another daughter] Clara were part of a big batch of about a hundred discovered in a stamp shop in California about two decades ago."

Third, he attributed the results to something he calls "letter fatigue." "I think that when this many letters come up all at once, without being broken up by books or broadsides or other things, that's just an awful lot of letters. Of course, if you're a Twain collector, letter fatigue doesn't set in. And if you're only there to buy one or two things, it doesn't [set in], either. But I think for most others, that many letters all at once is kind of overwhelming."

Mac Donnell said he bought multiple lots of letters to Twain publishers Frank and Elisha Bliss for a client. He paid \$10,625 for a group of three letters Twain wrote to Elisha. A group of four to Elisha's son Frank came to a mere \$1500. "That's getting pretty cheap per page," said Mac Donnell. Both lots were estimated at \$6000/8000.

Nor all of Mac Donnell's purchases were bargains. A Twain letter to a Gertrude Swain of Greeley, Nebraska, a young fan of *Huckleberry Finn*, cost Mac Donnell \$18,750 (est. \$7000/10,000). Swain had apparently told Twain she had read the novel at least 50 times. Twain, focusing on the book's moral lessons, touches on his well-known disregard for organized religion: "I would rather have your judgment of the moral quality of the Huck Finn Book, after your fifty readings of it, than that of fifty clergymen after reading it once apiece." He added: "I should have confidence in your moral vision, but not so much in theirs, because it is limited in the matter of distance, & is pretty often out of focus."

"That was a terrific letter, and I was glad to snag it for my own collection," said Mac Donnell, who spent about \$75,000 capturing about 90% of his wish list. He said he had expected to pay \$125,000 to \$135,000 for what he had hoped to get for himself. In retrospect, he should have bought a little more, he said. "But they don't offer things in the order that I want them to."

The comment harks back to the letter-fatigue theme, but it also speaks to the perennial dilemma of any bidder. "If you have your eye on one or two things, you go a little soft at the beginning of the sale to conserve your budget," he said. "And then by the end of the sale, you're looking back saying to yourself, 'Damnation! Hindsight's better than foresight.' But I can't complain. The things I didn't get I was perfectly happy not to have got at the prices they went for."

Before the afternoon session of Twain items, a morning session offered the Copley Library's collection of letters and manuscripts by various other writers, artists, scientists, and world leaders. The top lot of those items was a pen-and-ink portrait by Robert Kastor of F. Scott Fitzgerald, inscribed by the author with the final two paragraphs of *The Great Gatsby*: It sold for \$98,500 (est. \$25,000/35,000) to a member of the New York trade. Thirteen other Kastor portraits achieved minimal amounts by comparison, ranging from \$1250 each for Marcus Garvey, Jerome K. Jerome, and Rudyard Kipling to \$7500 for Leo Tolstoy.

A group of 15 autograph letters by newspaper tycoon William Randolph Hearst discussing his affair with Marion Davies was another lot that made the morning's top picks. The correspondence sold to an anonymous phone bidder for \$40,625 (est. \$20,000/25,000), proving once again that sex sells.

An archive of 48 letters, notes, and other documents by John Jacob Astor relating to the fur trade sold for \$36,250 (est. \$18,000/25,000). The buyer was said to be a private collector who is interested in American financial history.

James Cummins Bookseller, New York City, paid \$52,500 (est. \$15,000/25,000) for a huge collection of autograph manuscripts by Charles Cramer. The 40 volumes—approximately 1520 pages of manuscript and 2100 illustrations (woodcuts, engravings, drawings, and watercolors)—document this Russian-born gentleman's world travels, including 12 years in the United States.

An autograph sketchleaf by George Gershwin for "Clap Yo' Hands" and "Maybe" went at \$28,750 (est. \$8000/ 12,000). A Gershwin-signed typewritten letter, in which he discourses on the composition of "The Man I Love," made \$15,000 (est. \$5000/7000).

Results for an autograph letter by Charles M. Russell, artist of the American West, bodes well for the third part of the Copley Library sale, scheduled for October, which will feature Western material. Written in misspelled American English on Russell's letterhead with steer's skull vignette, this discussion of art, cowboys, and Tom Mix, among other things, brought \$23,750 (est. \$6000/8000).

A Charlotte Brontë letter, however, sold for a soft \$68,500 to a member of the London trade (est. \$70,000/ 100,000). Two other Brontë letters were passed (est. \$30,000/50,000 and \$40,000/ 60,000). Also passed were two by Emily Dickinson (est. \$35,000/50,000 each).

Of ten lots of Albert Einstein correspondence, four failed, while only one of the others got just an inch above its low estimate, selling at \$4063.

Still, on balance, the sale should be considered a modest success and proves that the auction house is on track with its prediction for the Copley material as a whole. Sotheby's estimated that all four sales would bring \$15 million; the total has now reached just over \$7,146,000 with two sales left to go.

That sum got a \$572,500 injection as the last lot of the day went up. Featured in its own catalog, it was the Copley's Declaration of Independence broadside. Published in Salem, Massachusetts, on either July 15 or 16, 1776, it is believed to be the earliest Declaration broadside published in Massachusetts, and only five other copies are known.

The buyer in the salesroom, bidding against the reserve and not quite up to the low estimate, was William S. Reese of New Haven, Connecticut. The rare-book dealer was not buying it for someone else, he said. "I bought it for myself." Did he really not have any plans to resell it? "Not at the moment. It's nice to have a Declaration of Independence." He laughed.

In the past, Reese has owned another of the Salem copies. "I bought it from the man who bought it at one of the [Philip D.] Sang sales [at Sotheby Parke Bernet in the late 1970's]. I later sold it to a collector, who still has it." The other known copies are in institutions, according to the Sotheby's census, which names the Peabody Essex Museum, Georgetown University, Harvard University, and the Massachusetts Historical Society.

Reese identified himself as the underbidder at Skinner on November 18, 2007, when Will Steere of Seth Kaller, Inc., White Plains, New York, paid \$693,500 for a Boston broadside. Steere said at the time, "In terms of non-John Dunlap printings, this would be the highest auction price for any of those."

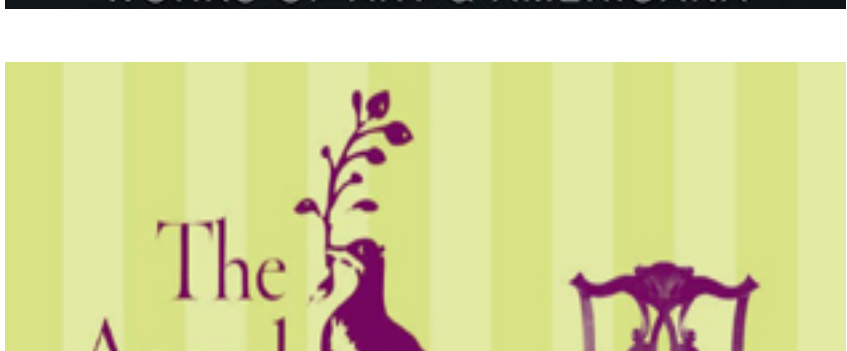
That price was surpassed on June 24, 2009, when a Boston copy sold at Christie's for \$722,500. Not much of a difference, but it was a price realized in the midst of the ongoing global financial crisis.

In all, there are 13 known 1776 broadside editions, the first being the so-called Dunlap, published by John Dunlap in Philadelphia on either July 4 or 5. The last Dunlap that went to auction was sold to Norman Lear and David Hayden via Sothebys.com on June 29, 2000, for an Internet document auction record of \$8.14 million.

For more information, contact Sotheby's at (212) 606-7000 or see the Web site (www.sothebys.com).

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