

Swann Galleries, New York City

Shadows Uplifted: A "Curated" African-American Fine Art Sale

by Jeanne Schinto
Photos courtesy Swann

At the start of Swann's African-American fine art sale on Thursday, February 13, in New York City, auctioneer Nicholas Lowry referred to the auction as having been "curated" by department specialist Nigel Freeman. Besides being described by a verb usually reserved for the activities of museum personnel, the event also had a museum exhibition-like name.

It was meant to show that the sale was more selective than usual, said Freeman, who

featured. For this sale, there were works from the 19th century through the mid-20th century only. Said Freeman, "This time, I gave the earlier artists a platform of their own."

The new approach is due to the signs of a welcome evolution. Simply put, African-American art is getting recognized as American art, period. "We're seeing a lot more collecting across the boundaries," said Freeman. "There are collectors looking for significant African-American artists who con-

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took the sale's title, "Shadows Uplifted: The Rise of African-American Art," from the subtitle of an 1892 novel, *Iola Leroy, Or Shadows Uplifted*, by Frances Harper. No doubt about it. The sale had been carefully planned, except for one uncontrollable factor: the weather.

Two days before the sale, Swann reserved a night for a reception and discussion of an interesting question, "How do collections integrate art and history?" Panelists were Dr. Nashid Madyun, director of the Hampton University Museum & Archives in Hampton, Virginia; Dr. Sylvia Yount, chief curator of American art at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond; and collectors Dr. Warren and Charlynn Goins, who are trustees of the Brooklyn Museum.

"So that was part of the lead-up, and we had about a hundred people," said Freeman, the panel's moderator. "There was some momentum going in." Then came the snow.

As a blizzard crippled the entire eastern part of the country, from Georgia up through New England, dumping 9½ inches of snow on New York City alone, hundreds of thousands were experiencing power outages and other problems. It's impossible to say how many people were unable to participate in this 82-lot sale as a result, but Freeman said anecdotally that a woman who tried to walk to the auction from Times Square—an easy distance on any other day—phoned to say she wasn't going to make it and e-mailed her bids. Swann usually has a good, full room for this department's sales. They are among the house's best-attended auctions. This time, instead of having a live audience of, say, 80, the count, according to Freeman, was "maybe ten."

"Undeniably the storm couldn't be ignored," he said. "We had to work around it. But I still think we had success." Indeed, there were some high prices, a few new records, and a sell-through rate of close to 75%.

Since 2007, when this department was founded, bidders could buy African-American art from every period at its sales. For this and the previous sale, there was a change. In the fall, on October 3, 2013, only works from post-World War II and beyond were

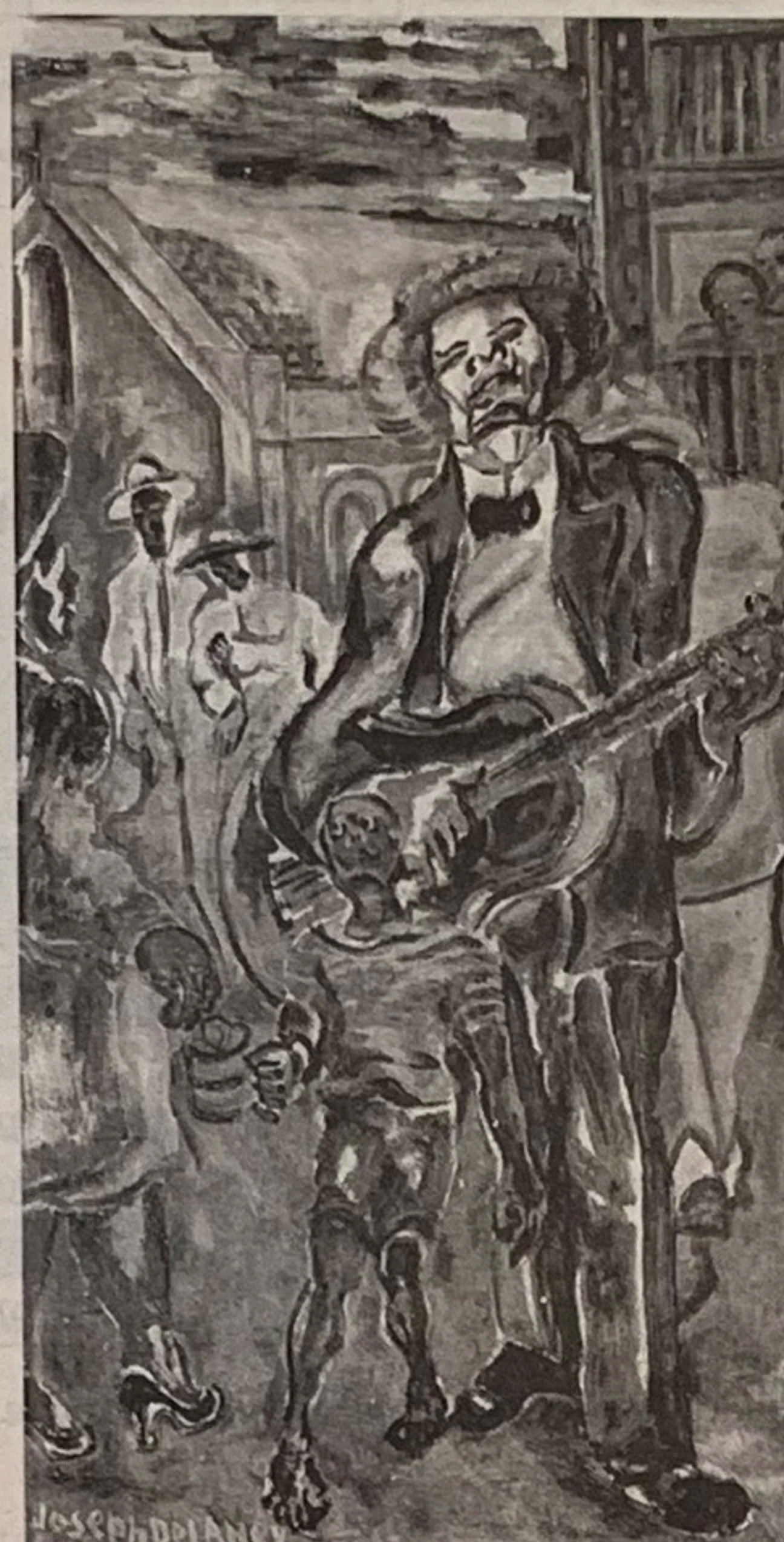
tributed to landscape painting, like [Edward M.] Bannister, or ones who contributed to Abstract Expressionism, like Norman Lewis. So our divisions put us in line with that."

What has not changed is bidders' interest in fresh discoveries, which continue to be a hallmark of these sales. One of the discoveries this time was *Violets* by Pauline Powell Burns, who is believed to have been the first African-American painter to exhibit in California. Estimated at \$4000/6000, the circa 1890 still life oil on cardstock—the only example by Burns that Swann has located—sold to an institution for \$13,750. It is by default the auction price record for Burns.

This sale also established a first-time auction price record for Vivian Schuyler Key, the first African-American woman to pursue a degree at New York's Pratt Institute. Exhibited in 2012 at the Hammonds House Museum in Atlanta, in a show called *Vivian Schuyler Key: Artist of the Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*, Key's 1927 watercolor portrait of her mother, Jessie Schuyler, sold to another institutional buyer for \$7500 (est. \$8000/12,000).

A work by an African-American woman whose name, Nancy Elizabeth Prophet, is relatively new in the marketplace sold to a third institution for \$35,000, the low estimate. The untitled stained and oiled wood sculpture of an androgynous head from the early 1930s was acquired at a Providence, Rhode Island, estate sale in the late 1960s. Swann said it came to this sale from a private Massachusetts collection. Curators of a 2007 show, *Hale Woodruff, Nancy Elizabeth Prophet, and the Academy*, at Spelman College in Atlanta located only two wood sculptures by the artist, although there are Prophet sculptures in other media in the collections of several museums, including the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. This was the first sculpture by Prophet to be sold at auction, Swann said.

In all, four different institutions were buyers of the top 20 lots. Only one gave Swann its permission to be named: the Norton Museum of Art in Palm Beach, Florida. Palm Beach? It's



Joseph Delaney (1904-1991), *Harlem, Sunday Morning*, 40" x 21", oil on masonite board, 1942, \$40,000 (est. \$15,000/25,000).

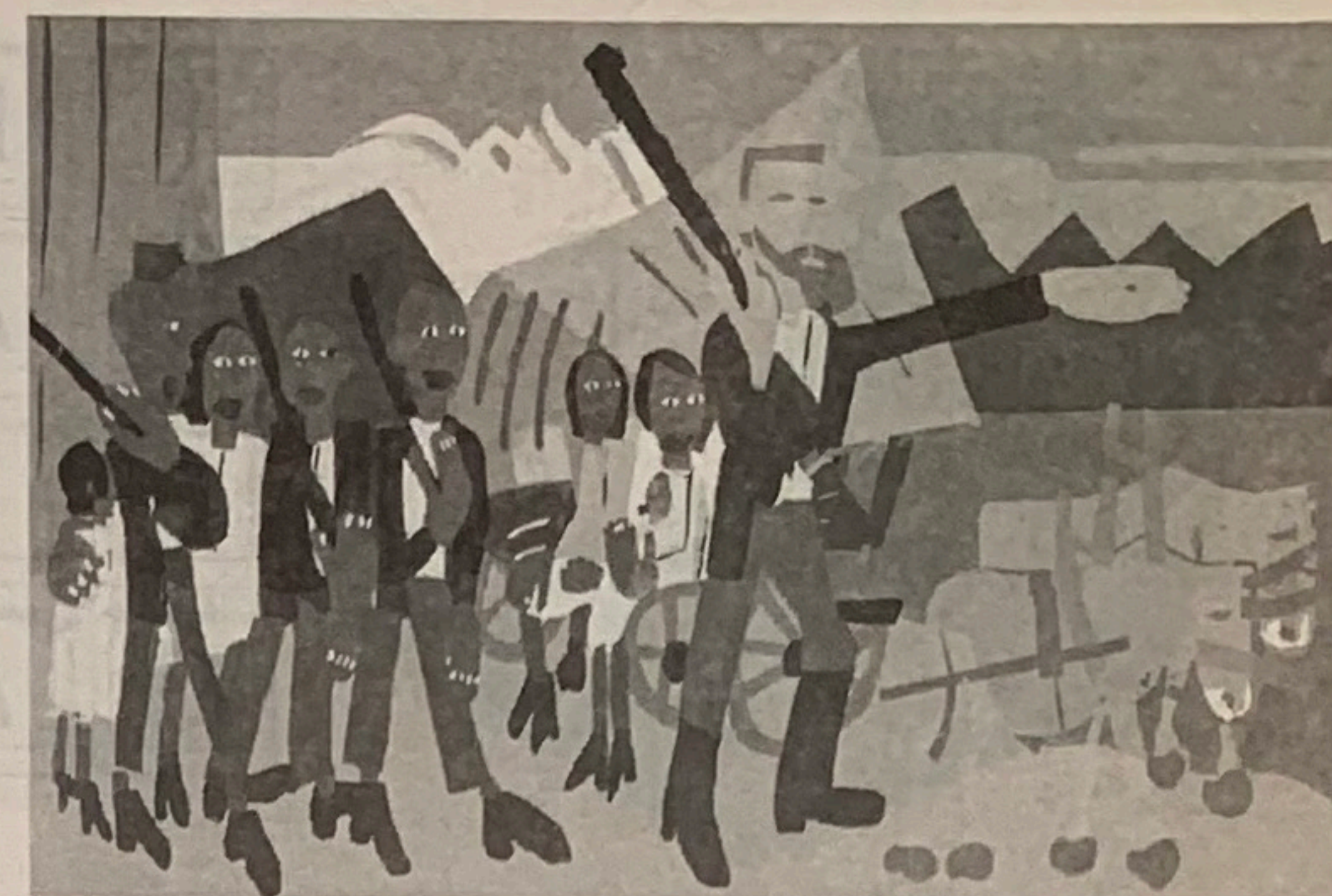


Eldzier Cortor (b. 1916), *Tête-a-Tête*, 16½" x 14", oil on canvas mounted on masonite board, 1934, \$35,000 (est. \$35,000/50,000).

not a center of African-American life by anyone's definition, and yet representatives of its museum competed at the highest level of this sale.

Besides the discoveries, bidders went for rarities, particularly by established artists, including Charles White, whose circa 1945 etching *Jerry*, one of an edition of only 15, sold to an absentee bidder for \$10,000 (est. \$6000/9000). A scarce example of Henry Ossawa Tanner's painting en plein air in Paris sold to a collector for \$20,000 (est. \$12,000/18,000). Just 4 5/8" x 6½", the untitled circa 1900 oil on plywood depicted a view of the Seine. This sale also marked the first time that William H. Johnson's 1942-45 color pochoir and screenprint *On a John Brown Flight* had come to auction. Estimated at \$50,000/75,000, it sold to a collector for \$81,250, which is now the record for that image. Four other impressions of the print are in institutions.

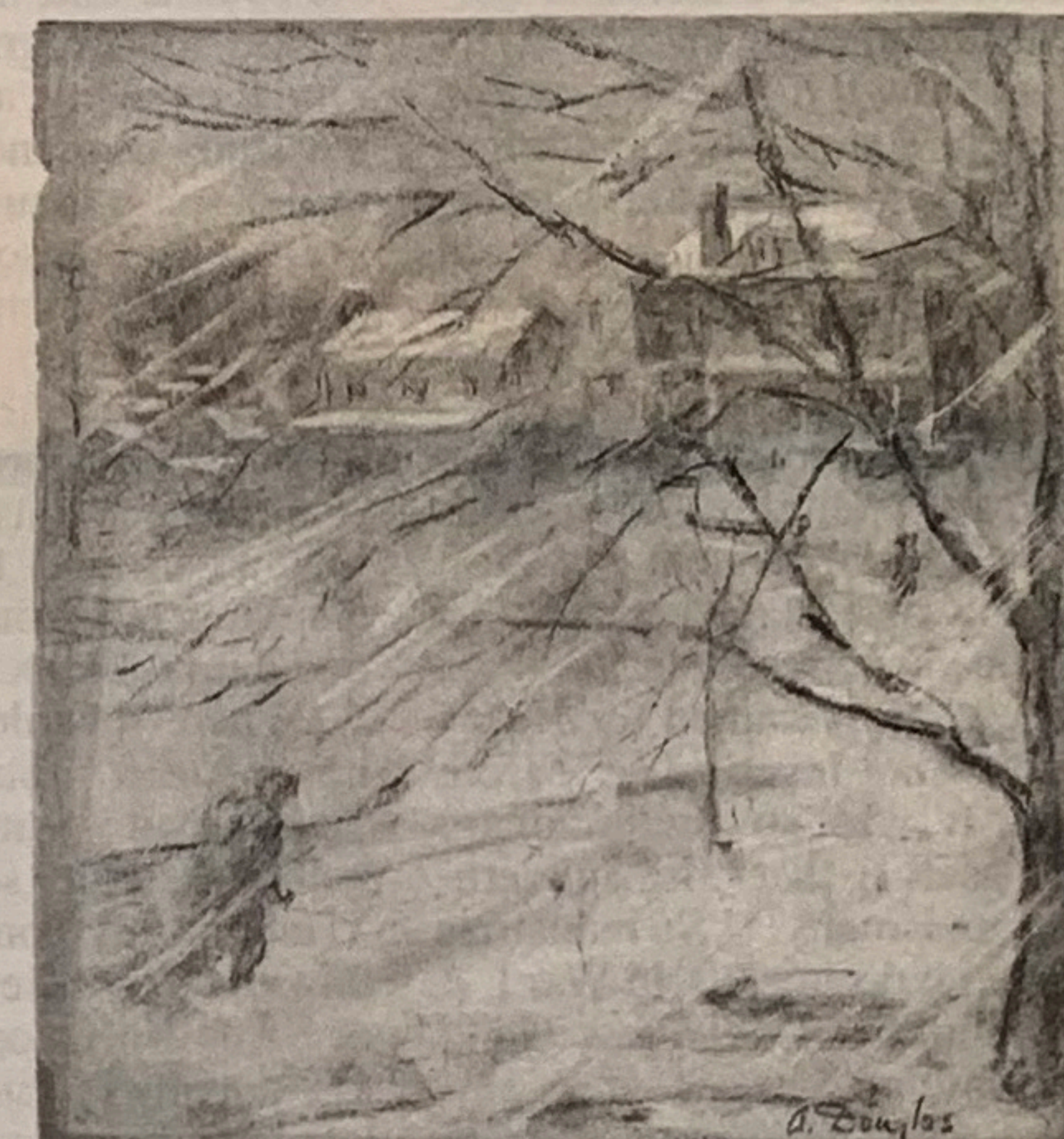
One of the earliest known works by 98-year-old Eldzier Cortor sold to a collector for its low estimate, \$35,000. Titled *Tête-a-Tête*, the oil on canvas mounted on masonite board shows a stylized working-class couple talking together on the sidewalk; he is in bright green overalls and leaning on a shovel, and she is in a red dress with a grocery bag in her arms. An example of what would become one of Cortor's enduring themes—i.e., everyday



William H. Johnson (1901-1970) used pochoir (hand-colored stencils) and screens to create *On a John Brown Flight*. The 16" x 24" print on cream wove paper from 1942-45 sold to a collector for \$81,250 (est. \$50,000/75,000). It was the top lot of the sale.



An institution was the buyer of *Still Life with Roses* by Charles Ethan Porter (1847-1923). The 10" x 16" oil on canvas dating from 1885-87 fetched \$15,000 (est. \$15,000/25,000).



This was about what it looked like in many other parts of the country on auction day. One wonders if some bidders were acknowledging that fact by competing vigorously for this lot. If you can't beat it, join it? In any case, *Snow Storm* by Aaron Douglas (1898-1979) sold to a collector for \$30,000 (est. \$8000/12,000). The catalog said the 13½" x 12½" charcoal on wove paper was likely done during the years 1950-55 when Douglas was teaching in Nashville. Government snow charts (www.srh.noaa.gov/ohx/?n=monthlysnow) show that the Tennessee city got 33½" of snow in the winter of 1950-51—as rare then as the Atlanta freezes were this year.



Nancy Elizabeth Prophet (1890-1960), untitled (*Head*), 12½" x 6½" x 7", stained and oiled wood, early 1930s, \$35,000 (est. \$35,000/50,000).

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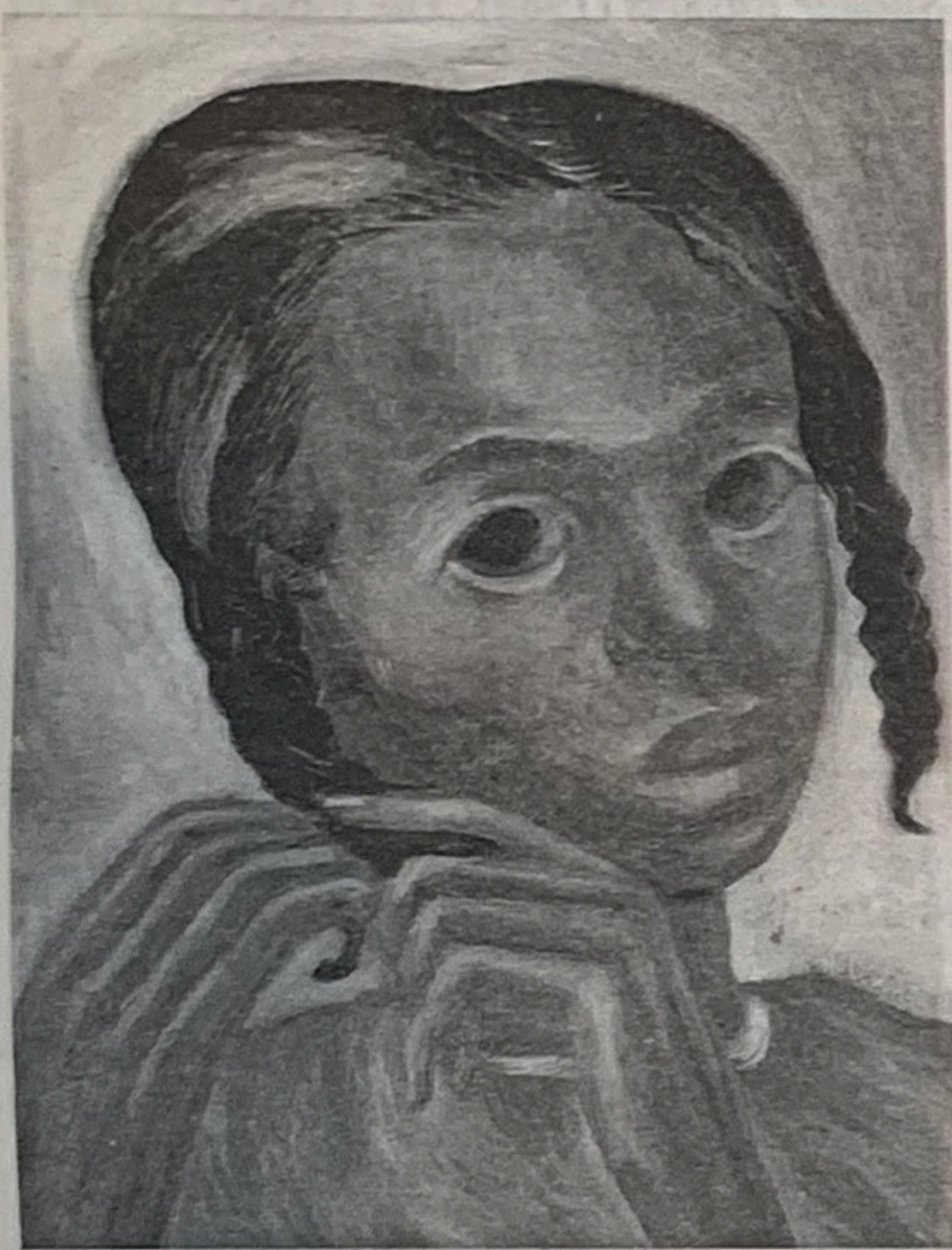
The sale featured four works by Edward M. Bannister (1828-1901), known for his Rhode Island landscapes. This untitled 12" x 16" oil on canvas sold to an institution for \$13,750 (est. \$8000/12,000). Not shown, another slightly bigger oil brought \$17,500, while a small (5" x 7") watercolor fetched \$6750, and a larger watercolor was passed.



Violets by Pauline Powell Burns (1876-1912), 8½" x 12½", oil on thin cardstock, circa 1890, \$13,750 (est. \$4000/6000).



Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859-1937), untitled (*View of the Seine*), 4 5/8" x 6½", oil on plywood, circa 1990, \$20,000 (est. \$12,000/18,000).



Hale Woodruff (1900-1980), *Portrait of a Girl*, 10¼" x 8½", oil on masonite board, 1935-40, \$27,500 (est. \$12,000/18,000).



Michael (Head of a Boy) by William E. Artis (1914-1977) sold to a collector for \$25,000 (est. \$8000/12,000). The 9" bronze with a greenish-copper patina dates from circa 1950. It was cast from a 1940 model in terra cotta, an unusual medium for the artist, as was bronze. He usually worked in clay or stone.

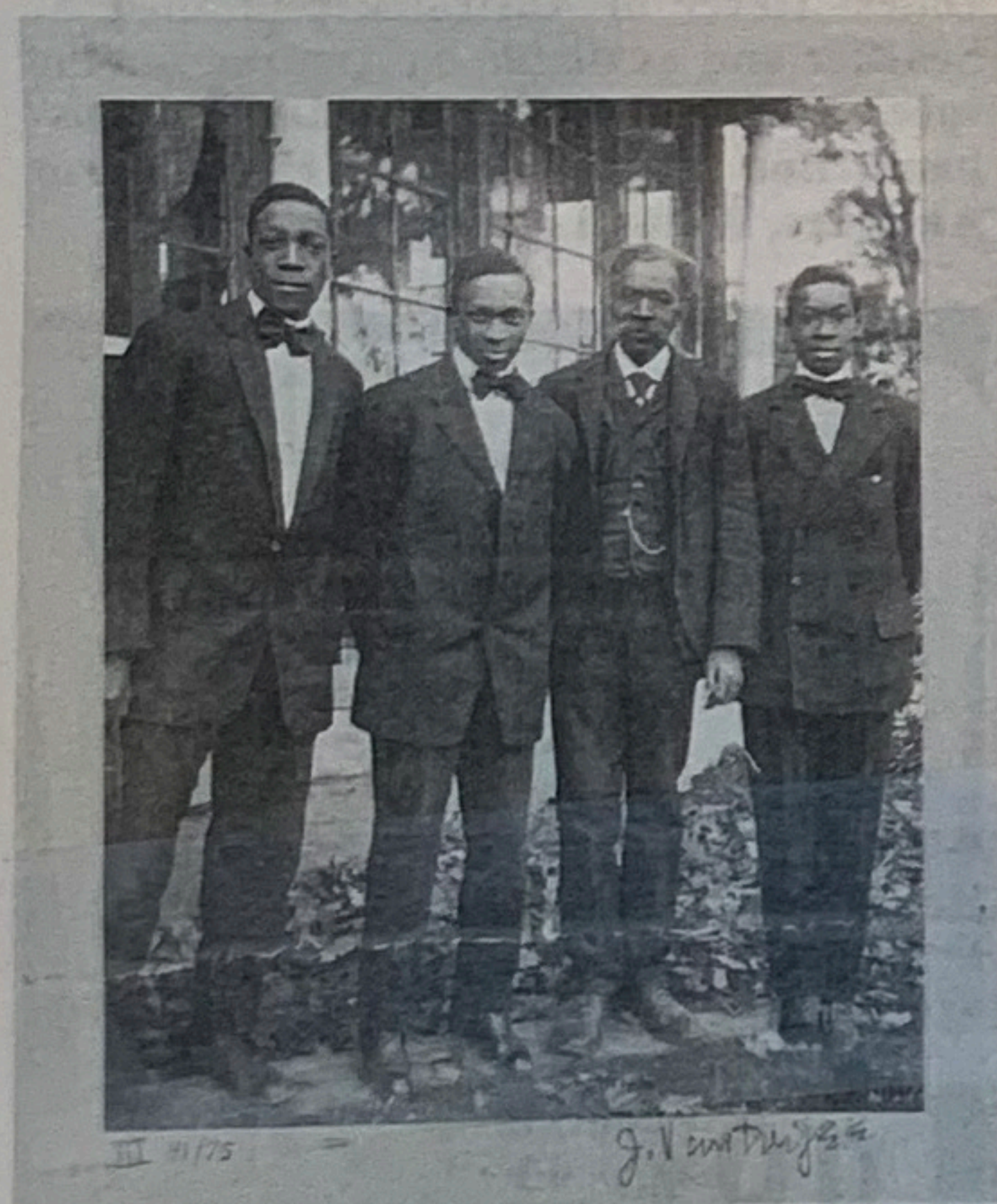
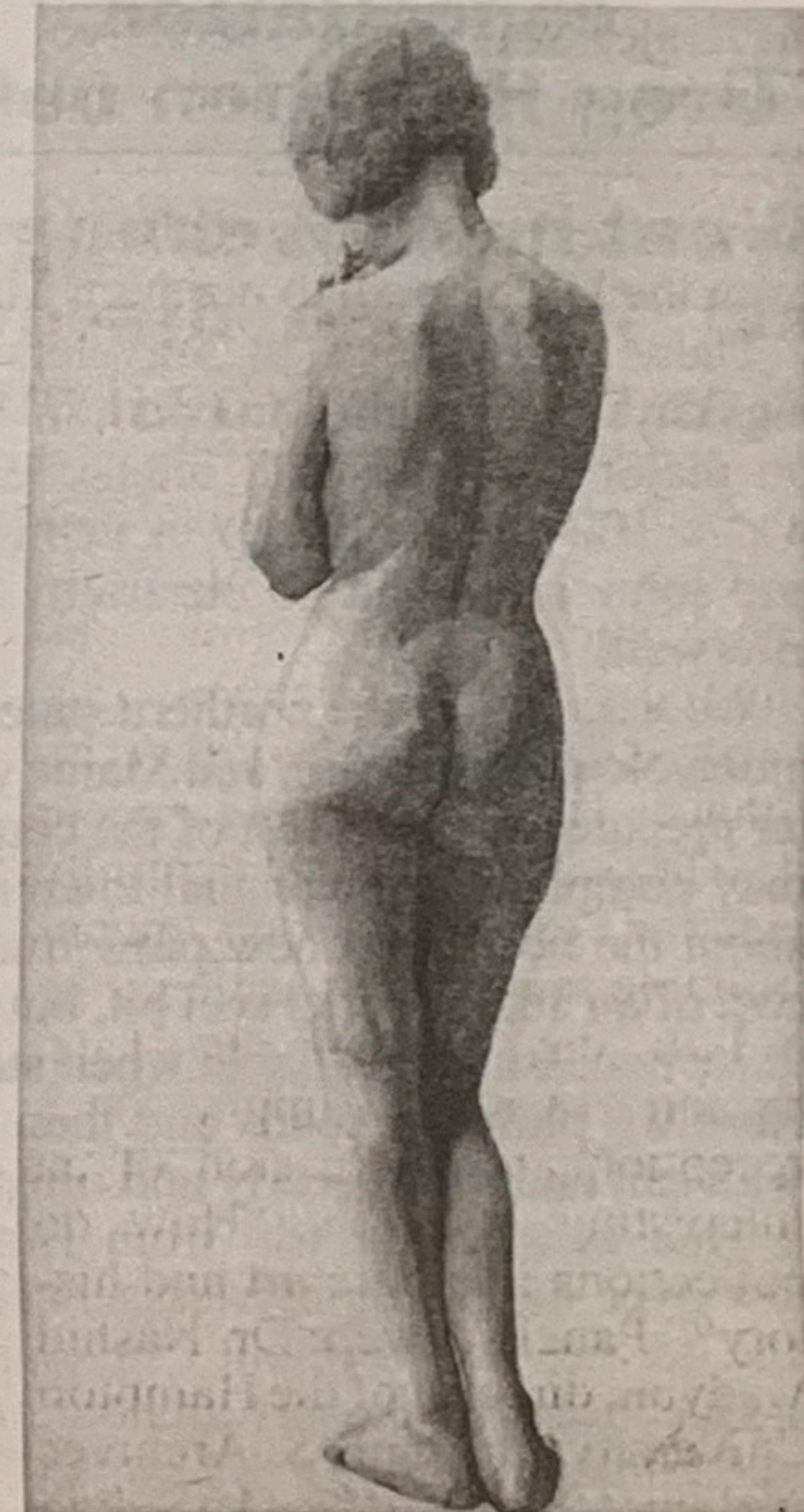


Lift Every Voice and Sing by Augusta Savage (1892-1962) sold to a collector for \$23,750 (est. \$12,000/18,000). The circa 1939 sculpture in white metal with copper patina is 10¼" x 9½" x 4". A life-size version was commissioned by a committee of the 1939 New York World's Fair. It was destroyed when the fair was over, but a number of these smaller versions were cast.



African Woman by Beulah Ecton Woodard (1895-1955) went to an institutional buyer for \$18,750 (est. \$10,000/15,000). The 11½" x 11¼" x 4½" glazed terra-cotta sculpture dates from 1937-38.

This 1927 charcoal on laid paper by Lois Mailou Jones (1905-1998) sold for \$9375 (est. \$4000/6000). The 25" x 13½" nude study, dating from when Jones was enrolled at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, is the earliest known drawing of hers to come to auction. A 1938 painting by Jones (not shown), the earliest nude oil of hers to come to auction, was passed (est. \$15,000/25,000).



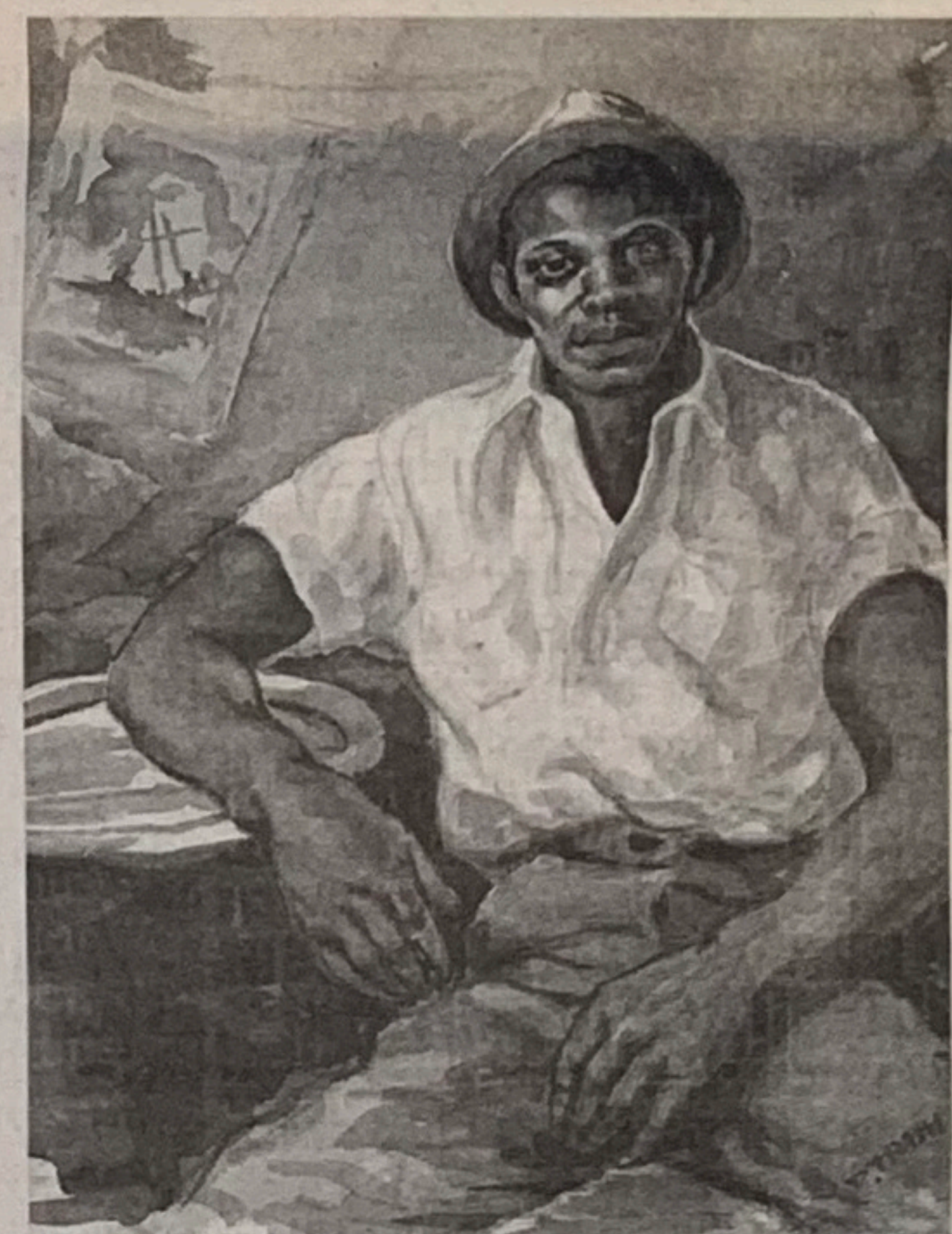
James VanDerZee (1886-1983) is on the far left; the others are his mustached father and two brothers. *The VanDerZee Men*, a 9½" x 7¼" silver print, sold for \$3750 (est. \$2000/3000). The date of the image is 1908; the print was made in 1974.



Vivian Schuyler Key (1905-1990), *Portrait of Mother Jessie Schuyler*, 12¼" x 11½", watercolor on cream illustration board, \$7500 (est. \$8000/12,000).



This self-portrait by James A. Porter (1905-1970) was the sale's cover lot. The first portrait in oil on canvas by Porter to come to auction, the 14" x 12" likeness sold to an institution for \$18,750 (est. \$12,000/18,000).



Wandering Boy by Dox Thrash (1893-1965) sold to a collector for \$13,750 (est. \$5000/7000). The price for the 16" x 12" watercolor on wove paper from the 1940s is a new record for a Thrash painting. Prices for his prints have gone higher.

African-American life—the painting was signed and dated "1934," the year Cortor was an 18-year-old art student in Chicago. Another, later (circa 1948) Cortor, one of his elegant, elongated nudes in pen, ink, pastel, and wash on cream wove paper, went to an institution for \$27,500 (est. \$8000/12,000). (After the sale, however, it was withdrawn by the consignor, said Swann communications director Rebecca Weiss.)

Among the works that bidders let pass was Hughie Lee-Smith's 1938 *Coal Breakers*. One of the earliest Lee-Smith paintings offered at auction and scarce for being an early oil, it had an \$80,000/120,000 estimate. "We were thrilled to have it, and it's a great piece by the artist," said Freeman. "It is, however, a social realist piece. That

audience is limited. Also its palette is dark browns and umbers." Nor was it a typical Lee-Smith. "It would have appealed to a special collector of his work or of WPA period artwork."

The disappointments were balanced by the other successes of the day, however, which included two new artist records. One was made when Dox Thrash's watercolor *Wandering Boy* sold to a collector for \$13,750 (est. \$5000/7000). The artist's prints have sold for more; this record stands for a Thrash painting. The other new record price is for any work by Joseph Delaney, whose *Harlem, Sunday Morning* in oil on masonite board fetched \$40,000 (est. \$15,000/25,000).

"It's been hard with his work. It's often dark and not always in the best condition," Freeman observed. "He's also been

somewhat in the shadows of his artist-brother [Beauford Delaney].

Speaking of shadows, we asked Freeman how he chose the sale's title. "I was looking for something that evoked the era while also suggesting the kind of changes that African-American artists have gone through," he said. "All of them were definitely in the shadows. The exceptional artists from the earlier period often made their names before people discovered their race. There's the famous story of Bannister winning the first prize at the Philadelphia Centennial and the great stir in the room when he went up to accept the prize in person."

He further explained that while at first African-Americans painted landscapes, portraiture, and still lifes, just like their contemporaries, as time went on they

felt freer to express themselves in subject matter that reflected their own African-American experiences. "So the title also refers to these artists coming out of the shadows."

Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy, Or Shadows Uplifted*, whose protagonist is a mixed-race woman in the South before and after the Civil War, tells a similar story of identity and race, Freeman noted. That's why he felt her phrase was apt. The work by one of our first African-American novelists is widely available in new editions. It can also be read on line (www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/12352/pg12352.txt).

For more information about the sale, phone (212) 254-4710 or see the Web site (www.swanngalleries.com).

