

Shaker Auction a Bit Shaky

by Jeanne Schinto

Afterward, people searched for the politic word to describe the results of the all-Shaker sale held on October 31, 2003, at the Boston gallery of Skinner, Inc. Disappointing would be an understatement. Almost a third (29%) of the 293 lots on offer were either passed or bought in. The total for the 208 lots that did sell was an unremarkable \$253,195 (including the buyers' premiums).

Bargains at auctions usually make dealers and collectors happy. But Jan Pavlovic of Winnetka, Illinois, who with her husband, Thomas, bought one of the two top lots of the evening, said, "It was so sad. I had never been to an auction quite like that before."

Why did it happen? The next morning, moments before a record-breaking Americana sale began, Stephen L. Fletcher, executive vice president for Skinner, said, "I don't know what happened last night. Those were really mixed results. One consignor's pieces did just fine. The other consignor really thought very highly of his material. He was more aggressive and pushed harder." He got Skinner to agree to set high estimates. The usual policy at Skinner, according to Fletcher, is to pair conservative estimates with aggressive marketing. "When we deviate from that, that's when we get into trouble."

The sale featured furniture, household articles such as boxes, baskets, bowls, pincushions, yarn swifts, a niddy noddy, spools, a shaving mirror, a mattress smoother, and a fan, and ephemera such as medicine bottles and their labels, seed advertisements and display boxes, photographs, and hymnals.

The items came from two major consignors, both well known to the closely knit Shaker-collecting community. Slightly over a third of the lots, or 110 of them, were consigned by Richard Klank of Hyattsville, Maryland. Seventy-three came from Gus and June Nelson of western Massachusetts. A majority of the rest were from a third collector, who chose to be anonymous.

The Klank items were the overestimated ones. The Pavlovics, Shaker devotees for over 30 years, know the market as well as anyone. What did they think when they first saw those estimates in the catalog? "We thought they were very high to start," said Jan Pavlovic. "I can only imagine it was the estimates that scared everybody so. It looked like Mr. Nelson didn't esteem his pieces as much as [Klank] did," because his estimates were so much lower, "but I think it was just more his style." Asked if the Nelsons were more modest than Klank, she said, "Well, I think so. And the fact that the others didn't sell would indicate that [Klank] was also more unrealistic."

The single piece that the Pavlovics bought was a pine chest of 14 drawers in a dark red stain. It came from the Nelson collection by way of Charles Upton, one of the earliest collector/scholars of Shaker objects. Outbidding phone and absentee bidders, the couple paid \$19,975 (est. \$10,000/15,000).

Douglas Hamel of Douglas Hamel Antiques, Chichester, New Hampshire, bought another Nelson piece, a detail of which was featured on the catalog's front cover. At \$31,725 (est. \$20,000/25,000), it was also the highest-priced item of the evening. A yellow cupboard and case of drawers in butternut and pine, the piece had been exhibited at the landmark Shaker exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City in 1986.

"I was really happy to get it," Hamel said. "It's an icon. It's in the book *Shaker Design* [by June Sprigg] that's considered by many people to be one of the nicest Shaker books that's been issued. And the fact that the piece has been exhibited at the Whitney and at the Corcoran [Gallery of Art] in [Washington] D.C. will always be part of its pedigree. It has a very nice provenance. It came from a very nice collection. And it was estimated properly."

Hamel's happiness with the outcome of his bidding was not unmitigated. "Business is fine," he said unprompted. He is, after all, a dealer who hoped the auction results wouldn't be taken as a sign that the value of Shaker things in general had plummeted.

His comment was an echo of Jan Pavlovic, who said, "I don't think that one auction is a reflection of anything." She hoped that savvy people would understand that. "And I do wonder what would have happened if [the bidding] had started lower [on the Klank items]. Auctions build in their drama, and maybe [prices] eventually would have gotten to that point. But I think starting that high, people were scared or a little upset or something. I guess that was it. At least that was one of the reasons, although there are probably lots of others that I'm not even aware of."

Even before the auction began, in the last moments of the preview Fran Kramer voiced another concern. Kramer has been a dealer/collector of Shaker for 35 years, is author of *Simply Shaker*, and is a contributor to *M.A.D.* She pointed out that this was the third all-Shaker auction in five months, the other two having been Willis Henry's in June and Ronald Bourgeault's in July. If an auction were a bridge game, one might worry that the trump had already gone around too many times. Collecting Shaker requires a great deal of knowledge, which, perhaps like the Shaker celibacy rule, keeps the numbers of collectors low. Were there enough collectors out there ready to buy again so soon? The sale results indicate that there weren't.

On the evening of October 30 Kramer participated as a panelist in a discussion hosted by Skinner called "Collecting Shaker: Perspectives and Preferences." It was moderated by Gerard C. Wertkin, author of *The Four Seasons of Shaker Life* and director of the American Folk Art Museum in New York City. The two other panelists were Thomas Pavlovic and consignor Richard Klank.

It was possible that some of the discussion, instead of increasing enthusiasm for bidding by attendees, had a chilling effect on their spending the following evening. What were they to make of it when Wertkin told them that Sister Mildred Barker, speaking in New York in the late 1960's, had "indicted" the collectors in her sellout audience for "buying and selling sacred art?" Sister Barker's remark was "problematic" for some of them, said Wertkin, who knew a collector who gave up collecting Shaker as a result of that speech. He quoted her this way, "I now look at a Shaker chair, and it tells me it doesn't approve. I don't need that in my house."

Other panelists spoke of having bought their pieces directly from the Shakers in the days when there were more than just four still alive. (Those four reside at Sabbathday Lake, Maine, today.) That direct contact added to the thrill of the purchase and ownership, they said. Klank showed a slide of the first Shaker piece he ever bought, a red-stained pine cupboard with recessed panels that was listed in the auction catalog as lot 17. "Nobody had ever owned it except Shakers before me," he said.

The trouble with Klank's boast was that it emphasized the piece's current distance from the Shakers. Because the celibate Shaker communities dwindled to hardly a trace of living members, their pieces weren't handed down in families. Now many of the objects are passed from one collector to another. What the market thinks of that collector's eye, taste, and documentation helps determine the prices people are willing to pay. Were Klank and his collecting judgments sufficiently revered to justify his reserves? Again, the auction's results answer: the red-stained pine cupboard found no buyer at the sale.

Klank is an associate professor of painting and art theory at the University of Maryland and is also an artist. Skinner's promotions of the sale presented Klank's collection as one formed as a result of his interest in the Shakers' purity of design, their philosophical ideals, and their philosophy of art.

The Nelsons' collection, by contrast, was presented as being "historically focused." Martha Hamilton, Skinner's expert in charge of the sale, said that when she went to see Gus Nelson and his collection at his home near Pittsfield, Massachusetts, where the Hancock Shaker Village is also located, she was "so impressed by his card files with all the documentation recorded." Nelson had a historian's way of collecting, she said, because he had been guided by historian/collectors before him, including William Lassiter and Faith Andrews, both of whom became outstanding authorities in the field.

It was usually possible to guess correctly which lots in the catalog were from the Nelson collection, because their descriptions were so precise and so detailed with names, dates, and other facts that proved the degree of their "Shakerness."

The word Shakerness is one Fran Kramer used in her remarks as a panelist. After the auction, she told us, "It's the Shakerness we want. We want real. That's in addition to what every collector who is paying a lot of money for anything wants—condition, form, and so on. But that specific history, the Shakerness that can be documented, is what is valued."

The walnut lap desk from the Nelson collection carried a high degree of Shakerness, which is one reason why Kramer said she bought it for \$1527.50, more than twice the high estimate. Thomas Fisher (1823-1902) of the community in Enfield, Connecticut, made it and signed it "T. Fisher '88."

Of the sale's results in general Kramer said, "Shaker collectors are very focused and very fussy. If it's not exactly what they're looking for, they'll hold back; they will not get involved. If they like what's being offered, they will pay extremely well for it."

The collectors sound like the material itself—focused and fussy, as suggested by Kramer, who said, "And the Shakers themselves were very focused and very fussy."

During the auction a phone bidder had to be convinced by the bid taker that he had won his lot for so little. He couldn't believe his good fortune. Jan Pavlovic said, "When people who weren't there get the information about how very low some of the things sold for towards the end of the auction and how different things didn't sell at all—and they were real things—they're going to feel bad that they stayed away. They maybe thought it was going to be real high-priced, but it wasn't. And I think a new collector could have been very successful there. It's just a shame."

Stephen Fletcher, for his part, was grateful to the audience for their demeanor. "It certainly was a pleasant, polite atmosphere. It could have been gruesome. And at the end of it, do you remember that there was a round of applause? And I said to Marie [Szurszewski, the Boston gallery administrator for Skinner who also auctioned a section of the lots], 'What are they applauding?'"

For more information, contact Skinner at (617) 350-5400; Web site (www.skinnerinc.com).