

## Skinner Hosts Benefit Auction for Provincetown Museum

by Jeanne Schinto

"I don't summer *or* winter in Provincetown," said Ned Jalbert, owner of Ned Jalbert Interior Design, Westborough, Massachusetts. What, then, led him to become a collector of Provincetown art? "The mark that it left on multiple generations of artists everywhere," he said. "I think people in the know understand the importance of the Provincetown art colony."

Jalbert, who is also a noted collector of American Indian art, was speaking to us in a corner of Skinner's Boston gallery on June 15, moments before the start of a benefit auction for the Provincetown Art Association and Museum. PAAM (pronounced Pam) organized the event to raise funds for the final phase of a major renovation and expansion of its facility in downtown Provincetown on Massachusetts's Cape Cod. With Skinner providing its gallery space gratis, along with all the frills save one (Internet bidding) of its regular sales, the evening raised \$102,000, or nearly a fifth of a \$550,000 Kresge Foundation matching grant that PAAM was awarded last fall. The building was slated for completion and its grand opening on Labor Day weekend this year.

The 60 lots on offer, donated by PAAM supporters, included artworks by many of Provincetown's best-known artists of the 20th century, including B.J.O. Nordfeldt, Blanche Lazzell, Oliver Chaffee, and Agnes Weinrich. The top lot was a Lazzell watercolor that fetched \$9775 (includes buyer's premium, which also went to PAAM). Next most successful was a Weinrich oil on board that sold at \$9545.

Estimates were not the usual conservative Skinnerian figures; they were high, intended to keep bidders reaching upward. For that reason, few lots exceeded those suggested prices. Two that did were by Chaffee. One was a white-line woodblock—the block itself, not the print—of four frolicking sheephead that achieved \$4945. The other was an oil landscape of a hillside in France that fetched \$9315.

Provincetown, once primarily a fishing village, began to attract artists as early as the 1890's. Charles Webster Hawthorne (1872-1930) established the Cape Cod School of Art there in the summer of 1899. By the time of the First World War, six schools of art were attracting hundreds of students each summer. In 1914 the Provincetown Art Association, from which PAAM evolved, was founded by a group of artists as well as local townspeople. The sheer number of creative folks in the community had given some urgency to the idea of forming an organization for the purpose of exhibiting work, exchanging ideas, and starting a permanent collection.

Today that collection numbers close to 2000 pieces by more than 500 artists, and many Provincetown artists are more collectible than ever. But for years now, the old PAAM building, picturesque though it was, has been problematic, hampering the organization's growth.

Stephen Fletcher, Skinner's chief auctioneer, a longtime summer resident of Provincetown, and a member of PAAM's board of trustees, explained to us the necessity of making the building improvements. "Many loved the old art museum there, with its leaky roof and funky fans," he said. "It was very casual, and there's something most unusual in this day and age about viewing art in that environment. And I think we all kind of liked that. But if ever we are to attract major works and build the collection and be able to accept traveling exhibits of really increasingly valuable materials, it has to be safe."

Along with a new roof and climate-controlled galleries, expanded storage vaults that meet museum standards will put PAAM on track to receive accreditation from the American Association of Museums. "We've brought the building into the twenty-first century," said Fletcher. "And when it's completed, the building itself will be a work of art."

The auctioneer, who presided over the evening's bidding, acknowledged that not every citizen of Provincetown was delighted with the prospect of having a contemporary building in the middle of an 18th-century neighborhood. "It was a bold decision," he said. But there are a lot of bold things about Provincetown and about its art.

As early as the 1920's, some Provincetown artists began to embrace modernism. A group of them had studied in Paris and been exposed to the influence of the Fauves, the Cubists, and others with revolutionary ideas about art. The more traditional artists clashed with these experimenters. Ultimately, those strains led to a schism that in 1927 divided PAAM into two camps. The association's first Modernist exhibition was mounted that year. There were separate shows for Modernists and traditionalists through 1936.

In the 1940's and 1950's the Abstract Expressionists converged on this spot on the outermost tip of the Cape. Franz Kline, Lee Krasner, Robert Motherwell, and Jackson Pollack pointedly did not paint lighthouses. Yet Provincetown's artists have never been known for any particular artistic style, abstract or otherwise. Ignoring the avant-garde, John Whorf (1903-1959), for one, found inspiration in the seacoast and expressed it in marine motifs.

In addition to nurturing new forms of artistic expression, Provincetown was a place where artists experimented with new techniques. One of those techniques was the white-line woodcut used by Oliver Chaffee for his sheephead. Traditionally, a separate block is cut for each color of a color woodblock print. According to lore, B.J.O. Nordfeldt grew impatient with the labor of making multiple blocks, so he devised a way to make a color print with a single block. He cut grooves to separate the different colors, then, during the printing step, he did not ink the grooves, causing the white of the paper to become the outlines around the colored shapes. The results were clean and crisp, like sunlight and shadow. The images also had a distinctly modern look, emphasizing the design and composition over the content.

Blanche Lazzell, Nordfeldt's student, became the leading practitioner of the white-line woodcut technique. From 1916 through the mid-1950's, she created more than 130 examples of what became known as the Provincetown print, combining the white-line method with her own adaptation of Cubism. It was a style particularly suited to the angularity of Provincetown, its crooked streets and steep roof lines, and the picket fences that then and now demarcate many of the town's charming antique properties.

About 100 people attended this affair, including many Bostonians with ties to Provincetown or, like Ned Jalbert, a passion for Provincetown art. They include Rodolfo Machado, principal of Machado & Silvetti, lead architects on the new building project; Massachusetts Institute of Technology neuroscience professor Richard Wurtman; interior designer Michael Barnum; and Julie Burns, former deputy chief of staff to Boston's Mayor Thomas Menino.

Auctions that raise funds for PAAM are not something new for the organization; only the Boston venue was. Since the 1980's, PAAM has conducted auctions in Provincetown to help raise money for the operating expenses of the museum. On those occasions the art is consigned. James Bakker, a collector, dealer, appraiser, as well as past PAAM president, has been conducting PAAM's consignor sales since 1988. "We find that we get top dollar, since it's for a good cause," he told us at this sale. "So the consignors often wind up with more money for a lot of the pieces than they would have if they had consigned them somewhere else."

Steve Fletcher noted accurately that "there are always bargains at benefit events, but there can be significant prices too. A lot of enthusiasm adds to the hammer price, because bidders know that these moneys are going for a very worthy cause."

For more information about this sale or PAAM's future consignment auctions, contact PAAM at (508) 487-1750 or see its Web site ([www.paam.org](http://www.paam.org)).