

## Skinner Sells Calder Cache at Paintings Sale

by Jeanne Schinto

How lucky can anybody get? One day in the early 1940's, a family in Roxbury, Connecticut, went kite flying on the hill near their house. A neighbor who lived on the other side of the hill saw the kites and came out to join the fun. It was Alexander Calder, "Sandy" to his friends, which these neighbors soon became. Soon, too, the artist began to bring the neighbors gifts. By then, he had already achieved fame as the maker of sculptures constructed from carefully equilibrated parts that moved, especially in response to air currents—mobiles, as Marcel Duchamp dubbed them.

Sandy often gave his friends a mobile here, a gouache there. If you invited him over for drinks, across the lawns and tennis courts of Cheever and Updike country, and couldn't lay your hand on your corkscrew, he'd make you one, said Skinner paintings department director Colleene Fesko. Have pliers and wire, will travel. He reportedly never left home without his tools and materials.

Fesko was speaking about Calder, his generosity and his genius, in a talk on the night before the auction house sold one of his mobiles and four gouaches in its Boston gallery, as part of its May 20 American and European art auction. They had been personal gifts from Calder to those Roxbury neighbors, the Whites, after which they had been passed down to the consignors.

The untitled circa 1960 mobile, a toy-like construction in polychromed metal, stood just 8" tall. Suggestive by turns of a playful animal life form and a pocket planetarium, initialed "CA" on the base, it was offered near the end of the sale and bought by a determined room bidder, who paid \$121,500, more than twice the high estimate, bidding against the phones. It was his only purchase, and his polite request for anonymity came in accented English. (All prices include the buyer's premium; the estimates do not.)

The four gouaches went up directly after the mobile. Phone bidders bought these at \$24,675, \$12,925, \$11,162.50, and \$9400. The focal point of the most expensive gouache could be described as a clown-like smile worked into a pattern of curlicues and other abstract shapes in red, black, and white; it was dedicated, signed, and dated: "To Whites, amicalement Calder 57."

Who bought the mobile? Who bought the gouaches? Skinner auctioneer and CEO Karen Keane, standing near us when those five lots went up, intimated that the mobile buyer was a Frenchman. "Calder has an international appeal and reputation," she added. "He spent time in Paris, South America...He covers the globe." In other words, his work translates well. Keane hinted further that Europeans had been consistently buying by phone throughout the evening, apparently taking advantage of the weak U.S. dollar. Later, Colleene Fesko confirmed that Europeans swept the Calder's and some of the most important European pictures.

It would be difficult to imagine Europeans coveting the sale's top-priced American lot or the American painting that made as much as the Calder mobile, as both express emphatically American themes. A bronze by Augustus Saint-Gaudens, *Head of Victory, Nike-Eiphnh* (Victory-Peace), which sold on the phone for \$127,000, began as a study for the monument to Civil War General William Tecumseh Sherman. That finished sculpture stands in the Grand Army Plaza just outside the main east side gateway to New York City's Central Park. A 1941 Rockwell Kent oil on canvas, *Sportsman's Delight*, which brought \$121,500, shows a landscape with a just shot deer, still in mid-prance, silhouetted against a line of green forest and purple mountain majesties. Europeans simply don't clamor for U.S.-stamped pieces like these. Although we may have gotten over feeling like we're standing in Europe's artistic shadow, Europe doesn't seem to have gotten over feeling like it's casting one.

When the Calder mobile was sold, there was applause from the audience, which included art dealers from Boston and beyond, pickers, collectors, hangers-on, and at least one scholar we recognized, Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr., curator of American art at Harvard University's Fogg Art Museum.

The sale of one other artwork was applauded by the medium-size crowd, *Portrait of a Woman Before a Window*, a gouache on paper by Alfred H. Maurer. True, its \$27,025 price tripled the high estimate, but we like to imagine the clapping was more in recognition of the general aesthetic of Maurer, who is considered by many to be our first American Modernist. The son of Louis Maurer, a Currier & Ives illustrator, the artist evolved a style that combined vestiges of American realism with the influence of the European Cubists he encountered while studying in Paris prior to World War I, much to his traditionalist father's everlasting consternation. A case could be made that traditionalists are still trying to come to terms with images like the severely elongated neck and mustard-colored skin of Maurer's subject in this portrait from a private New England collection.

Except for the Calder mobile, all other major lots (\$25,000 or over) cited above and in the captions were bought on the phone, but for the first time we noticed that Internet bidders didn't just bottom feed. On a few occasions they competed vigorously and sometimes prevailed. One of them paid \$22,325 for a Venetian view by the Spanish painter Antonio Maria de Reyna y Manescau, who often painted Venice in the Victorian and post-Victorian ages.

"People are very comfortable bidding with us on the phone, on eBay, and even live!" Fesko quipped in a post-sale e-mail.

We noticed one other trend of the evening, which may bode well for anyone who was an art-buying tourist in Paris in the 1950's and '60's. Post-Impressionist oil on canvas scenes of the city and its environs painted during that period (or even more recently) brought good money.

As at any art sale, the unsigned works sporadically generated the excitement of hopeful discovery. In the margin of our catalog beside the entry for a little unsigned 19th-century American oil, *Passing Shower*, we had written "Heade-ish." When Ted Stebbins, the leading expert on Martin Johnson Heade, started to bid on it, we thought we were about to see another kind of luck in action—the luck of knowledge—but Stebbins let it go to a phone at \$2350. Later we asked him, was it or wasn't it? He smiled and shook his head. "It's not a Heade," he replied. "It was painted by someone who had *seen* a Heade...but it's a nice little scene."

All told, the sale offered 487 lots, 400 of which sold for a gross of \$1,724,628.

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