

Skinner's American Furniture and Decorative Arts

by Jeanne Schinto

The crush of people waiting to ascend the stairs to Skinner's Boston gallery on the morning of November 1, 2003, moments before the start of what would become the auction house's highest-grossing Americana sale in its 42-year history, was probably the closest an antiques-seeking crowd will ever get to resembling its rock-concert counterpart.

There was no stampede, but the possibility was joked about. "I thought those days were behind me," said one woman who, like many, was there to witness the selling of lot 110, the Chippendale mahogany bombé chest-on-chest that descended in the family of Robert "King" Hooper (1709-1790), loyalist, merchant, and bon vivant of Marblehead, Massachusetts.

The \$1.5/2 million estimate on the iconic piece of American furniture, its maker unknown, its date also uncertain although likely pre-Revolutionary, could be based on nothing but intuition, instinct, and nerve. There are only five comparable chest-on-chests known, the closest aesthetic cousin owned by Virginia's Colonial Williamsburg, and none of them have changed hands in anybody's recent or not-so-recent memory.

When the bidding was over, in a matter of 30 seconds, the numbers were proved right. What Todd Prickett of C.L. Prickett, Inc., Yardley, Pennsylvania, paid for the elegantly potbellied form was \$1,766,000 (includes buyer's premium), which falls almost exactly in the middle of the presale figures.

The sum also accounts for slightly more than 46% of Skinner's one-day record-breaking take of \$3,773,000 on a total of 466 lots. (In all, 536 lots were offered.)

Stuart Whitehurst, one of Skinner's European furniture and decorative arts experts, was the first to see the Hooper chest, about 3 1/2 years ago, when its owners called the auction house for an insurance appraisal. It was in their dining room, filled "in the best Yankee tradition" with items from the 1920's, said Stephen Fletcher, Skinner's executive vice president. Fletcher saved the phone message from the family member who told him that while they weren't yet ready to sell the piece, Skinner would be the one to handle it when they were. "It was music to my ears," said Fletcher. "It's on my voice mail. I still have it. It was like a lovely tune that I played now and then." In the meantime, he "dared not tell a soul that I had seen this thing," nor that he had smelled its "lovely old-wood smell or whatever else that smell is. I don't know. But I was drunk on it for quite some time."

The chest's underbidder was Wayne Pratt of Wayne Pratt, Inc., Nantucket, Massachusetts, and Woodbury, Connecticut. In the last hour of the preview, he examined it one more time, drawer by drawer. Pratt's first look had been a week before the sale. After the sale, having arrived home with nothing more than a Nantucket basket, he said, "I was very disappointed. I thought it was a very good buy, and I congratulate the Pricketts. I would love to have bid one more time, but we just couldn't do it. I had gotten to the point where I was at the end of the line."

Prickett, for his part, was obviously elated with his win. "We were up in Boston for the Ellis Antiques Show, so we had several days to look at the piece, enjoy the piece, ponder the piece. We were astounded to purchase it at such a reasonable figure. We were prepared to go well beyond where we went. So many of the bombé forms tend to be a little heavy down in the base. This, unlike those, has perfect proportions."

A set of eight Grecian mahogany carved dining chairs, made in Boston circa 1820, brought the second-highest dollar amount of the day and was the lot most talked about, after the Hooper bombé chest. The chairs were consigned by a Francistown, New Hampshire, family with Boston roots. All but two of the chairs still had their original stamped velvet upholstery. They also had many inexpert (to put it kindly) repairs. One previewer said they looked as if they hadn't been so much used as abused. "In this case, familiarity bred contempt." He dropped out of the bidding soon after it exceeded the lot's typically Skinnerian—i.e., modest—estimate (\$8000/12,000). But the condition didn't deter Margaret B. "Meg" Caldwell of New York City, who bought them on the phone for \$215,000. "The design is the best I've ever seen in a Boston Classical dining chair," Caldwell said later, "and to find a set of eight is extraordinary."

A Civil War memorial quilt was the third most significant lot of the day. Not only was it stunningly beautiful, but it came with a poignant story confirmed by family papers. Sewn by Mary Bell "Polly" Shawvan circa 1863, the quilt was intended to be a homecoming gift for her husband, a member of the Union army's 1st Wisconsin. He was killed at Chickamauga, however, and the quilt, except for being displayed at county fairs, where it won ribbons, was never used. The family kept it wrapped in a pillowcase inside a battered old suitcase, and that's how they brought it to Skinner's. Fletcher said underbidder Steven Weiss of Gemini Antiques, New York City, "was very smitten with it," but it went to a private folk art collector in the room at \$149,000 (est. \$50,000/75,000).

One other lot brought six figures, a 7 5/8 inches x 12 inches yachting picture in oil on academy board signed by James Edward Buttersworth (1817-1894) of the yacht *Columbia* as it rounded the flag boat off Staten Island, New York, circa 1870. Because of its size, Fletcher dubbed it "the ultimate stocking stuffer" during the preview. The many hues of blue and purple were typical of Buttersworth, said another of Skinner's Americana experts, Martha Hamilton. It sold for \$138,000, making the estimate of \$10,000/15,000 look like a typo.

There were a couple of notable disappointments among the most promoted lots of the sale. Only one of the two pieces attributed to John and Thomas Seymour did as well as predicted. A mahogany and maple-veneered dressing bureau with mirror, circa 1820, brought \$38,187.50 (est. \$25,000/35,000), but a carved and inlaid mahogany sideboard, circa 1810, managed only \$11,750 (est. \$20,000/35,000). The former had old finish. The latter was refinished, with oversized replaced brasses that "bugged" at least one prospective bidder.

Nor did a painting by Edward Lamson Henry (1841-1919) charm this group as much as Skinner hoped it would. Portrait of Charles P. Daly in His Boat on Sag Harbor with His Dog seemed to have several points in its favor. It was an idyllic subject, the dapper old judge and his keeshond out for a day on the sound. The point of view was engaging, bringing the viewer right into the boat with the pair. Skinner has sold Henry works for very good prices in the past, but this crowd didn't clamor for his super-realistic American romanticism, and a phone bidder took it for \$18,800 (est. \$25,000/35,000). Maybe Skinner should have saved it for its dog- and cat-painting sale scheduled for three weeks later. (See that story in an upcoming issue of M.A.D.)

After the Hooper went up, the crowd, numbering easily 300 at its peak, thinned noticeably. All told, Skinner reports that it issued 156 live bidder cards, 166 absentee numbers, and took 120 bids on the phone. To judge by announced bidder numbers, more than a few people, whether in person or not, whether retail or not, bought only one stellar lot, each time competing very aggressively. More ordinary pieces were left to the dealers, who took care not to overspend. True to the prevailing market pattern, the middle remains middling and prices for unique or specialized material continue to be robust.

Meanwhile, auctioneers everywhere wait for another voice mail worthy of saving for 3 1/2 years. An auctioneer from another Massachusetts gallery, speaking for many of his brethren, told M.A.D., "Driving around the North Shore [of Boston], we all know where the bodies are. We know there's a highboy in there, a Fitz Hugh Lane in there, a John Sloan in there, and we're all waiting for the phone call that we hope will come."

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