

Skinner's Latest Fitz Hugh Lane Sale Sets a Record

by Jeanne Schinto

A new world record for a Fitz Hugh Lane was set by Skinner, Inc., on Friday evening, November 19, 2004, when *Manchester Harbor* was sold at \$5,506,000 (includes buyer's premium) to dealer Michael Altman of New York City. The auction house advertised an extremely conservative estimate, just \$650,000/850,000 for the 24 inches x 36 inches oil on canvas in its original frame. Everyone knew the final bid would beat that pipsqueak number. The question was, by how much?

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In the days before the sale in Skinner's Boston gallery, the figures being mentioned by dealers and other market observers were in the \$2.7 million to \$3 million range. Maybe Skinner itself would have been happy enough if it had reached \$4 million, a price that would have subtly erased the record for a Lane that was set by Christie's on May 25, 2000, when *The Golden Rule* sold at \$3,966,000. Who could have imagined how high this latest Lane would go? There was to be nothing subtle about this sale.

Jeffrey Brown of Milton, Massachusetts, co-owner with his wife, Kathryn Corbin, of Brown-Corbin Fine Art, came to the gallery that evening, intending to be a contender. "What does the recipe book say for a painting of that vintage?" he asked us rhetorically. "If I were telling a client what to look for, I would describe exactly that picture. It's the original package. It was from the original family, with a history going back to day one. It was exhibited early [in 1857 in Boston]. And no one can find fault with it, although some may say, 'It's not my favorite Lane.' It's a very complex picture. It really does represent a piece of time by one of the big guys, and one of the most sought after of them. It's of serious importance in the history of American painting."

Presumably, Brown had said similar words to the client for whom he was hired to bid. Nonetheless, with his ear to a cell phone and his wife's niece seated nearby, having been invited along to witness the inevitable drama, he dropped out before the painting had reached less than half of what it would attain.

Those who pushed Altman the rest of the way were on the phone and will remain anonymous. Their bids were taken by Skinner paintings department experts Anne E. Poling and Robin S.R. Starr, one each on either side of the auctioneer's podium. Stephen Fletcher was directing the traffic. Paintings department head Colleene Fesko and Skinner CEO Karen Keane were his spotters for this three-way tug. Poling, Altman, Starr; Poling, Altman, Starr. Nobody hesitated. The bids came like bullets. And Fletcher never lost the count even as the increments climbed to numbers he was calling for the first time in his career.

Poling's bidder reached \$4,000,000, in a jump bid. But it was barely noticed by the other two—a small bump in the road—a virtual pimple. Finally Poling's bidder fell, then Starr's, and Altman had it. The painting was hammered to him at \$5,000,000.

"You people don't expect me to pay for it, do you?" he said to us when we took the empty seat next to him in hopes of a comment. Obviously his joke had missed its intended mark: Skinner's staff. When told we were the press, he said, "Can't I remain anonymous?" No, he couldn't—he just wouldn't be able to, not in this packed room of onlookers, was our honest reply. Describing himself as "too nervous to talk," he was able to say at least this much: "It's for resale."

The truly remarkable sum was not only a new record for a Lane—it was another new record for Skinner. Twelve days earlier, on November 7, the auction house's Americana sale had made headlines as its most successful sale of any kind, grossing \$4,363,324. Now the Lane had torpedoed that figure.

But the evening wasn't over. Also crossing the block were four paintings by William Bradford from a private New England collection and 55 pieces by various artists that were being deaccessioned by the former Fuller Museum of Art, now the Fuller Craft Museum, a result of its change of focus. The pieces from the Fuller included a stunning Robert Spear Dunning still life, two landscapes by John Joseph Enneking, a pair of ink drawings by Diego Rivera, and a mesmerizing Maxfield Parrish, called *Winter Dusk*. When the sale was over, the total for the 389 lots that sold was an astonishing \$7,767,918.

Fletcher seemed both amazed and a little wistful about what had just transpired when we saw him on the stairs on our way home. "The Americana department had the record for what—less than two weeks?" he said. Better start knocking on doors in Lowell, we suggested, since just that evening someone in the know had told us that the \$1,876,000 japanned chest of the Americana sale had been found in that old textile-mill city. Fletcher agreed that door-knocking wasn't a bad idea.

The record-breaking Lane, by contrast, had come to Skinner from a family on the West Coast and in a way more appropriate to our high-tech times. They had read on the Internet about Skinner's other headline-making sales of Lane paintings—the Gloucester harbor view that brought \$3,302,500 on September 22, 1995, and *View of West Beach, Beverly, Massachusetts*, that made \$3,852,500 on May 9, 1997.

"The family was experimenting with their new computer," said Fesko. "They always knew they had a Fitz Hugh Lane and that it had some value. It had been in the family for generations. But they really didn't know the current values. They typed in 'Fitz Hugh Lane' and their life changed. Yes, they had a cyberspace experience."

No representative of the family was present at the auction. "But I spoke with them immediately afterwards and they were of course ecstatic." Fesko added, "I think one of the reasons why this piece did so well is because it was a classic example of Luminism." Just as the painting was looking out at the horizon, so, metaphorically, was Lane. "It was painted at the point of the freshest moment of that movement."

Jeffrey Brown, for his part, said a few days after the sale, "That record number wasn't an aberration. I don't believe that was just a case of [underbidders] vying so that they could have bragging rights. I think the market really was at play, and that it really has changed. If somebody wants a Lane of substantial quality now, they will have to cross a new threshold."

Brown agreed that Skinner makes it seem as if Lanes are almost plentiful in the attics of the world. "It's been such an extraordinary run for them, where they have had four fresh, wonderful Lane pictures." (Brown himself was the buyer of Lane's *Boston Harbor at Sunset*, sold to him by Skinner for \$827,500 on November 22, 1996.) "But the supply is extremely limited. How often could he get up and down those steps from his stone house overlooking [Gloucester] harbor? [As a child, Lane contracted what was probably polio and walked with difficulty.] Physical condition can diminish an artist's output."

To conclude our conversation with Brown, we asked what his wife's niece had thought of the sale's theatrics. His reply, "Even if one doesn't know all the players or all the plots, one can watch the action. She said, 'Goll-ee!'"

Complete coverage of the auction will appear in an upcoming issue.