

[Click here to subscribe to M.A.D.](#)

Slave Poet's Letter Breaks Records

by Jeanne Schinto

It was national news, featured in the *New York Times* and other media, when a freshly discovered autograph letter by Phillis Wheatley, a slave in colonial Boston who is considered to be the originator of the African-American literary tradition, was sold at Swann Galleries in New York City on November 22, 2005, for \$253,000 (including buyer's premium). Until then, only 19 other letters by Wheatley (circa 1753-1784) were known. All are in institutional collections in the United States and Great Britain, and all have been published in the various modern editions of her work.

The newly found letter, besides being unpublished, was further noteworthy in the marketplace because it brought the highest price ever paid at public auction for one written by an African-American. Perhaps even more significant is that it appears to have broken another record. Swann autograph specialist Jeremy Markowitz said that he and several leading autograph dealers believe it to be a record for a letter written by a woman.

Wyatt H. Day is Swann's one-person African-Americana department and the founding organizer of its yearly African-Americana sale, Swann is the only major auction house that has such a department and began sales in that category in March 1996. One has been held every February, Black History Month, ever since. The Wheatley letter, however, was sold at a Swann auction of general autographs. Other significant pieces of African-Americana—most notably photographs—have been sold for record prices by other departments at Swann and at other major auction houses.

Day said, "I was asked at the time of the Wheatley sale, 'What does this mean?' Well, it does some giant legitimizing in one stroke. I think the fact that it went for such an enormous sum demonstrates that this is American history, hard-core American history," with no hyphen about it.

The subject of the two-page Wheatley correspondence, dated February 14, 1776, was a very American one—our Revolutionary War. "Even I, a mere spectator, am in anxious suspense concerning the fortune of this unnatural civil contest," Wheatley wrote, in part, to her friend, another slave, Obour Tanner of Newport, Rhode Island.

Three years earlier Wheatley had published the book that had brought her international acclaim, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. The first volume published by an African-American, it was initially issued by a London publisher because no one in Boston would believe that a slave had written it.

"I think there are growing numbers of collectors interested in this material," said Day, speaking now about the mostly upward arc of the whole African-Americana market in recent years. "There are growing numbers of middle-class and upper-middle-class Black families, and within that group, a growing number of collectors. There is also a growing number of Americana collectors in general who are buyers. If you keep all that in mind, the more the market rises makes sense."

Day described the department's genesis. "It was created—I conceived it—out of a need for a level playing field, so that dealers wouldn't just pull prices out of a hat. I realized it wasn't going to happen in one year, but I figured over time the market would settle into something more sensible."

Before 1995, things were helter-skelter, Day said. "One person priced a book of Black literature at two hundred dollars. Then suddenly it was an eight-hundred-dollar book or a fifty-dollar book. Nobody knew what the hell was going on. I wanted a sale like this, where people pay what they will pay. And since you have a focal point for sensible, knowledgeable collectors and institutions, you're going to get consensus, and that has happened after ten years."

Day said he keeps careful track of who's buying what. "It was apparent within a couple of years what institutions were buying historical material," he said. He named the granddaddy of them all, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at the New York Public Library, founded in 1925, and the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research at Harvard University, also Emory University, Duke University, and the University of Virginia.

"The archival material that has some potential for research invariably goes to institutions," Day was happy to say. "I steer it that way. If I have a major item that is relevant [to a certain institution], I let them know months before the sale because I know they have to buy by committee."

The more visual, glitzy items—slave broadsides, for example—tend to go to private collectors as opposed to public collections, Day said. As for books, although institutions sometimes buy items by an author that may shed new light on that author's work, private collectors tend more often to buy the choice literary pieces. Those pieces include "a really nice Langston Hughes title, or any of the major, major figures of the Harlem Renaissance." Georgia Douglas Johnson and Nella Larsen are also in demand by privates, he said, since "women of the 1920's are being rediscovered."

Artworks go to "serious art collectors and some galleries," Day continued, noting that many who buy at his auctions are clients of those same galleries. So whether to buy and then mark up (and, if so, how much) presents what he called "a kind of conundrum" for the galleries. "But in general I think it's been a healthy exercise in bringing stuff to light. I'm dedicated to getting out the knowledge that these things exist. So much of this is, for the majority, just not known. Even within the Black community it's unknown."

Other events in the last dozen years have had an impact on the African-Americana market in general or on one category within it. For instance, in 1994 then-President Bill Clinton and Mrs. Clinton asked two art experts to select a painting by an African-American for the White House. It would be the first such artwork to enter the collection.

David C. Driskell, a leading expert on African-American art, and Sylvia Williams, director of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African Art, chose *Sand Dunes at Sunset, Atlantic City* by Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859-1937). It was bought by the White House endowment fund for \$100,000 from Dr. Rae Alexander-Minter, the artist's grandniece, and unveiled at a White House ceremony on October 29, 1996.

In the 19th century Tanner, a one-time student of Thomas Eakins (1844-1916) who spent over half his life in France, became the first African-American artist to achieve international acclaim. By the mid-20th century, however, the artist Merton D. Simpson (b. 1928) is said to have bought multiple works by Tanner for virtual pennies. Miya Sanson, director of the Merton D. Simpson Gallery in New York City, told us that Simpson bought "twenty or thirty" Tanner paintings at a New York City gallery in the 1960's for between \$30 and \$100 each.

"He has been collecting since the 1950's," said Sanson, "and he is a painter himself, so he understood the artist's importance. He has sold those Tanners over the years. When the White House bought theirs, the demand went way up—along with the prices. If [the White House's Tanner] is probably worth half a million now, not that they're going to sell it."

The current record for a Tanner at public auction is \$617,500, realized on October 17, 2000, at William H. Birch Auctions in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania. The White House effect was only a small part of the reason why that price was reached for the untitled piece of Christ at a table with chalice in hand, said William Bunch, who recalled that its buyer was one of the Manoogian family foundations of Michigan.

"Nothing major of his had come out for a long time. It was previously unrecorded. It was large [54" x 79"]. It was very moving. The condition was beyond reproach. And the world's leading authority on Tanner, David Driskell, authenticated it."

More recently, in October 2003, two other Tanner oils were sold by Bunch for \$168,000 and \$120,000. They were Interior of a Mosque, Cairo, 20½" x 26", and Entrance to the Casbah, 13" x 15". The buyer was the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery in New York City. In 2005 the Cairo painting was bought by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

The last private sale of a Tanner oil by Simpson's gallery was of a large one for around \$450,000, Sanson said. In any size Tanner oils are not plentiful at either galleries or at auction. Simpson's inventory at the time of this interview, shortly before the National Black Fine Art Show in New York City February 2-5, where the gallery was scheduled to show, included just one, The Good Shepherd, 24" x 16", for \$200,000.

Founded in 1996 by Jocelyn Wainwright, the National Black Fine Art Show has itself been a market force, especially for works by 20th-century African-American artists. In honor of its tenth anniversary, Sanson said, several galleries, including hers, were bringing "the old masters." Tanner topped that list along with Robert S. Duncanson (circa 1820-1872). "They are the classics," she said.

Edmonia Lewis (1842-circa 1911) was the first African-American to gain an international reputation as a sculptor. Her works are also in increasing demand by collectors and institutions. Marilyn Richardson of African-Americana Consultants, Watertown, Massachusetts, who is completing a biography of Lewis to be published by the University of North Carolina Press, has been monitoring the Lewis market for years. The current interest was ignited, she said, when Bill Cosby, comedian, actor, and art collector, bought *The Marriage of Hiawatha* at Sotheby's in New York City on May 27, 1992, for \$68,750.

Lewis, who was part Chippewa, explored themes from history, mythology, the Bible, and Native American subjects. She made several copies of *The Old Indian Arrowmaker and His Daughter*. One sold at Sotheby's New York on March 17, 1994, for \$87,750. Another sold there on September 26, 1996, for \$85,000. Then, at Sotheby's London on April 9, 2003, her 1872 sculpture of two sleeping infants, *Night* (also known as *Sleep*), fetched \$130,720. It remains the Lewis public auction record.

Night was bought by the Baltimore (Maryland) Museum of Art. Two other versions of *Night* are in the collections of the Tuskegee (Alabama) Institute and in the San Jose (California) Public Library. Other public collections that have acquired Lewis works in the last few years include the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool; the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland; and the Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio.

Lewis attended the Young Ladies Preparatory Department at Oberlin, the first college in the country to admit women. She left for Boston in 1863 without graduating, then moved after the Civil War to Rome, where she lived and worked for many years. At the Philadelphia Centennial she triumphed with *The Death of Cleopatra*. A few years later its whereabouts was unknown. (Lewis herself vanished from history sometime after 1909.) Rediscovered in the late 1970's, *Cleopatra* was purchased and conserved in the early 1990's by the National Museum of American Art, renamed the Smithsonian American Art Museum, which Richardson calculates has the largest collection of Lewis works at eight.

The Smithsonian may acquire more. Its forthcoming National Museum of African American History and Culture, scheduled to be built on the Mall near the Washington Monument, announced during Black History Month that it will soon begin raising money and acquiring collections.

Ross J. Kelbaugh was happy to hear the news of the site selection, which has come only after decades of political infighting and controversy. Kelbaugh, author of *Introduction to African American Photography 1840-1950: Identification, Research, Care & Collecting* (2005), the first book of its kind, has been collecting African-American images, as an outgrowth of his interest in Civil War material, since the early 1970's.

"I understood that this material was important and needed to be preserved, and it was at the time affordable," said Kelbaugh of Baltimore, a retired American history teacher who founded Historic Graphics in 1983. He has bought and sold over the years but now is devoting himself to writing and research projects, including a catalog of every different type of Frederick Douglass photograph. "I have documented seventy-four different types so far. He was the most photographed African-American." By comparison, there are 125 or 130 different Lincoln photographs, he said.

Those 74 different Douglass images do not include pirated images or copies of photographs. "There is one that turns up frequently," said Kelbaugh. "It was published during the period, but it is a copy." Others are floating around that are purportedly Douglass, but aren't "and don't even look like him."

Most of the important Douglass images are in public institutions. "At least one is in private hands." It belongs to Greg French of Early Photography, Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts. "His is number one, the earliest daguerreotype of Douglass that I have seen," said Kelbaugh, who dates it from 1845. "Greg had the vision to buy it years ago, really not knowing that it was the earliest, and he definitely, in terms of value, hit it out of the park." A circa 1852 half-plate daguerreotype of Douglass by Samuel Miller of Akron, Ohio, sold at Sotheby's New York on October 2, 1996, for \$184,000.

Multiple, different cartes de visite of another 19th-century African-American abolitionist, Sojourner Truth, were made, but as far as Kelbaugh knows the types have not been cataloged. That apparent lack "is an outgrowth of the fact that not much attention has been paid to this material until now," he said. "Finally, there is a movement, and it's about time."

Kelbaugh monitors the market and posts prices on his Web site (www.HistoricGraphics.com). One of those listed is a quarter-plate daguerreotype made by W.A. Pratt of Richmond, Virginia. The subject is a White infant resting in the lap of an African-American nurse. It sold in May 2003 at Cowan's Auctions in Cincinnati, Ohio, for \$22,425. The image shows only the torso of the nurse. Pratt failed to include her head. If ever there was an example of the racial hierarchy in 19th-century American society, this is it.

By contrast, a half-plate tintype, circa 1875, of an African-American nurse holding a White child on her lap brought only \$330 at Cowan's in June 2005. Granted, daguerreotypes generally bring more than tintypes, and this image was more traditional and therefore more common. But the price differential was also the result of something else, something ironic—the perceived status of the African-American. "This is a good example of this genre," Kelbaugh wrote in his market analysis on the Web site, "but since it was made after the Civil War, the nurse was not a slave, which accounts for this average price."

Kelbaugh also monitors and reports sales of relevant material on eBay. A sixth-plate daguerreotype of an African-American child posed "kneeling in a subservient manner and touching a little white girl who is sitting in chair," circa 1850, brought \$12,600 on eBay in May 2005. Kelbaugh reported on his site. "Child slaves posed with their charges are much less common than those of a Black nurse with a White child," he added, "and will usually command higher prices."

A similar sixth-plate daguerreotype, showing a White girl seated while an African-American child appears to tie the girl's shoe, sold at Swann Galleries on October 20, 2005, for \$21,850. Kelbaugh believes it to be a record for an image of a slave child.

Photographs by early African-American photographers (Augustus Washington (1820/21-1875) and James Presey Ball (1825-1904/05) especially) are bringing high prices. A half-plate daguerreotype of a Cincinnati street scene by Ball was sold by Swann Galleries in 1992 for \$63,800. At Sotheby's New York on October 2, 1996, a long-lost portrait of antislavery hero John Brown by Washington fetched \$129,000.

The image of Brown, the earliest known at circa 1847, went to dealer William Schaeffer of Chester, Connecticut, who was bidding for the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. In 1999 the gallery mounted *A Durable Memento: Portraits by Augustus Washington, African American Daguerreotypist*.

Even when institutions don't have exhibits in mind, they are "filling in gaps that they have allowed to occur," said Kelbaugh. "Others are starting to build collections from scratch." He named as an example of the latter the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History & Culture, Baltimore, that opened in June 2005.

With any emerging movement in collecting, a kind of swell and subsequent spike occur before the rare and the less rare materials get sorted out and priced accordingly. For some markets that's not entirely good news, but for African-Americana it's one more proof of legitimacy. We asked Wyatt Day at Swann Galleries if he thought we had passed through that phase in African-Americana yet. "I think so," he said. "People are now settling in and beginning to view Black history as history, Black artists as artists."

© 2006 by *Maine Antique Digest*