

## Spring Auction of American and European Paintings and Prints

by Jeanne Schinto

After Skinner's paintings sale in Boston on March 4, the auction house ate no caviar, but no crow, either. It was strictly bread and butter when compared to its previous art sale in November 2004, the most successful in any category in the company's history.

This time, the gross was \$1,773,482, and the top lot made five figures, not seven. The priciest piece, *Over the Bridge/ A Winter Landscape* by Fritz Thaulow, brought \$88,125 (including buyer's premium). What might have superceded it, didn't. A Toulouse-Lautrec lithograph tagged with the highest estimate in the catalog, \$150,000/200,000, failed to sell.

"Might" is the key word. Estimates have become such complex tools, serving so many purposes, that a beginner who compares them with final prices would be perplexed, but most veteran auction-goers can't find a pattern either these days. Auctioneers use them as a tool to assuage consignors. Potential buyers use them as a gauge to guess reserves. Technically, they are meant to be a reflection of past auction sales of similar properties. It's hard to recall ancient history, but were they *ever* a consistently reliable price forecaster?

We were even more aware of their intricacy this time because we brought a friend who had never been to an auction, unless you count the cattle auction she once attended in England. Having just consigned a New Hampshire landscape to Skinner's May paintings sale, she wanted to see how things worked. Noting that Evert Pieters's *Preparing Supper* had been given the same estimate as her painting (\$15,000/25,000), she wondered if its \$16,450 price was an indication of what hers would bring. Or would its final tally more closely match the \$22,325 that someone paid for the William Aiken Walker with the same estimate? Or would its fate be like the Arthur Fitzwilliam Tait with the same estimate? It was signed off at \$8500 to bidder 697, one of Skinner's buy-in numbers, we had to explain.

Seasoned buyers, writing their coded lists at the previews, seem to know what they're doing, and at the auction itself they act focused. They buy one or two key items only and tend not to bid on a whim or a prayer. David Kasman (born 1962), a Boston area artist and collector, waited all evening for *A Nude* by Charles Webster Hawthorne and then paid \$10,575, more than triple the high estimate, for what he believes was a "demonstration" painting that Hawthorne did for his students in Provincetown, Massachusetts. He considered himself lucky that bidding stopped at \$9000 on the hammer, which was as high as he was prepared to go.

Also late in the evening, Daniel Ross, owner of Sylvan Fine Arts, Waban, Massachusetts, took an A.C. Goodwin oil of a peanut vendor in Boston's Public Garden for a bargain \$12,925 and said he wasn't even tempted by the other three Goodwins in the sale. Hours earlier he had bought only one other significant work, a Miró etching at \$7050, for personal reasons (he had been to the Fundació Miró, the Miró museum, in Barcelona recently). Another bidder in the room bought a lithograph by Robert Motherwell for \$1762.50 and a Richard Serra print for \$5581.25 and then headed for the stairs.

A Massachusetts dealer/collector who rarely misses a Skinner sale complained that being so conservative took the fun out of it. He longed for the cowboy days, when to take a flyer required far less cash and, face it, less nerve.

Showing no signs of risk aversion on this night was Alexander Acevedo, the owner of Alexander Gallery on Madison Avenue, New York City, and creator of those intriguing ads in *The Magazine Antiques*. He arrived as the sale's last preview ended. "I was there five minutes before the sale was being pulled away," he said. Then, by his own description, he bid "by the seat of my pants."

He bought a genre painting attributed to Lilly Martin Spencer without examining it at all. "That one I bought straight from the [video] screen," said Acevedo, whose bill for it was \$12,925. He also bought a small, enigmatic William Rimmer (but aren't all Rimmers enigmatic?) that he barely examined, paying \$21,150 for *Job and His Comforters*. "The purchase of genre pictures for me is unusual," he said, "but it was right up there in rarity. I've never had a Rimmer before, so I decided easily to take the plunge. I hadn't even had time to see it, but I don't think it was a hard thing to judge."

Jeffrey Weidman, author of the William Rimmer catalogue raisonné, said by phone from his office at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri, that Acevedo has a good eye. "I wouldn't call it a genre painting, but it's rare without a doubt. And the price isn't bad for a late Rimmer, which I take it to be. In the 1990's a couple of Rimmers went up, at Sotheby's and Christie's, ones I'd known about for a long time, and they didn't sell. The market was strong, but Rimmer has always been a connoisseur's artist, and the prices being asked for those paintings, one hundred thousand or so, which I thought were reasonable, no one was willing to pay."

Weidman, who assisted Skinner's with its catalog entry, related *Job* to other mature works by Rimmer from the mid-1870's. He mentioned *The Sentry*, purchased not long ago by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; he wrote an authentication essay for it for Hirschl & Adler Galleries, when the New York City firm had it in 1989. "That's a painting very much like *Flight and Pursuit*," a Rimmer masterwork in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. "It's really terrific, but the one at Skinner was not in that class."

Acevedo missed one painting that he wanted, a marine scene by Lemuel D. Eldred, for which his successful rival paid \$34,075. Skinner's painting department head, Colleene Fesko, said the harbor view "was from the same private Massachusetts collection that included the [four] Bradfords from the November sale." A collection that would contain works by William Bradford and Lemuel Eldred makes sense. The two painters were born and lived in Fairhaven, Massachusetts, near the whaling community of New Bedford, and often painted together.

The Eldred oil shared another characteristic with the Bradfords from the previous sale: it was very dirty. "It was such a wonderful painting, I would love to see it cleaned up," said Fesko, who added that, despite the dirt, she judged it to be "in stable, original condition."

Although local, the buyer of the Eldred seascape bid by phone. The phones occupied 12 Skinner staffers most of the evening, especially when the better lots went up. The Internet kept two people sporadically engaged. Skinner's said afterwards that 14% of the sale's 518 successfully sold lots (82% of those offered) went to mouse clickers. The Internet's share by dollar value was not provided, but our observation was that the computer bidders were, as usual, mainly bottom-feeders.

It's often stated with envy by auction attendees that Internet participants can bid in their pajamas, but they do miss the theatrics, if any. At a sale such as this one, diversion was provided almost solely by verbal wit, which included the quirky humor of Robin S.R. Starr, who auctioned the prints and photographs, and the controlled irreverence of Stephen Fletcher, who took over when the paintings began. Indeed, Fletcher was in even finer comedic form than usual. Was it because he was "celebrating" his birthday by working or because the stakes were relatively minor? At any rate, there was plenty of grist for the Fletcher mirth mill, including an inordinate number of cow and cattle pictures ("Oh, here's an udder one").

Fletcher, however, seemed to be serious when he said to his audience, "Colleene and I have a good idea. People should be allowed to set aside a percentage of their Social Security to invest in art." Write your congresspeople.

Even if the dealer/collector who longed for the old days failed to have fun, others had their share. As the evening ended, an obviously delighted young couple shared a kiss while one of them prepared to pay the cashier for their purchase, Jean Vollet's *On the Seine*. It wasn't a large purchase, \$1292.50, but theirs were the fresh faces that Skinner seeks almost as much as fresh merchandise.

One familiar face was missing and won't be seen again. Frederick Rush Innes, the retired physicist with flowing white hair, a beard to match, and a Beacon Hill apartment in Boston jam-packed with his collections, died at age 88 on January 4 after suffering a stroke on New Year's Eve.

At least one unsold painting, A.C. Goodwin's *Harbor View*, found a post-sale buyer at \$17,625, but we didn't learn what happened to the unsold Toulouse-Lautrec litho or to Thomas Eakins's *Portrait Sketch of Maybelle Schlichter*, offered for the second time at Skinner and again unsold. Another buy-in was *View of Gstaad* by William Samuel Horton, who used a creamy lavender palette to show what snow does to the quality of light and to one's vision. It was a lovely piece, but nobody was willing to go more than \$15,000, where it opened and closed (est. \$25,000/35,000). Perhaps a reoffer is in its future.

By the time you read this, Skinner's next painting sale, in May, will have happened. It's reportedly going to be a big one, and we'll write that story for a future issue. For more information, contact Skinner's at (617) 350-5400 or visit its Web site ([www.skinnerinc.com](http://www.skinnerinc.com)).