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Strongest Painting Sale Ever---without a Fitz Henry Lane

by Jeanne Schinto



Skinner Inc., Boston, Massachusetts

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Photos courtesy Skinner

"We were absolutely thrilled; there's no getting around it. This is the strongest painting sale we've ever had that's been Fitz Henry Lane free," said Skinner's Robin S.R. Starr after the auction house's May 21 sale at its Boston gallery that grossed \$3,982,398 (including buyers' premiums). "It was a terrific sale. I don't think anybody is ready to say the market is back and going gangbusters, but with fresh material, it is."

Starr, director of Skinner's department of American and European paintings and prints, admitted to having presale nerves. "Truth be told, like everybody else we were watching the stock market and the news about the euro being in decline, and I think we were all biting our nails a bit," she said. "We were concerned about whether that would affect us. If that was an effect, I can deal with it." She laughed heartily.

A dealer on the phone paid \$699,000 for the most expensive work in the 571-lot auction, Childe Hassam's *At the Grand Prix*, circa 1887, estimated at a conservative \$150,000/200,000. A relatively small pastel and graphite on paper/board, the 11½" x 8¾" (sight size) picture depicts two young, fashionable Parisian women standing up in a carriage and watching the doings at a horse race. Starr said it came from a private collection whose owners purchased it in the early 1950's. According to its provenance, it has been hanging in residences in Palm Beach, Florida, Islesboro, Maine, and other places true to its horsey set subject.

Hassam made at least two other pastels of the same subject; one is in the collection of the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., while the location of the other is unknown. There are also two large-scale oil paintings of race day promenades, one at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the other at the New Britain (Connecticut) Museum of American Art.

"Hassam didn't work in pastels for all that long or that frequently," said Starr. Nonetheless, she noted, these works should be considered an important step in the artist's development, since they represent "the moment when he discovers his sunlit, impressionistic palette."

Achieving almost as much as the Hassam was a playful dreamscape by Yves Tanguy, *Un peu après [A Little Later]*, 1940, an 18" x 15" oil on canvas mounted on masonite that sold on the phone for \$688,000 to a dealer overseas. Starr described the composition's odd, colorful shapes as "biomorphic figures," some resembling "sinew and bone and muscle," others early plastics. At a gallery walk, she referred to one of those shapes as a "green table monster with Bakelite-like legs."

The artist didn't intend the scene to be a literal translation of anything in the real world, but elements of the artist's autobiography shine through it, Starr pointed out. Born in Paris, the Surrealist-to-be spent his childhood summers on the coast of Brittany. Judging from the contours of this fantasy picture, the prehistoric menhirs and dolmens (standing stones) of its terrain must have insinuated themselves into his imagination.

The Tanguy came from the estate of Mary Lee Ingbar (1926-2009) of Cambridge, Massachusetts, whose mother and stepfather, Ruth P. and Edward C. Mack, bought it in the 1940's, said Starr. "So it has been in the family since it was painted. They showed it in 1974; other than that, it really hasn't been seen much. It is a known and documented work, but it was hidden away—very fresh. That was the common theme of the sale's very successful pieces."

A collection of fresh-to-the-market artists' books from the Ingbar estate also helped make this sale memorable. For those unfamiliar with the art form, they are not just illustrated books, though authors and artists frequently collaborate to create them. Put simply and broadly, but necessarily obliquely, they combine story and visual elements into an original work of art that expands the concept of "book."

Ingbar's collection included more than a dozen examples by artists such as Jean Arp, Pierre Bonnard, Georges Braque, Jim Dine, Raoul Dufy, Max Ernst, David Hockney, and Jasper Johns, among others. Bidders, however, did not clamor for all of them with equal fervor. The one that achieved the most was *L'Antitête (The Anti-Head)*, one of 200 copies published in 1949 by Tristan Tzara in Paris. *L'Antitête* consists of three 5¼" x 4½" unbound volumes, each with hand-colored etchings by either Yves Tanguy, Max Ernst, or Joan Miró that relate to each of three French-language texts. It sold for \$55,125 to a dealer via the Internet.

That same Internet bidder paid \$34,300 for a copy of Braque's *La Théogonie d'Hésiode* (est. \$7000/9000), a French translation of Hesiod's circa 700 B.C. Greek epic poem about the creation of the gods and their cosmos. Published in 1955 by Maeght in Paris in a total edition of 150, it includes 20 etchings by the painter and sculptor who, along with Picasso, developed the art movement we call Cubism.

Another bidder took a copy of Jim Dine's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde at a reasonable \$4148 (est. \$4000/6000). Published in 1968 by Petersburg Press, New York and London, it includes 12 lithographs by the artist, plus a portfolio of six lithographs and four etchings. The red leather binding features a raised heart, Dine's signature symbol and an appropriate one for Wilde's gothic tale that involves broken hearts and stabbings.

Being able to handle so many different artists' books at once was a rare opportunity for anyone looking to gain a better understanding of the genre. "Having a great group of them was what made it interesting and also enticed potential buyers to come see them," said Starr. Their condition was another factor in their favor. Ingbar and her husband, Sidney (1925-1988), displayed some in their home, but others were "tucked away, carefully stored," according to Starr, "so these books were loved, but they were also very protected. They came out very fresh."

A top lot that sells to an on-site bidder is a rarity these days, but *A Walk along the Harbor Shore* by Irving Ramsey Wiles went to a man in the gallery who was murmuring into a cell phone. Starr confirmed that he was a dealer acting as agent. Auctioneer Stephen L. Fletcher said from the podium that he'd found the work hanging in a private home where he'd been summoned to look at furniture. Starr said after the sale that when Fletcher mentioned his interest in it, the owner hesitated, saying her daughter had always liked it, but Fletcher's estimate of \$50,000/75,000 quickly convinced her to let it go.

The 16 1/8" x 22" oil on canvas depicts a young Victorian woman hanging on to her white bonnet as she strolls along a seashore on a glorious, sun-drenched day. The place is likely Peconic, New York, on the north shore of Long Island, where Wiles built a studio and cottage in the late 1890's. The painting opened at \$60,000 from an absentee bidder, and eventually the agent, who prevailed against a slew of phones, won it at \$490,000, a new auction price record for the artist, according to Skinner's research on ArtNet.

Pickers aren't getting the best media attention these days; they deserve better. Most would rather have the dough. One—"a great guy, a picker/dealer who has been working with us for years," said Starr—got a nice reward as a result of a consignment to this sale: two late 18th-century watercolors of China by William Alexander, *Chinese Barges of the Embassy Preparing to Pass Under a Bridge* and *A View of Part of the Great Wall of China*...

Each carried the same paltry estimate, \$1000/1500, "and the initial estimate was lower," said Starr. Skinner, however, decided to let the numbers stand, even as research revealed the paintings to be originals for engraved plates that illustrate Sir George Staunton's *An Authentic Account of an Embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China* (London, 1797), the official account of Lord George Macartney's experiences as the first British ambassador to China, 1792-94.

"Even I didn't know they were going to go sky-high. In my wildest dream, I thought twenty to forty thousand," said Starr, who watched Stephen Fletcher sell them to a phone bidder in the United Kingdom for \$82,950 (Chinese Barges...) and \$100,725 (...the Great Wall...). The latter set a new price record for the artist, and the former is the runner-up, according to Skinner's research on ArtNet.

Starr said one "extra special" feature of the Alexander items was the date on ...Barges..., 1793, which means that the artist completed it while still in China. "He did copious sketches [in China], but many of the finished compositions were done back in London." Another selling point was their "fantastic condition." The paper showed evidence of foxing, but "nobody had messed with them." Both were "really, fairly pristine."

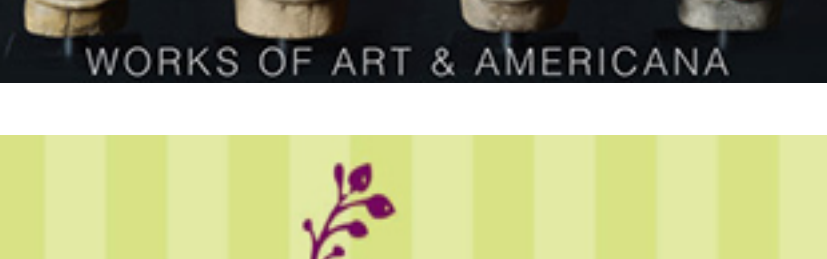
This sale began at noon, resumed at four after a break, and ended at about nine. Audience numbers ebbed and flowed-by the end, Skinner's staff easily outnumbered the dozen stalwarts in the audience-but absentee and off-site bidders made sure that no truly great artwork got away. Still, there were plenty of reasons for collectors on a budget to give their luck a try throughout the day.

Here's one example. For a mere \$3081 (est. \$1200/1800), someone bought a tour de force by Frank Henry L. Tompkins (1847-1922), *Dorchester Bay at Night*, an almost entirely black composition, sparsely speckled with the harbor's colored lights. The 11¼" x 18¾" oil on board is signed, inscribed, and dated "...FH Tompkins/ Pope Building/ Boston/ 1905" on the reverse.

Looking forward to her next major sale in September, Starr said, "Our goal is very much to concentrate on great pieces; that's where we're headed." She continued, "We're never going to walk away from the pieces that are good quality but more affordable-that's a good market for us-but certainly the focus is shifting to much higher quality. And we're going to present as much fresh material as we can."

For more information, contact Skinner at (617) 350-5400; Web site ([www.skinnerinc.com](#)).

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At the Grand Prix by Childe Hassam (1859-1935), an 11½" x 8¾" (sight size) pastel and graphite on paper/board, brought the top price of the day, \$699,000 (est. \$150,000/200,000). Signed "Childe/Hassam," it was inscribed "given to me by A.L.A. for Victorian Room" on a label from the Worth Avenue Gallery, Palm Beach, Florida. The provenance notes indicated that Alexander Laughlin Alexander may have given the circa 1887 pastel to his mother, Madelaine Francis (née Laughlin) Alexander. The work came to the sale from the estate of Anne P. Owsley.



A Walk along the Harbor Shore by Irving Ramsey Wiles (1861-1948) almost certainly depicts a turn-of-the-20th-century scene in Peconic, Long Island, New York, where Wiles and his family summered regularly. The 16 1/8" x 22" oil on canvas fetched \$490,000 (est. \$50,000/75,000).



The same U.K. phone bidder bought these 11" x 17¼" (sight size) watercolors on paper/board by William Alexander (1767-1816), Chinese Barges of the Embassy Preparing to Pass Under a Bridge for \$82,950 and A View of Part of the Great Wall of China...for \$100,725. They are the two highest auction prices on record for the artist, according to Skinner's ArtNet research. Engraved plates after these paintings illustrate Sir George Staunton's An Authentic Account of an Embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China (1797).

