

Swann Galleries, New York City

Swann's Best-Ever African American Fine Art Sale: \$3.1 Million

by Jeanne Schinto
Photos courtesy Swann Galleries

"Who says auctions can't be fun?" Swann Galleries' president and chief auctioneer Nicholas D. Lowry asked his audience after selling a circa 1958 painting by Norman Lewis for an applause-generating record-breaking \$965,000 (including buyer's premium). The untitled and previously uncataloged abstraction in oil on canvas, estimated at \$250,000/350,000, was hammered down at the auction house's African American fine art sale on December 15, 2015, to an anonymous entity at the other end of a phone line.

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Lowry didn't announce the bidder's paddle number. That was curious. He is one of the smoothest auctioneers in the business, so observers were left to wonder if it had been a deliberate omission. The following day, the list of top-lot results disseminated to the media didn't indicate with the usual "C," "D," or "I" whether the buyer of the Lewis painting was a collector, dealer, or institution. More intrigue. An inquiry to communications director Alexandra Nelson elicited the e-mailed response that he, she, or it didn't want to be identified in any way. An anonymous buyer, indeed.

A television crew from *CBS Sunday Morning* filmed the Lewis sale. They were said to be doing a segment on the artist, who was Harlem-born in 1909 to Caribbean immigrants and whose work grew increasingly abstract as his career developed. That happened in New York City in close proximity to Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning, and others of the "Irascibles" famously photographed by *Life* magazine for its January 15, 1951, issue. Lewis was not invited to the shoot.

The mainstream media attention was the result of publicity for the auction as well as for Lewis's first-ever and long overdue full-scale retrospective, which opened in mid-November at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia. Titled *Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis*, the show was "highly recommended" by Lowry from the auctioneer's podium. However, he added, "Those who would rather acquire your artworks than go to a museum, here's your chance."

Bidders took advantage of the opportunity as Swann presented a total of six oils by Lewis. In addition to the top lot, which measures 51" x 64", the five other (smaller) oils dating from circa 1950 to 1960 achieved \$8750, \$11,250, \$11,875, \$23,750, and \$25,000 (one within estimate, the rest over the high estimate, and one of those well over the high). Together the six Lewis paintings brought \$1,045,625—33.5% of the auction's \$3,117,132 gross, which was announced to be the department's best in its nearly nine-year history.

The Lewis retrospective continues in Philadelphia through April 3. After that, it heads to the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth, Texas, where it will be on view from June 4 through August 21. The show then travels to its final destination, the Chicago Cultural Center, its host from September 17 through January 8, 2017. Of the show's 90 artworks from public and private collections, one won't be returning to its owner. The large (4' x 7') untitled oil and gold metallic paint on canvas is going to the Newark Museum. Previously in the artist's estate, the 1953 painting was sold to the New Jersey institution on November 5 by Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York City.

As readers of *M.A.D.* have known for some time, museums have been adding more and more works by artists of color to their collections. (See, for example, "Institutions Buy Big at African-American Art Sale," *M.A.D.*, December 2008, p. 10-C.) What is new—and exemplified by the museum attention being given to Lewis—is that curators are increasingly willing to embrace African American art that isn't overtly about the black experience, that isn't narrative, that isn't figural, i.e., that doesn't give viewers any clue at all about its maker's racial identity. That truly is a milestone.

If only Lewis were around to witness it. As Randy Kennedy wrote in "Black Artists and the March into the Museum" (a lengthy piece published by the *New York Times* on November 28) Lewis "rarely complained in public about the singular struggles of being a black artist in America." However, as his daughter recalled to Kennedy, he made a prediction to his family while dying of cancer in 1979. "He said to us, 'I think it's going to take about 30 years, maybe 40, before people stop caring whether I'm black and just pay attention to the work.'" His prediction has proven to be fairly accurate, and, as Kennedy pointed out, Lewis "might well have been predicting history's arc for several generations of African-American artists in overcoming institutional neglect."

The second-to-top lot was decidedly representational. It was *Tuff Tony*, one of Barkley L. Hendricks's full-length portraits of hip African American subjects from his "white-on-white" series of the 1970s. The 1978 oil and acrylic on canvas is a nearly life-size likeness of a slim young man wearing white pants, a see-through plastic visor, and a shirt that says "MCHS Swimming." Like all the subjects from this series, the subject is posed against a white background. Produced by Hendricks from an initial photograph (what the artist has called his "mechanical sketchbook"), the painting sold to a collector on the phone for \$365,000 (est. \$120,000/180,000). The price matches the record achieved by Hendricks's *Steve*, a work from the same series that Swann sold to an unnamed institution on April 2, 2015. (Swann said it is still unable to name that institutional buyer.)

The sale's cover lot for December was Elizabeth Catlett's 1944 painting *Friends*. It sold to an institution that, like the buyer of *Steve*, did not want to be named. The price was \$81,250—more than double its high estimate and the new auction record for a painting by Catlett, who is best known for her sculpture and prints. It is in fact a record by default, because the tempera on paper mounted to masonite board is believed by Swann to be the first Catlett painting to come to auction. The auction house said it knows of only eight others, in private collections, adding that many are small figural portraits like *Friends*, a closeup and cropped image of two angularly stylized faces that measures 11¼" x 9¼".

Other big prices were achieved at this sale for works by Hughie Lee-Smith, Romare Bearden, Alma W. Thomas, Glenn Ligon, Sam Gilliam, and Eldzier Cortor.

It was announced at the podium before the Cortor went up that the artist had died three weeks earlier, on Thanksgiving Day 2015. Cortor, who was 99, did live to see his art featured in the inaugural show of the new downtown Whitney Museum of American Art, which opened on May 1, 2015. Asked by Randy Kennedy of the *New York Times* how he felt about that honor, Cortor said, "It's a little late now, I'd say. But better than never."

For more information, phone (212) 254-4710 or see the auction house's website (www.swannalleries.com).

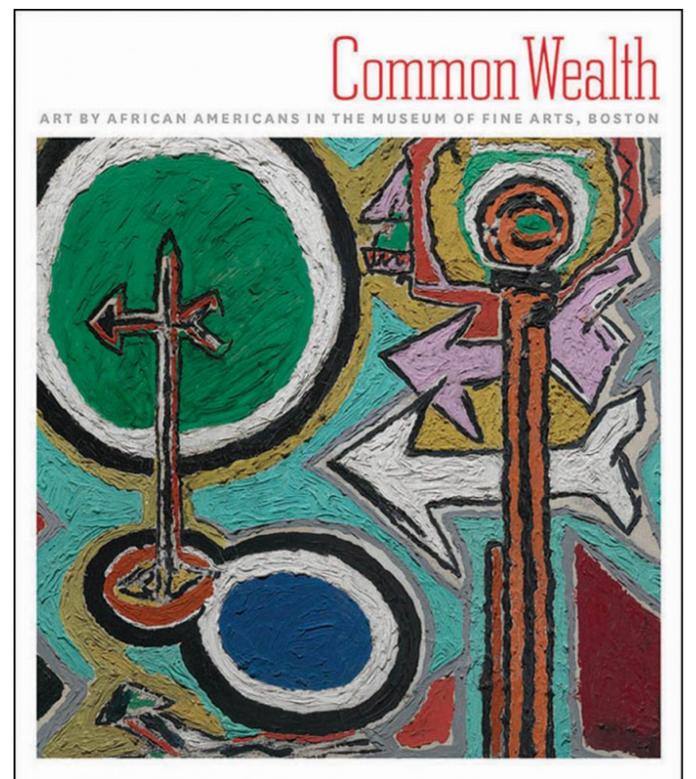
There is a new book out about the African American fine art collection of Boston's major art museum. It is *Common Wealth: Art by African Americans in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* by Lowery Stokes Sims, published by MFA Publications in 2015. With 145 color illustrations, it is available in hardcover for \$50 plus shipping/handling from the museum's gift shop. For more information, phone (508) 894-2863 or see the website (www.mfa.org/publications). The book can also be found for sale online and at bookstores.



During the selling of this untitled work by Norman Lewis (1909-1979), Nicholas Lowry took a shouted-out jump-bid of \$450,000. It turned out to be piker level. The painting sold for \$965,000 (est. \$250,000/350,000), a new record for the artist. The large (51" x 64") circa 1958 oil on canvas has a much lighter palette than other, comparable "promenade" paintings by Lewis, i.e., those that feature patterns of tiny calligraphic "ritual" figures. Dominated by tones of beige, this example is more closely associated with one of Lewis's best-known works, *Harlem Turns White* (1955), which is in a private collection.



The size of this live audience was unusually large, compared to those for most auction houses today, but not for Swann's African American fine art sales, which still pack them in.

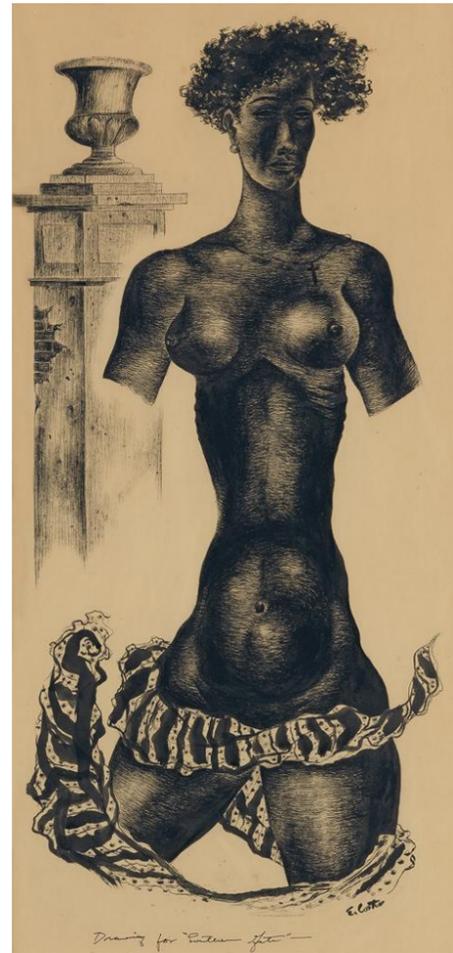




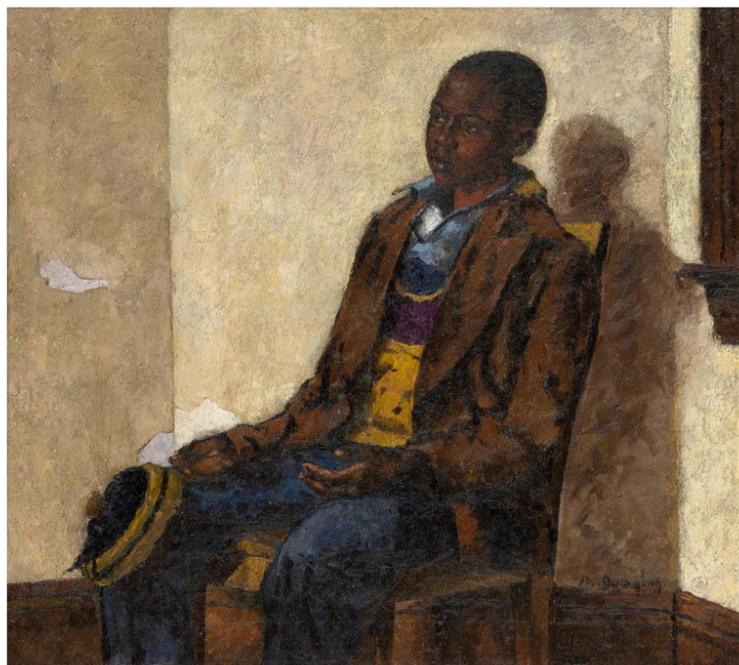
Atina Sutton is Swann's new specialist in African American fine art. She is pictured in the office she shares with the department's founding director, Nigel Freeman. The window looks out on the 69th Regiment Armory on Lexington Avenue, where in 1913 the International Exhibition of Modern Art, a.k.a. the Armory Show, took place. Sutton, who joined Swann in the summer of 2015, earned a B.F.A. at Pratt Institute. After completing her undergraduate degree, she worked as a researcher and writer at the Brooklyn Museum in its department of pre-Columbian art of Latin America, assisting on exhibitions such as *Life, Death, and Transformation in the Americas*. Sutton is currently enrolled at New York University's master's program in Latin American and Caribbean Studies. Schinto photo.



This terra-cotta woman's head by Elizabeth Catlett is on display at the new Whitney Museum of American Art down in the meat-packing district of Manhattan. When it sold for \$173,000 at Swann's African American fine art sale of October 3, 2013, the buyer was a room bidder representing an unnamed institution. As can be inferred now, that institution was the Whitney. Schinto photo.



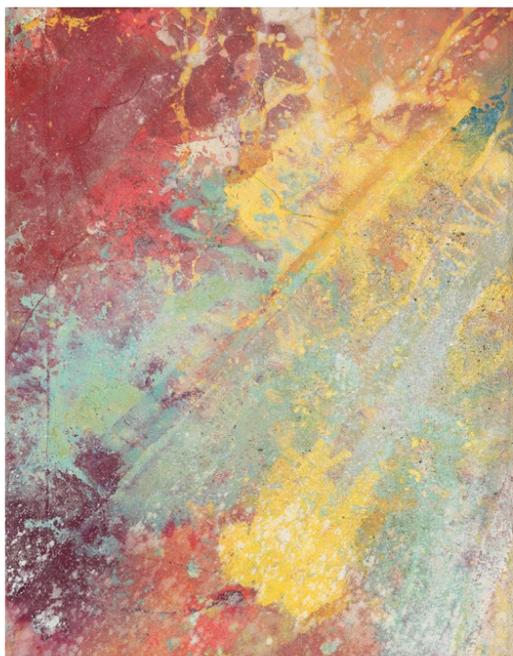
This 1942-43 study for Eldzier Cortor's best-known painting, *Southern Gate*, which is in the collection of the National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C., sold to a dealer on the phone for \$60,000 (est. \$15,000/25,000). The 28½" x 13½" brush and pen and ink on cream wove paper had been in a private collection since 1988.



The Street Urchin by Aaron Douglas (1899-1979) achieved \$60,000 (est. \$30,000/40,000). Its new owner, a collector, waited until the competition's end seemed near and then bid just once to take it. A rare figural work by the artist, who is better known for the modern style of his murals, this circa 1938 portrait was one of two examples used to illustrate Douglas's work in *The Negro in Art* by Alain Locke (1940). According to the painting's provenance, the original owner of the 24" x 27½" oil on canvas was Max Robinson (1939-1988), who in 1969 became the first African American anchor on network television.



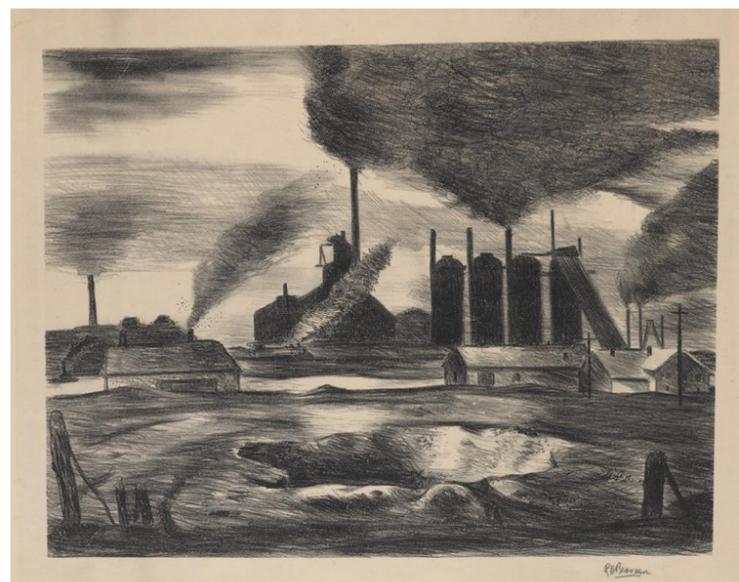
An unnamed institution paid \$81,250 for the sale's cover lot, *Friends* by Elizabeth Catlett (1915-2012). The 1944 tempera on paper mounted to masonite board measures 11¼" x 9¼". In the 1940s, the painting, which is signed in two places, was in the collection of William and Louise Patterson of New York City, then went by descent to another New York collection. According to her *New York Times* obituary, Louise Patterson (1901-1999) was "an advocate of civil rights and leftist causes, a participant in the Harlem Renaissance, and a longtime associate of one of its leading figures, the poet Langston Hughes."



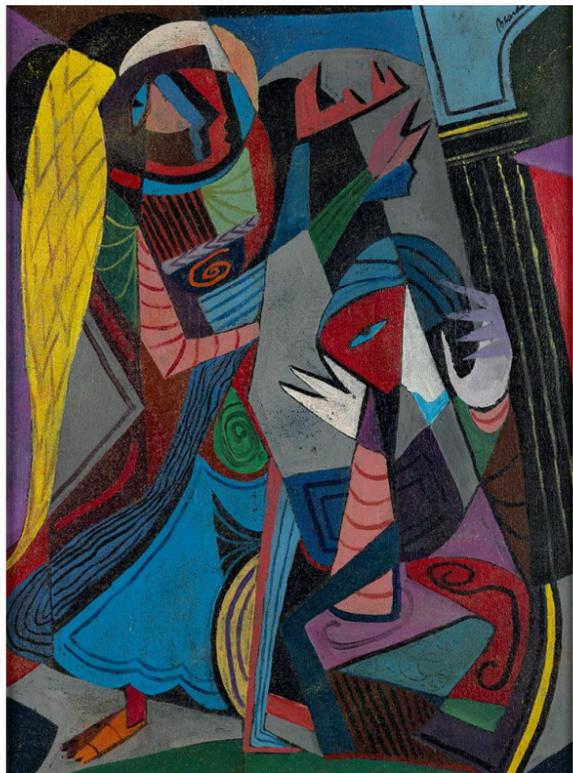
Scatter Pisces by Sam Gilliam (b. 1933) brought \$67,500 (est. \$15,000/25,000). The 1973 acrylic and flocking on canvas is 40" x 30" x 2".



Romare Bearden's *Wine Star* fetched \$125,000 (est. \$120,000/180,000). The 59" x 42" oil on canvas dates from about 1959. In circa 1965 it was part of a collection in France; since 2006, it had been in a private New York collection. The new owner is another private collector.



This untitled 12½" x 16½" lithograph on cream wove paper most likely depicts an industrial scene in Pittsburgh, hometown of its creator, Romare Bearden (1911-1988). Cataloged as "an extremely scarce print and a new discovery," it dates from 1937 to 1940, making it the earliest print by Bearden that Swann has located. Scheduled for inclusion in the upcoming catalogue raisonné to be published by Jerald Melberg and the Romare Bearden Foundation, the print sold on the phone for \$11,250 (est. \$7000/10,000).



The Annunciation by Romare Bearden sold to a collector for \$125,000 (est. \$120,000/180,000). According to the catalog, the 1946 oil on canvas is unusual because it is from a period when the artist was working primarily on paper. Originally owned by Ben Wolf (d. 1996), a critic for *Art Digest* from the 1930s through the 1950s and an early champion of Bearden, the 33½" x 24½" painting had been in a private New York collection for the last 20 years.



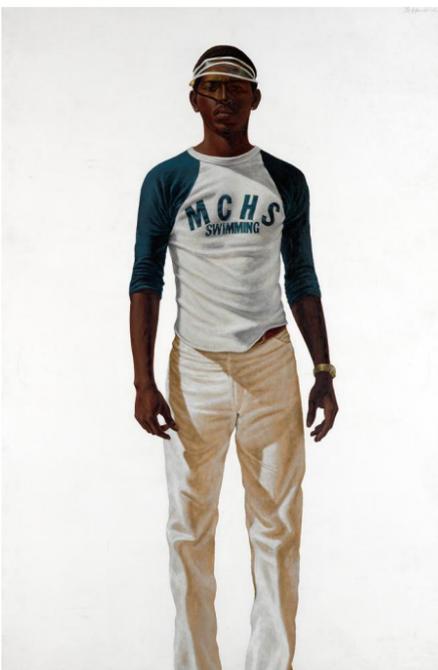
Still Life by Haywood "Bill" Rivers (1922-2002) sold to an unnamed institution for \$23,750 (est. \$10,000/15,000). The 18" x 17" oil on canvas, once owned by publisher Harry N. Abrams, had been in another private collection since 1971. The price is a new record for a work by Rivers.



Recognition by Elizabeth Catlett (1915-2012) fetched \$125,000 (est. \$120,000/180,000). Approximately 17½" x 15" x 7½", the 1970 black marble sculpture is mounted on a wooden base. Its first owner was Russell L. Goings, well known in art circles for his Romare Bearden collection. Born in Connecticut in 1932, Goings is known in at least two other spheres, as a one-time linebacker in the Canadian Football League and as founder of First Harlem Securities.



A collector paid \$87,500 (est. \$50,000/75,000) for *Fall Atmosphere* by Alma Thomas (1891-1978). The 1971 acrylic on canvas measures 18" x 24".



The price paid for *Tuff Tony* by Barkley L. Hendricks (b. 1945), \$365,000 (est. \$120,000/180,000), matches the record made at Swann for Hendricks's *Steve*. This 72" x 48" oil and acrylic on canvas from 1978 went to a collector.



Mother Earth by Benny Andrews (1930-2006) sold for \$20,000 (est. \$8000/12,000). The 30" x 20" portrait is a partially painted oil on canvas combined with other elements including painted fabric, unpainted beige corduroy, a zipper, and two snaps. It is signed and dated "70."



Five works by Hughie Lee-Smith (1915-1999) were offered at this sale: a lithograph, two watercolors, and these two oils. *Untitled (Figure at the Shore)*, a circa 1960 painting that measures 18" x 26", sold for \$35,000 (est. \$35,000/50,000). *Performers*, which dates from 30 years later and at 46" x 40" is the largest painting by Lee-Smith to be offered at auction, achieved \$143,000 (est. \$60,000/90,000).



What I remembered—or imagined myself to remember—of my life in America—before I left home!—was terror. And what I am trying to suggest by what one imagines oneself to be able to remember is that terror cannot be remembered. One blots it out. The organism—the human being—blots it out.

—James Baldwin

Untitled (My Life in America) by Glenn Ligon (b. 1960) sold to a dealer on the phone for \$81,250 (est. \$75,000/100,000). The 1994 work in oil stick and pencil on thick wove paper is a 21½" x 50" maquette that Ligon used for his contribution to the 1994-95 group exhibition *Equal Rights & Justice*, organized by the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, Georgia. The quotation is from James Baldwin's *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, his book about the Atlanta child murders of 1979-81.