

Swann Galleries, New York City

Bidders Undeterred by Pandemic or Remote Format of African Americana Sale

by Jeanne Schinto

Photos courtesy Swann Galleries

“I am still somewhat dumbfounded that we managed to pull off a strong sale given the circumstances,” director of books and manuscripts Rick Stattler wrote in an e-mail shortly after Swann’s annual printed and manuscript African Americana sale on May 7. The auction was held live but conducted remotely, with bidders participating on multiple Internet platforms.

In the end, the format worked.

I watched the action unfold on two computers in my home office. My iPad was opened to the Swann Galleries app, where I could see the bidders’ numbers roll by, while my desktop iMac provided me with Invaluable’s audio stream and the complete catalog descriptions and pictures. Nicholas D. “Nicho” Lowry, Swann’s president and principal auctioneer, and Todd Weyman, a Swann vice president and director of several of its art departments, switched off every hour. Teams of bid takers did the same. The two auctioneers and the staff members were working from locations in four of New York City’s five boroughs and the state of New Jersey.

In his opening remarks Lowry declared the remote format to be “the new normal.” He characterized himself as “delighted and overjoyed” to be auctioneering once again after a nearly two-month hiatus. The auction house’s printed and manuscript Americana sale on March 10 had been the last regular sale at Swann. (See “‘Affordable’ Bay Psalm Book Fetches \$62,500,” *M.A.D.*, May 2020, pp. 110-112.)

Stattler, for his part, said, “I miss seeing our customers. I miss seeing my colleagues. The situation is not ideal, but I’m glad that we could make it happen at all. They haven’t written books on how to do this.” But like every business large or small these days, Swann is “rapidly reinventing” itself.

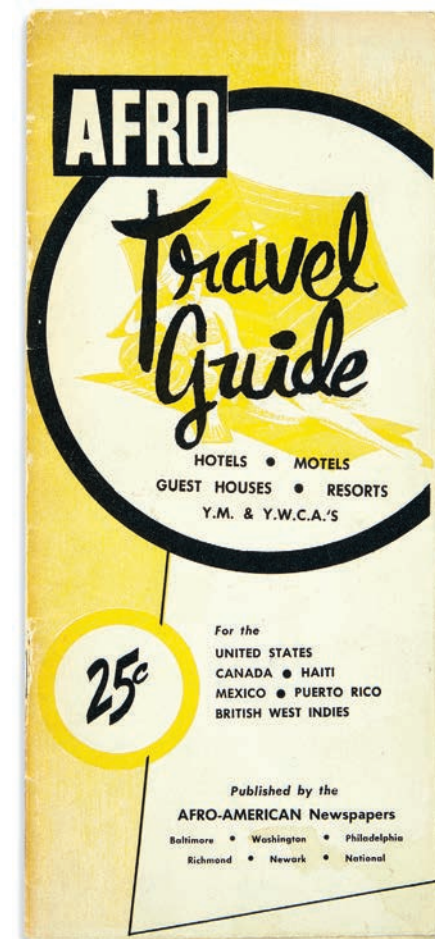
Since in-person previews weren’t possible, extra images and condition reports were prepared well in advance and sent to those who requested them. For the first time, Swann used the platform LiveAuctioneers. “That was a big step in itself,” said Stattler. That platform and Invaluable showed 200 viewers apiece, he added. As for the Swann Galleries app, it was used by a record number of bidders.

A big question I had beforehand was whether institutions, usually major buyers at this annual sale, would be too hampered by restraints imposed by the pandemic or feeling too financially uncertain to participate. When the post-sale press release came out, it showed that institutions had bought 11 of the top 20 lots, including the top four. Leading that quartet was an annotated 1848 letterpress broadside advertising a reward for three young women—sisters—who had escaped from slavery together. Bidding by phone, one of the institutions, all unnamed, paid \$37,500 (est. \$7000/10,000) for it. Swann’s research shows it is a record for the highest price paid at auction for a broadside of the same nature. I noted further that six more of those 20 top lots had achieved auction price records, and that the sale as a whole had fetched \$741,581 (est. \$455,900/672,900). The buyers’ premiums are included in the total but not reflected in the estimates.

On the day of the sale I had witnessed few lots being passed. The press release gave the final tally: of the 399 lots offered, only 43 had failed to sell. The following week, after a few post-auction sales, the sell-through rate got pushed even



This is easily one of the most chilling runaway slave broadsides that Swann has ever offered. Published in Baltimore, Maryland, dated March 15, 1848, and signed by “the subscriber,” C.A. Burnett, who lived in the Georgetown section of Washington, D.C., the print advertises a reward for three sisters, Susan, Maria, and Harriet Johnson. Aged approximately 25, 20 and 13, the young women made their escape together. The level of detail about their physicality is striking (“full faces,” “defect in one arm, which causes her to use it somewhat awkwardly”). In longhand someone annotated the announcement with additional identifiers, modifying skin tone (“darker than a mulatto”) and body type (“short but heavy”), and noting a scar and left-handedness. How intensively these girls were subjected to the male gaze! The annotations were undoubtedly called for by Burnett, i.e., Charles Alexander Burnett (1769-1849), a noted silversmith and watchmaker, who created pieces for George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. The 11¼" x 9½" letterpress example names him again, in docketing on its reverse: “1848 C.A. Burnett vs. 3 girls,” suggesting that the sisters were captured and stood trial, with the broadside serving as evidence against them. Bidding by phone, an institution paid \$37,500 (est. \$7000/10,000) for it. Swann’s research shows it is a record for the highest price paid at auction for a runaway-slave broadside of any kind.



Applause would have erupted at a live sale after the prolonged bidding on this item. Published by the Travel Bureau of the Afro-American Newspapers in Baltimore, the 17th annual *Afro Travel Guide* is a close kin to *The Negro Motorist's Green Book* featured in the 2018 Oscar-winning film *Green Book*. The 36-page 9¼" x 4¼" pamphlet, undated but likely from 1957, was originally owned by a New Jersey minister, who marked a Newark hotel with an asterisk and circled another in North Carolina. A bidder using the Swann Galleries app competed fiercely, but the lot’s winner, who paid \$27,500 (est. \$800/1200), was an institution on the phone.

A bidder using the Swann Galleries app paid \$5250 (est. \$3000/4000) for this 3½" x 2" albumen photograph of sculptor Edmonia Lewis (1844-1907). The carte de visite was produced by the studio of Henry Rocher of Chicago in the period 1866-71.



higher, to 90.7%. Swann said it is the new record for this department, which has reached its 24th birthday.

The auctioneer’s job was made more onerous than usual by the new format, since it required keeping track of bids not only on the phone lines and in the order book but also on the three Internet sites. It went slowly, at a rate of about 50 lots per hour. Anticipating that reduced pace, Swann started the sale early, at 10:30 a.m. It ended a little over seven hours later. As seasoned live auction-goers know, the auctioneer is the maestro of a sale. He or she dictates with eye contact, as well as voice and commentary. In a remote situation, the sale’s momentum isn’t necessarily under the auctioneer’s control. “Three bidders duking it

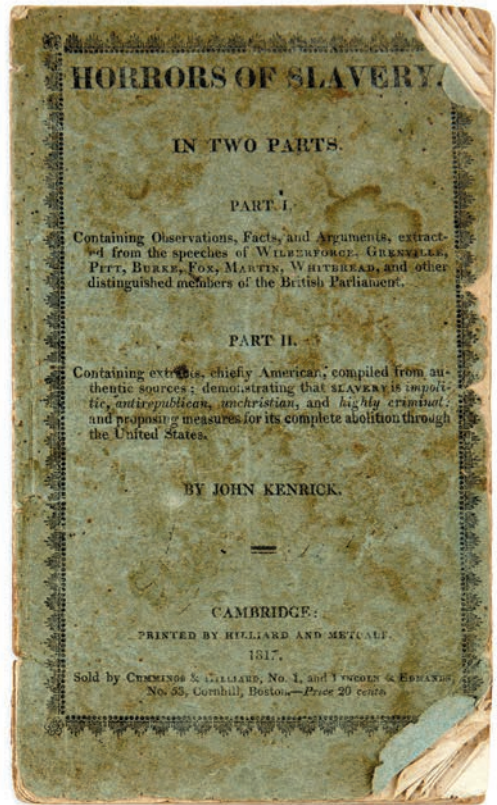
out on the app,” said Lowry at one point, sounding like a mere observer.

It didn’t matter. In the end, the format worked. Many bidders have been bidding online for years. Those who were new to it learned quickly. More important, excellent material was to be found in just about every category: slavery and abolition, civil rights, Black Panthers, photography, literature, politics, music. An auctioneer from another house once told me, “If the material is good, they’ll come, even if the sale is being held on an oil rig.” Virtually, that is what happened here.

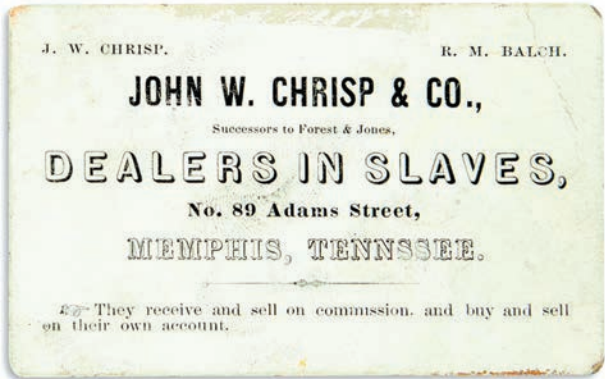
For more information, contact Swann at (212) 254-4710 or via its website (www.swannalleries.com).



On March 5 Rick Stattler kindly gave me a private preview of some selected items from this sale while I was at Swann previewing another sale. Lots he showed me included the wine bottle he’s holding. It’s from the Fedderman Wine Co., Prattsburg, New York, which advertised itself in 1973 as “the first black winery in the United States.” The bottle sold, along with an advertising placard, for \$469 (est. \$400/600). The consignor had poured out its contents beforehand. Even if wine is vintage, Swann cannot sell alcohol. Having given it a taste, the consignor reportedly told Stattler that it hadn’t aged well. Schinto photo.



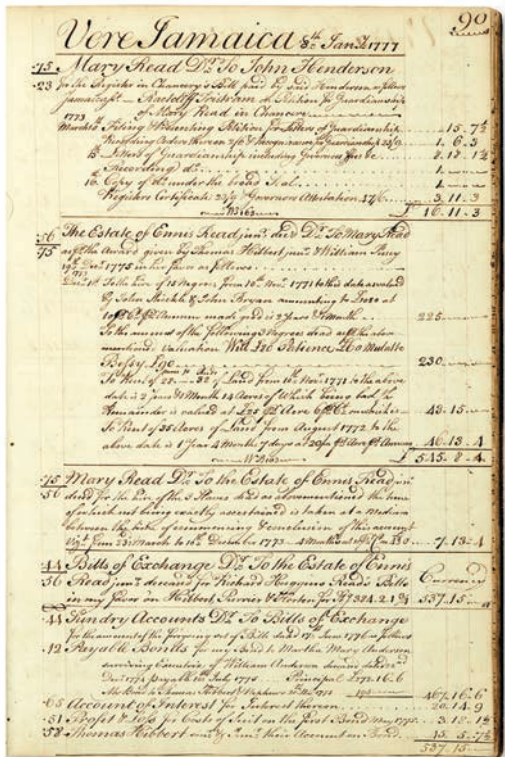
A bidder using the LiveAuctioneers platform paid \$2000 (est. \$400/600) for a copy of the first and only edition of *Horrors of Slavery*, compiled by John Kendrick and published in 1817 by Hilliard & Metcalf of Cambridge, Massachusetts. The price is a new auction record for the title, said Swann. The 59-page book in its original wrappers consists of two parts: one, speeches by William Wilberforce and other British abolitionists, and two, extracts from chiefly American sources. Hilliard was William Hilliard (1778-1836), who in 1800 set up shop and began printing on what is now known as Hilliard Street, not far from Harvard Square. Metcalf was Eliab Wight Metcalf (1781-1835), who was in a business partnership with Hilliard in the period 1808 to 1826.



A 2" x 3½" trade card advertising the business of slave dealer John W. Chrisp & Co., Memphis, Tennessee, sold to an institution bidding by phone for \$3750 (est. \$2000/3000). In early 1861 Chrisp (1828-1863) entered a short-lived partnership with Robert Monroe Balch (the name “R.M. Balch” is in the card’s upper right-hand corner), so the item can be dated to around that time. The card not only announces this new partnership but also carries the misspelled name of the firm’s infamous predecessor, Forest [sic]—i.e., Nathan Bedford Forrest (1821-1877), the Confederate cavalry general who was elected the first grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. Note: most of us would call this a business card, but the term is relatively modern. For more information, see *The Encyclopedia of Ephemera* (2000) by Maurice Rickards, edited by Michael Twyman; it has a lengthy entry on “trade card,” none on “business card.”



A 3¼" x 2¼" albumen photograph of Rev. Henry Highland Garnet (1815-1882) sold for \$15,000 (est. \$5000/7500) to an institution bidding by phone. In his earlier years, Garnet was a radical abolitionist who supported an armed rebellion to achieve liberty for enslaved people. By the time this portrait was made by George Rockwood of New York City in the 1860s, Garnet had decided religion offered better solutions to the problem. He had also become an advocate for emigration to Liberia, site of the eventual dismal failure of the colonization experiment for freedmen on the west coast of Africa. Swann’s research shows no other Garnet photographic portraits at auction.



A 1775-86 account journal for a plantation on the southern coast of Jamaica owned by the Raetcliff (or Radcliff) family sold for \$11,250 (est. \$4000/6000) to an institution using the Swann Galleries app. The 192 manuscript pages include many details of the lives of the enslaved people who worked on the plantation; the journal also mentions by name at least two other plantations.



A phone bidder paid \$4750 (est. \$5000/7500) for a small archive of correspondence—21 letters, postcards, and greeting cards—sent by artist Romare Bearden (1911-1988) and his wife, Nanette, in the period 1949-87. Their recipient was Harry Henderson (1915-2003), an editor and journalist, who coauthored two books of African American art with Bearden. The pictured New Year’s card was hand-painted by Bearden and signed “Romie.” The lot included five exhibition catalogs.



A 12" x 18" metal sign from the Jim Crow era with white lettering and an applied arrow sold to a collector for \$15,000 (est. \$3000/4000), an auction record for any segregation signage, said Swann. The Swann catalog description said it was believed to have originated from a bus station in Montgomery, Alabama, a place of significance for the civil rights movement. Among other consequential events that occurred in that city, on December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat to a white man, sparking the yearlong Montgomery bus boycott.



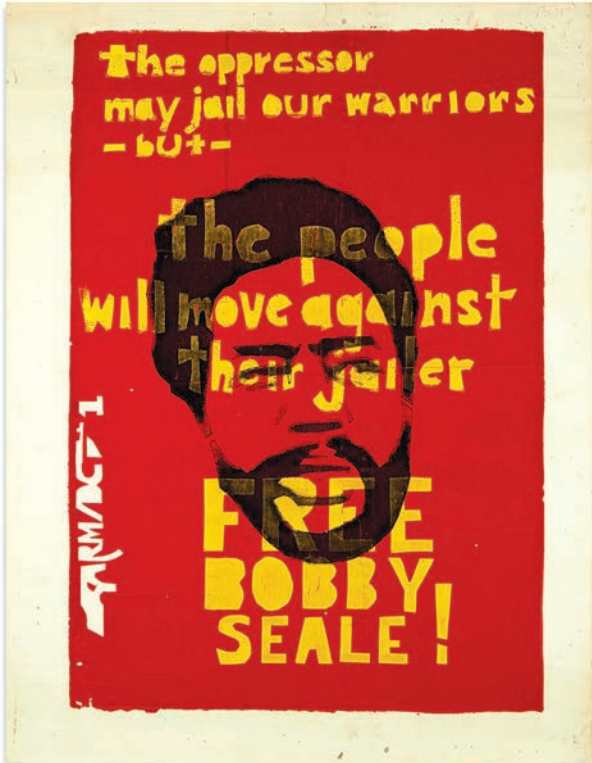
Forty-four issues of *The Black Panther*, a newspaper published by the Black Community News Service in San Francisco, sold to a collector on the phone for \$6500 (est. \$3000/4000). Swann said the price was an auction record for any group of Black Panther newspapers. The incomplete run, dating from May 1967 to August 1971, includes artwork by Emory Douglas, the infamous image of Huey Newton in the fan-backed chair, full-page photos of Angela Davis, and a cover story about Ericka Huggins that she signed. A good selection of posters designed by Douglas (b. 1943), the one-time minister of culture of the Black Panther Party, also went on the block at this sale. A 22¾" x 14¾" example (not shown), captioned "Afro-American Solidarity with the Oppressed People of the World," was produced in San Francisco in 1969. Printed on newsprint, with tack holes evident in its corners, the poster fetched \$2750 (est. \$1000/1500).



A phone bidder paid \$3000 (est. \$600/900) for this unique Black Panther item, a handmade, hand-painted double-sided sign that came to the sale from a Los Angeles estate. "Peace and Freedom" (on the reverse) refers to Eldridge Cleaver's Peace and Freedom Party. "BPP for SD" means "Black Panther Party for Self-Defense," the group's original appellation. Undated but estimated to have been made in May or June 1968, the sign consists of two 21¼" diameter sheets of artist board stapled together.

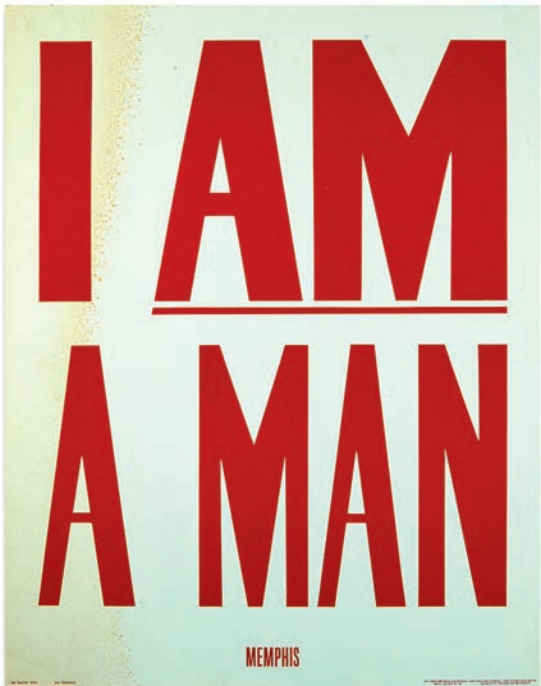


This unassuming lacquered wooden cane was said to have been a gift from Frederick Douglass to John Brown, likely in the 1850s. Swann itself made no claims to the veracity of the association, and the 34½" long cane, carved with three alligators and other decorative motifs, provided no evidence. The only thing bidders had to go on was a small (5¼" square) slip of notebook paper that had purportedly been with the cane since 1880, the last time it changed hands, when it was sold by a man named Wilcox to George F. Pope, whose descendant was the consignor. More than one bidder was convinced. The cane sold to someone using the Invaluable platform for \$5720 (est. \$4000/6000).



A phone bidder paid \$3250 (est. \$700/1000) for a circa 1969 poster advocating the release of Bobby Seale, cofounder with Huey P. Newton of the Black Panther Party. The 22" x 17" silkscreen example bears what Swann read as a signature, "Armact1." It is in the shape of a rifle positioned along the poster's left-hand border. The auction house's research could trace no other examples. Nor could it find a source of the quote, "The oppressor may jail our warriors—but—the people will move against their jailer."

A collector bought this 28" x 22" "March for Freedom Now!" poster for \$17,500 (est. \$4000/6000). It is believed to have been printed in Chicago in July 1960 for a protest at the Republican National Convention, held that year in that city July 25-28. One piece of evidence linked it securely to the event: an image of the sign is seen in a photograph of the protest published in the *Chicago Tribune* on July 26. Martin Luther King Jr. was among the 5000 marchers who were demanding a civil rights plank in the party platform, whose final version shows they apparently succeeded. There are no examples of this poster in OCLC (Online Computer Library Center) and none traceable at auction, according to Swann.



This is not an original from the rally for the striking black sanitation workers of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees in Memphis in April 1968. It is a poster created after the fact—albeit that same year—by Emerson Graphics in San Francisco. Nonetheless, the 28" x 22" example sold for a phenomenal \$6500 (est. \$500/700). For comparison's sake, on February 25, 2010, Swann sold an original—measuring 21½" x 14" and rendered in black and white—for \$40,800 (est. \$8000/12,000). Two other originals, from a press run believed to have been only 300 to 400, are on display at Memphis's National Civil Rights Museum.

A collector paid \$7250 (est. \$4000/6000) for this circa 1963 poster produced in Atlanta by the Lincoln Lithographic Co. for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. The 14" x 18¾" example is one in a series of five that feature the work of photographer Danny Lyon (b. 1942). The scene depicted is a protest at a segregated pool in Cairo, Illinois. Pictured at left is 22-year-old John Lewis, who, since 1987, has been the U.S. representative for Georgia's 5th Congressional District. Two other posters in the series (not shown) sold for \$4250 each. Swann said one was an auction price record for the image.





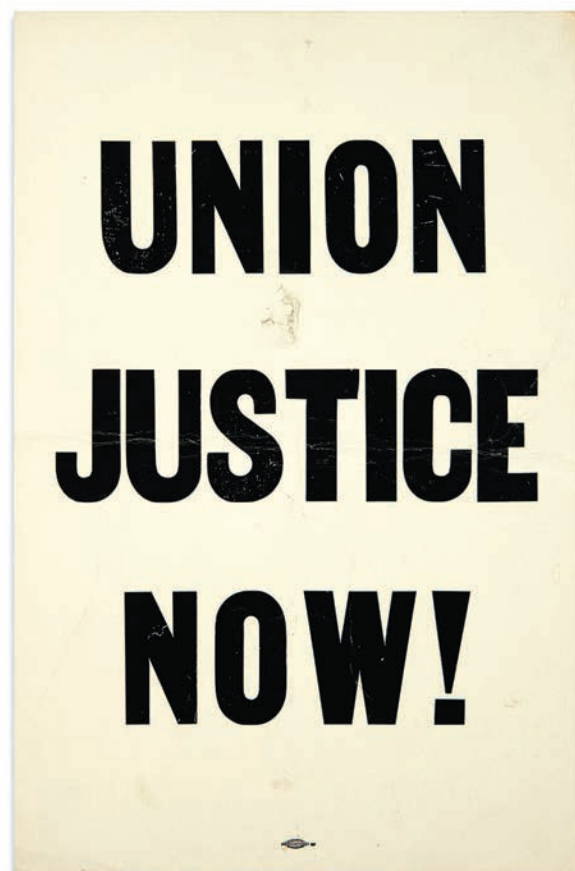
A collector paid \$6750 (est. \$4000/6000) for a 3½" x 2" albumen photograph of Frederick Douglass (1818-1895). Its photographer unknown, its date uncertain, though likely circa 1865, and its condition less than "A," the carte de visite excited bidders for its rarity. According to John Stauffer's *Picturing Frederick Douglass: An Illustrated Biography of the Nineteenth Century's Most Photographed American* (2015), there are no institutional holdings of this sitting and only one other example seen at auction, in 2009.



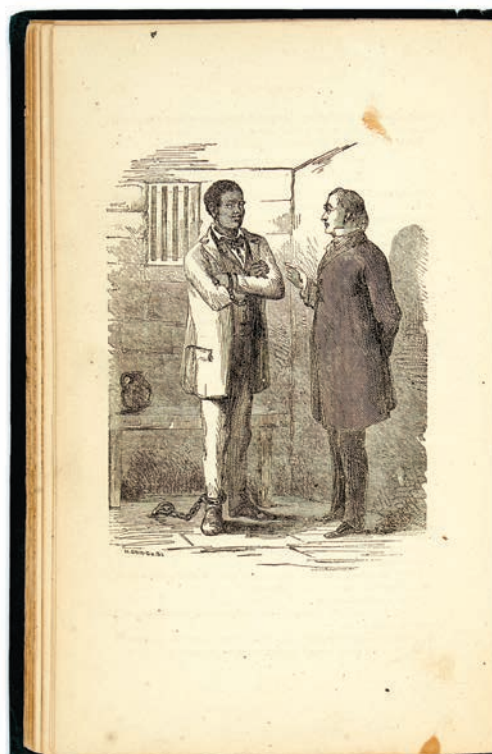
The papers of five generations of the Ruby-Jackson family achieved the upper end of its \$3000/4000 estimate. Reuben Ruby (1798-1878) of Portland, Maine, was a hack driver who served as a conductor on the Underground Railroad and helped form the Maine Anti-Slavery Society. His son George Thompson Ruby (1841-1882), pictured here in the carte-de-visite format, went south to Louisiana as a teacher in 1864 and served as a state senator in Texas during Reconstruction, from 1870 to 1874. The last generation represented by this archive includes Eugene B. Jackson (1923-2015), who served as a Tuskegee Airman during World War II and graduated from Boston University. The 82 items were bought at his estate sale in North Marshfield, Massachusetts, in June 2019.



An institution paid \$17,500 (est. \$6000/9000) for an archive of papers pertaining to the comedian and talk-show regular Nipsey Russell (1918-2005). Most of the several hundred items in six boxes were dated 1929-2000. They included correspondence from a wide variety of luminaries. As Rick Stattler pointed out, Russell may well be the only person ever to have received a personal letter from both Martin Luther King Jr. and *Playboy* mogul Hugh Hefner.



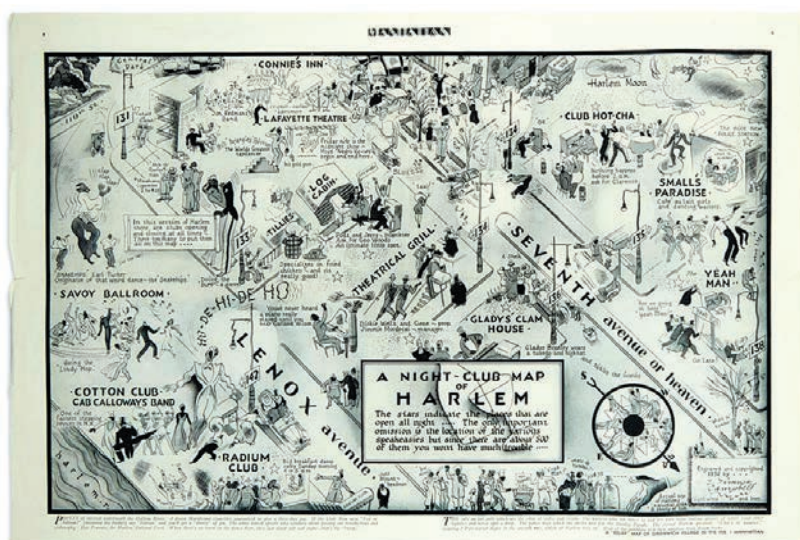
A 21½" x 14" poster printed in Memphis in April 1968 sold for \$5750 (est. \$1500/2500). It was produced, along with the more famous "I AM A MAN" poster, to be used at the April 3 rally for the striking black sanitation workers of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees in Memphis. Martin Luther King Jr.'s final appearance before his assassination on April 4 was at that rally. No other example has been traced at auction since Swann itself sold one on February 17, 2000.



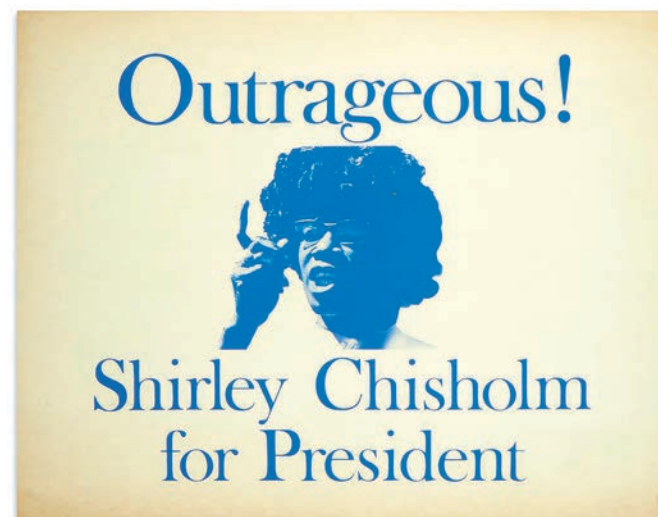
A copy of William Wells Brown's *Clotel: or, The Colored Heroine, a Tale of the Southern States*, sold for \$5000 (est. \$3000/4000). The novel was published by Lee & Shepard in Boston in 1867. When Brown originally published it in London in 1853, it was called *Clotel, or The President's Daughter* and incorporated a version of the Thomas Jefferson-Sally Hemings story. In this version, a third edition, *Clotel* is now *Clotel*, a senator's daughter, and the last part of the book has been expanded to include the Civil War. Swann found no examples of any edition at auction since the one that sold at its own sale on February 26, 1998, for \$2300.

An institution paid a phenomenal \$32,500 (est. \$1000/1500) for a 3½" x 2" albumen photograph of three members of a contraband family at Point Lookout, Maryland. It was produced by New Hampshire photographer Lafayette V. Newell (1833-1914), who was "imbedded" with the soldiers at that base during the Civil War. The same institution paid \$6250 (est. \$2000/3000) for another Newell carte de visite (not shown) that was captioned "Negro prisoner" in manuscript. It is the scene of a cruel punishment by means of a device that forces a man to sit astride a suspended rail, sometimes with weights attached to his feet. The device was regularly used at the Union military base at Point Lookout for punishing Confederate prisoners. One can only guess at why an African American man was being punished in this way. Rick Stattler speculated in his catalog that he was "likely a Union soldier who had run afoul of his commanding officer."





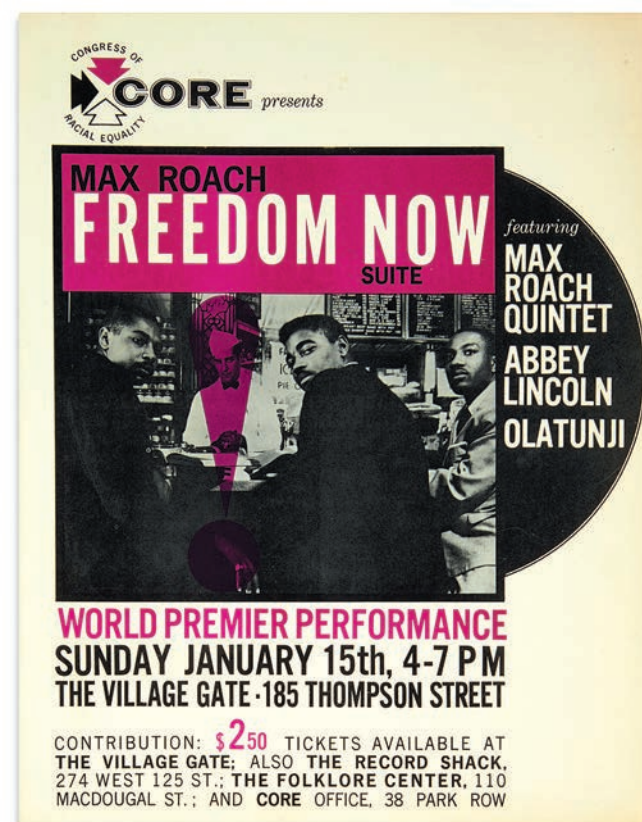
An institution paid \$27,500 (est. \$10,000/15,000) for a first printing of “A Night-Club Map of Harlem” by E. Simms Campbell. It is an auction record price for the image, whose original pen-and-brush artwork was sold by Swann to Yale University on March 31, 2016, for \$100,000 (est. \$40,000/60,000). Campbell (1906-1971) was the first African American cartoonist to be published in nationally distributed slick magazines, including *Esquire*. The map was published as the 16" x 24" centerfold of *Manhattan Magazine*'s Volume 1, No. 1 for January 18, 1933. The lot included the 16-page publication with the map still attached. (For an extensive description of the item and its creator, see “Black History Matters: 20th Anniversary of African Americana Sales,” *M.A.D.*, June 2016, pp. C-9-13.)



A 22" x 28" poster picturing Shirley Chisholm (1924-2005) during her 1972 run for U.S. president sold for \$5750 (est. \$600/900), an auction price record for any piece of Shirley Chisholm memorabilia, said Swann. The first black woman elected to the U.S. Congress, Chisholm represented New York's 12th Congressional District (Brooklyn) for seven terms, from 1969 to 1983. In 1972 she became the first African American, man or woman, to run for president. Hence, the “Outrageous.” A trailblazer for sure, she has not been forgotten. Indeed, her legacy is being introduced to a new generation via popular culture and public displays. An upcoming film, *The Fighting Shirley Chisholm*, is being produced by its star, Viola Davis. The actress Uzo Aduba plays her in the current Hulu television series *Mrs. America*, a dramatization of Phyllis Schlafly's campaign to quash the Equal Rights Amendment. The Shirley Chisholm State Park opened in Brooklyn in July 2019. And a public monument honoring her is planned for Brooklyn's Prospect Park.



An institution paid \$6500 (est. \$1000/1500) for this 20¾" x 17" poster produced by North American Star Systems Productions to advertise a circa 1974 concert by Sun Ra, a.k.a. Herman Poole Blount (1914-1993), and his Intergalactic Myth-Science Solar Arkestra. The price was an auction record for that poster, according to Swann. The band, still known as the Sun Ra Arkestra, continues to tour the world. See its website (www.sunraarkestra.com).



A 12" x 9½" poster printed in New York on January 15, 1961, sold to an institution for \$10,000 (est. \$800/1200). The “Freedom Now Suite” was composed by jazz drummer Max Roach and singer Oscar Brown. The poster shows that it premiered on January 15, 1961 at the Village Gate in New York City, at an event presented by CORE, i.e., the Congress of Racial Equality. Swann found no other example at auction or in OCLC (Online Computer Library Center).