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Swann Broadens Market for African-American Fine Art

by Jeanne Schinto

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Swann Galleries, Inc., New York City

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Photos courtesy Swann

"This was our twelfth auction, so it's not such a new thing anymore. The pressure's on to draw people in, get new buyers," said Nigel Freeman after Swann's latest semiannual African-American fine arts sale, held February 16, during Black History Month, at the auction house's Manhattan gallery. Several works sold for records, and several others established impressive first-time auction prices for artists.

The buy-in rate of 33% on 163 lots was higher than usual, however, and total sales of \$1,666,980 only just cleared the \$1,589,500/2,331,500 estimate. That said, all but a couple of the big pieces sold, and those that did often went for prices above expectations, sometimes well beyond. Buyers seemed to be after an artist's best examples, scarce works, or, in the case of non-abstract works, the ones that most effectively reflect the African-American experience.

Selling to a dealer on the phone for a just-above-estimate \$204,000 (includes buyer's premium), the top lot was *J'Accuse! No. 10* (Negro Woman) by Charles White (1918-1979). Taking its name by analogy from the Emile Zola essay that pointed a finger at the Dreyfus affair and anti-Semitism in France, it is from the artist's 18-part series and the first one to be sold at auction, said Freeman. The 28" x 28" charcoal on paper in tondo (round) form depicts 11 portrait heads of African-American women. The subjects' moods are by turns determined, defiant, and, yes, accusatory. Oppression has galvanized them.

A large detail of the charcoal on paper was used for the cover of a special issue of *Ebony* magazine published in August 1966, and a copy of the magazine went with the lot. Articles and essays in that issue describe ways in which African-American women of the period were beginning to rebel against their traditional roles. It's a process that continues, no thanks to the recent movie adaptation of *The Help*, many African-American commentators contend. (See, for example, Touré on *Time* magazine's Web site [http://ideas.time.com/.../is-the-help-the-most-loathsom-movie-in-america/].)

The work came from a private Chicago collection. Before that it belonged to John H. Johnson, a grandson of slaves, who was *Ebony's* publisher. Johnson had bought the work at the Heritage Gallery in Los Angeles. Founded in 1961 by Benjamin Horowitz (d. 2004) and Charlotte Sherman, Heritage broke the informal color line at galleries in the West when it began showing Charles White and other African-American artists in the early 1960's. The gallery has continued to represent White to this day.

Another dealer on the phone paid \$108,000 for *Birds* by Norman Lewis (1909-1979), an Abstract Expressionist oil on canvas from 1950. The result, more than double the high estimate, elicited applause. "There was a lot of interest in that painting. I think, out of everything in the sale, it received the most looks from various potential buyers," said Freeman.

Asked about its special qualities, Freeman said, "It had a combination of things—everything sort of lined up perfectly." First, it was "a great example" of Abstract Expressionism, while at the same time it was "a very pretty, colorful work, a very painterly, attractive piece that people really liked." Additionally, it was fresh to market, in good condition, and had a reasonable estimate. What is more, it was large, 34" x 60", and from "a good year" for Lewis. Finally, bidders feel a sense of urgency about acquiring works by Lewis.

"I think there's a sense that his work is out there but only for so long," said Freeman. "He's being more and more recognized as an important American artist and an important Abstract Expressionist. He's going into museum shows and collections. I think people realized this was a very good one, and they felt they shouldn't let it get by them."

Buyers interested in Lewis, however, are being particular. An untitled work (cataloged as *Procession Composition*) did not inspire the kind of bidding that *Birds* did. Passed at \$14,000 (est. \$25,000/35,000), the 19" x 37" oil and ink on paper from 1954 is composed of wavy lines of tiny calligraphic figures. At this department's last sale, on October 6, 2011, a dealer paid \$108,000 (est. \$120,000/180,000) for *Promenade*, a Lewis work in oil on canvas from 1961 that employs a pattern of similar figures. But if color is one thing that collectors are after in a Lewis, *Procession Composition* did not deliver it. The palette is predominantly black, gray, and beige.

Eastern Star, a 1971 work by living artist William T. Williams, was the sale's cover lot. The large (7' x 5') bright, geometric abstraction in acrylic on canvas was the first by Williams to be offered at auction, and it sold to a collector on the phone for \$120,000 (est. \$75,000/100,000). Impressively for that price level, the underbidder was on the Internet.

The painting had been acquired by the consignar at the artist's first solo exhibition in New York City within the year of its creation and had remained in that collection until the sale. Fresh, scarce, and a significant example of the artist's work from the early part of his career, it was also in very good condition. "So all those things came together, and we set the bar high for his work," said Freeman.

Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated) by Kara Walker (b. 1969) went to another collector at the same price, \$120,000 (est. \$75,000/100,000). It's a new auction record for a Walker print, according to Swann. The 2005 portfolio consists of 15 offset lithographs and screenprints that use the famous 19th-century magazine images of Alfred H. Greensey and Henry M. Alden as a jumping-off point. Overlaying the engravings are the artist's signature black cutout silhouettes. She has often used them to satirize stereotypical racist images and concepts. The ones in this portfolio depict caricatured slaves working, fleeing, playing, and disturbingly dismembered.

The prints are large, 24" x 35" (or the inverse), and the soldout edition was small, just 35 copies, most of which are in museum collections, Freeman said. "Not everyone can take on something like this," he added. "Those who know Kara Walker's work realized this was a great chance to get an important work of hers."

On the subject of these and other younger artists' works, Freeman observed, "We continue to do well with the first generation of the big names, like Lewis, White, and Bearden. But the second generation, we're trying to do more with. You've seen that with Barkley Hendricks and Robert Colescott," whose works have been sold successfully at Swann's past sales. He said Swann is now trying to "reinforce [its] past successes" and "introduce different artists and broaden the market."

Institutions have been buying at these sales since the beginning. When the economy nose-dived four years ago, they continued to buy for a while, then began to hold back. With last fall's sale of John P. Axelrod's African-American art collection to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the appetite of one major institutional player may have been sated, at least for now. But institutions still want and need these works to complete their American art surveys.

This time, a geometrical abstraction by Mavis Pusey (b. 1928) sold to an unnamed institution being represented by a woman in the room. Outbidding several phones, she paid \$31,200 (est. \$6000/9000) for *Recarte*, a large (64" x 46") circa 1968 oil on canvas. And like the price for the Williams work, it was a first auction record for the artist.

"We were really hoping to get a strong result for her, to put her on the map," said Freeman. "It was an excellent example of her sixties work, a piece that she used when she applied for a Pollock-Krasner award." (She won it.) "The reasonable estimate was designed to attract bidding, and it did. After Norman Lewis's *Birds*, this one attracted the most interest."

An unnamed institution also bought an early abstraction with Cubist tendencies by Charles Alston (1907-1977), paying a bargain \$20,400 (est. \$20,000/30,000). Of the price for the untitled 24" x 20" oil on canvas that dates from 1946-49, Freeman said, "His work is still undervalued, considering his stature as an artist, so we're trying to build it up."

As part of that effort, Swann offered three more by Alston. An untitled abstraction in oil on canvas from 1959 sold on the phone for \$14,400 (est. \$15,000/25,000). Alston's crayon and pencil study of a man's head made \$1920 (est. \$1000/1500). His untitled California landscape in gouache, watercolor, and pencil on paper (est. \$5000/7000) did not find a buyer.

Nor did an 1865 oil on paper photo portrait, *Abraham Lincoln*, by David Bustill Bowser (1820-1900). Estimated at \$60,000/90,000, it was passed at about half the low number. "It's tough," Freeman said of the outcome on that one. "The piece had great art historical interest," including the claim that it had once belonged to Robert Purvis, a notable abolitionist. "But it just didn't excite our collectors. It's the sort of piece that a museum, we thought, would be interested in. It's such a well-known iconic image of Lincoln." But that was one of its problems. "It was sort of hard to overcome that. Still, we wanted to give it a shot. Bowser is such an interesting artist, and his works are extremely scarce."

Swann has had much more success with another 19th-century African-American artist, Robert S. Duncanson. At last February's sale, it offered an example of his work for the first time. A small (7½" x 9½") untitled late-period (1860-65) oil on paper board landscape fetched \$45,600 (est. \$15,000/25,000). At this sale, his *Winter Landscape* sold to a collector in the room for nearly twice that, \$84,000 (est. \$75,000/100,000). The 24" x 36" oil on canvas landscape is signed, dated "1860," and inscribed "Cinci., O., i.e., Cincinnati, Ohio, where the artist spent many years.

Again, however, bidders were being picky. When another untitled landscape by Duncanson of a woodland scene—an oil on oval—from the same late period as the one Swann sold in 2011, but an oval—came up it did not find a buyer at the auction, although it sold later for \$48,000 (est. \$50,000/75,000), as noted by the Swann prices realized list. Collectors interested in Duncanson may be wise to wait because more works will inevitably come to market, and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., announced on February 3 that it had bought Duncanson's 1848 *Still Life with Fruit and Nuts* in a private sale.

The museum's director, Earl A. Powell III, stated in a press release, "We continue to look for an outstanding example of the landscape paintings for which Duncanson was widely recognized during his lifetime....The exceptional quality of *Still Life with Fruit and Nuts* suggests that much remains to be learned about this little-known aspect of his career."

Freeman noted, "A lot of museums are looking to add his work to their collections. He's another artist who's now part of a canon, who wasn't before. We're all learning a lot more about who he really was, through both the paintings themselves and the scholarship." A case in point: his middle name, erroneously reported as Scott since 1976, is actually Seldon. (See *M.A.D., May 2012*, p. 12-A, for the full story.)

Swann regularly sells works by Elizabeth Catlett (1915-2012) for record prices. This time, a collector paid a record price for one of her prints, spending \$31,200 (est. \$15,000/25,000) for the circa 1952 *Sharecropper*. One of her most iconic images, often reproduced, it is the face of a white-haired, chisel-featured African-American woman wearing a broad-brimmed hat. A color linoleum-cut, signed, titled, dated "1970," and numbered 24/60, this copy of *Sharecropper* came from the collection of artist and illustrator Vernette P. Honeywood (1950-2010).

The sale's two top Romare Bearden lots were priced from the Bearden woodblock collection, *The Train*, which sold for \$9600 (est. \$6000/9000), and *Conversation*, which made \$10,800 (est. \$4000/6000). From a different consignment came Bearden's *Mother and Child*, a collage and gouache and ink on thick paper board from 1982. Estimated at \$40,000/60,000, it did not find a buyer. Nor did an oil monotype on wove paper, *A Portrait of Max: In Sounds, Rhythms, Colors, and Silences*, that came from the estate of musician-composer Max Roach (est. \$15,000/25,000).

Some readers may recall an episode of PBS's *History Detectives* (season 7, episode 9, August 24, 2009) that featured the Works Progress Administration (WPA) murals, including those of Thelma Johnson Street (1911-1959). At this sale, one of her mural maquettes, *Medicine and Transportation*, sold to a bidder in the room for \$12,000 (est. \$3000/5000). Signed by the niece who appeared on the TV program, it is a 15½" x 15½" tempera and oil on board dating from 1940-44, and its price is a new auction record for Street.

Street's most famous work is a 1941 gouache, *Rabbit Man*. When New York City's Museum of Modern Art bought it in 1942, it was the first work by an African-American woman to enter MoMA's permanent collection. Swann has sold other works by Street, but not a mural study and none for five figures until now.

Freeman said, "I think her mural work is really where she made her mark. A lot of people are really interested in WPA work in general. So we're happy that she finally got a good price."

For more information, contact Swann at (212) 254-4710 or visit the Web site (www.swanngalleries.com).

An 1881-84 untitled still life of peonies in a blue vase by Charles Ethan Porter (1847-1923), oil on cardstock, 18" x 14", went to a dealer in the room at \$28,800 (est. \$12,000/18,000). Another Porter untitled still life (not pictured) of a bag of cherries sold on the phone for \$9000.

A silver print by Gordon Parks (1912-2006) brought \$14,400 (est. \$5000/7000). The untitled 9½" x 7½" image is from "Harlem Is Nowhere," a photojournalism project that Parks collaborated on with novelist Ralph Ellison (1914-1994) in 1948. It did not come to fruition, although images from it were published in Life. The print was sold along with a related contact sheet of 12 images by Ellison, one of which has a shot of the same alleyway that Gordon Parks took.

Gateway in Tangier by Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859-1937) sold for \$6480 (est. \$2000/3000). A 9 3/8" x 7 1/8" posthumous print of a circa 1905 etching, signed and numbered 101/120 by the artist's son, Jesse O. Tanner, the print may have benefited from the excitement surrounding the current museum show Henry Ossawa Tanner: Modern Spirit. After opening on January 28 at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia, it went on to the Cincinnati Art Museum, where it's on view from May 26 through September 9. Following that, it will be at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, from October 21 through January 13, 2013.

A collector on the phone paid \$33,600 (est. \$15,000/25,000) for Rue Geoffroy St. Hilaire, Paris by Lois Mailou Jones (1905-1998). The price for the 19½" x 24" oil on canvas from 1948 established a new auction record for the artist. A late (1989) Jones painting, La Grange du Château, Cabris (not pictured), acrylic on canvas, 19" x 25½", fetched \$24,000 (est. \$10,000/15,000).

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