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June 7th, 2012 Swann Broadens Market for African-American Fine Art

Charles White's J'Accuse! No. 10

(Negro Woman) sold to a dealer

on the phone for \$204,000 (est.

\$150,000/200,000). The 1966

is 28"" x 28"".

charcoal on paper in tondo form

Harper's Pictorial History of the

\$120,000 (est. \$75,000/ 100,000),

artist. The 2005 portfolio consists

screenprints on Somerset textured

paper measuring 24" x 35" or 35"

Civil War (Annotated) by Kara

Walker went to a collector at

a new record for a print by the

of 15 offset lithographs and

x 24".

Swann Galleries, Inc., New

by Jeanne Schinto

by Jeanne Schinto Photos courtesy Swann

York City

"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.

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

That said, all but a couple of

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

essay that pointed a finger at

by analogy from the Emile Zola

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/.../isthe-help-the-most-loathsomemovie-in-america/].) The work came from a private

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

Another dealer on the phone

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

received the most looks from

various potential buyers," said

everything in the sale, it

Asked about its special

Freeman.

Norman Lewis (1909-1979), an

paid \$108,000 for *Birds* by

to this day.

Chicago collection. Before that

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

"I think there's a sense that his

about acquiring works by

Lewis.

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

October 6, 2011, a dealer paid

calligraphic figures. At this

department's last sale, on

of wavy lines of tiny

\$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.

bar high for his work," said Freeman. 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,

get an important work of hers."

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

a buyer.

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 wellknown 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."

Nor did an 1865 oil on paper photo portrait, Abraham Lincoln, by

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.

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 Works Progress Administration (WPA) murals, including those of Thelma Johnson Streat (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). Consigned 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 Streat.

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

Freeman said, "I think her mural work is really where she made her mark.

For more information, contact Swann at (212) 254-4710 or visit the Web

A lot of people are really interested in WPA work in general. So we're

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

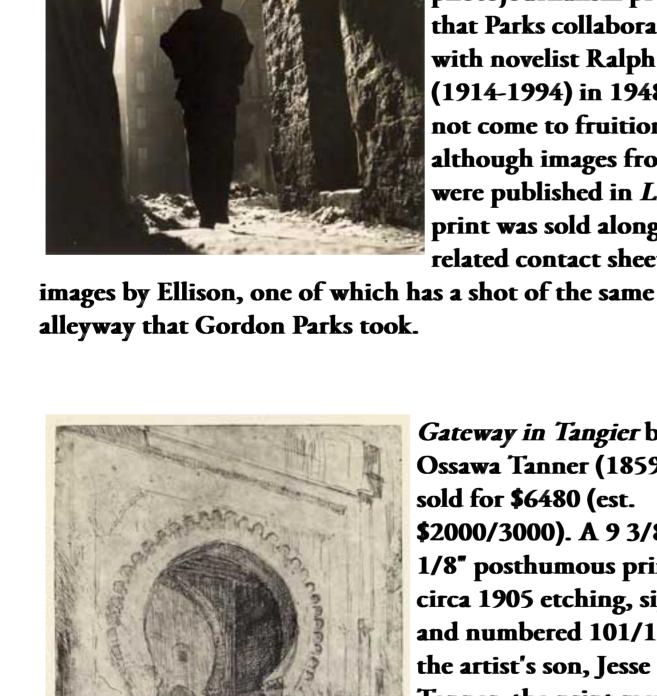
with novelist Ralph Ellison

(1914-1994) in 1948. It did

were published in Life. The

not come to fruition,

although images from it



related contact sheet of 12 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

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.



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A collector on the phone paid \$33,600 (est. by Lois Mailou Jones (1905-1998). The price for the 19¾" 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 251/2", fetched \$24,000 (est. \$10,000/15,000).

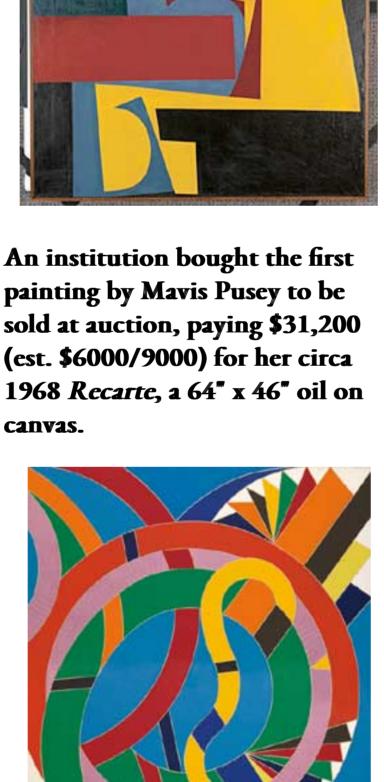
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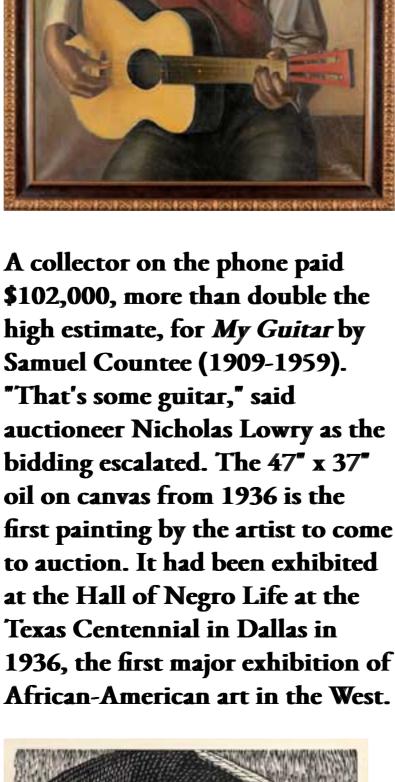




Eastern Star by William T. Williams (b. 1942), a 1971 acrylic on canvas, 84" x 60", sold to a collector on the phone for

\$120,000 (est. \$75,000/100,000),

the artist's first auction record.



En Route by Ellis Wilson (1899-1977) sold to a collector on the phone for \$45,600 (est. \$20,000/30,000), a new record for Wilson's work. The 22 5/8" x 48" 1954 oil on masonite is from the artist's Haitian period. Haitian Funeral Procession is the artist's most celebrated work

because of its placement on the

set on The Cosby Show.

A collector paid a record price for

(1915-2012), spending \$31,200

artist's circa 1952 Sharecropper.

linoleum-cut on smooth cream

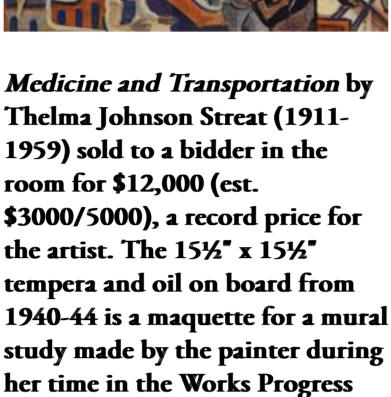
"1970," and numbered 24/60.

wove paper is signed, titled, dated

(est. \$15,000/25,000) for the

The 17 5/8" x 16½" color

a print by Elizabeth Catlett



Administration.

The painting had been acquired by the consignor at the artist's first solo

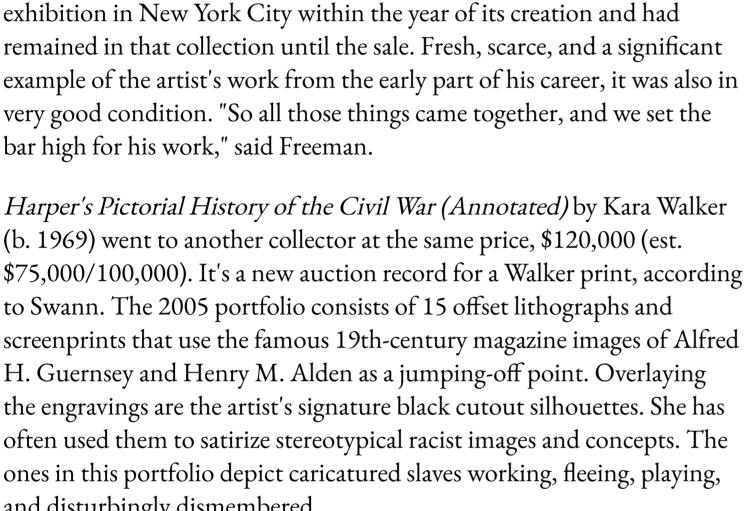
Freeman said. "Not everyone can take on something like this," he added.

"Those who know Kara Walker's work realized this was a great chance to

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

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

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."

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 canvas from

the same late period as the one Swann sold in 2011, but 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

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."

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.

Swann has had much more success with another 19th-century African-

One of her most iconic images, often reproduced, it is the face of a whitehaired, chisel-featured African-American woman wearing a broadbrimmed 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 Varnette P. Honeywood (1950-2010).

The sale's two top Romare Bearden lots were prints from the

Honeywood collection, The Train, which sold for \$9600 (est.

\$6000/9000), and Conversation, which made \$10,800 (est. \$4000/6000).

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

From a different consignment came Bearden's Mother and Child, a

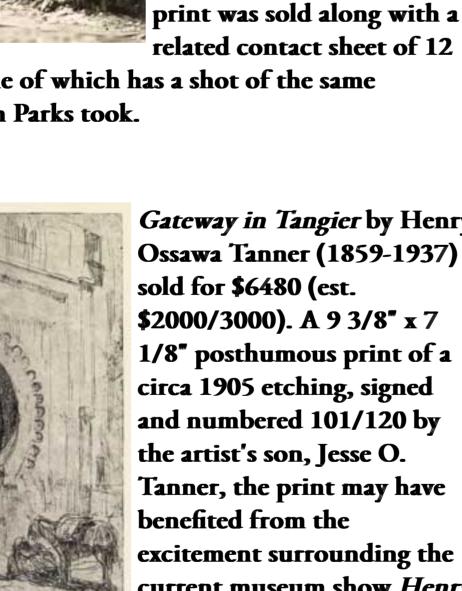
wove paper, A Portrait of Max: In Sounds, Rhythms, Colors, and

Streat'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 Streat, but not a mural study

and none for five figures until now.

happy that she finally got a good price."

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.



January 28 at the \$15,000/25,000) for *Rue* Geoffroy St. Hilaire, Paris

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