

The 20th-Century Sale at Skinner: Back to the Future

by Jeanne Schinto

It's a truth easy to forget, but Boston and environs can boast many landmarks emblematic of eras well beyond our Colonial and Federal past. The house that Walter Gropius designed for his family in 1937, after he arrived from Germany to teach at Harvard's Graduate School of Design, is in Lincoln, Massachusetts, about 12 miles northwest of the city. In other suburban pockets of Greater Boston you're likely to see a surprising number of houses with architecture inspired by the founder of the Bauhaus school. Gropius's colleagues, their followers, and followers' followers all fanned out from Cambridge, Massachusetts. This reporter's in-laws had a house built in Andover, Massachusetts, circa 1956, whose contours and philosophy closely conformed to Bauhaus principles, and there are several others in this old New England town.

People who grew up in such houses sometimes find it difficult to call antique the furniture and decorative arts that complement the visionary architecture—the Robsjohn-Gibbings bureaus, the Eames-style Plycraft chairs, the Georg Jensen silverware. Yet for quite a while now, in the same auction rooms where highboys and weathervanes remain the acknowledged potentates, furnishings like these have been creating price records, new collectors, and marketplace trends of their own.

Jane D. Prentiss is the director of 20th-century sales at Skinner. She began her association with the auction house in 1973 as a young collector. Although her training as a chemist took her elsewhere professionally at first, 13 years later, in 1986, she joined the Skinner staff as director of Arts and Crafts and the modern movement. She continued in that position until 1991, when she left for a job at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

"At M.I.T. I was part of a team that helped build one of the greatest machines of the twentieth century, the Chandra telescope," Prentiss said. In 1997, however, coaxed by Skinner CEO Karen Keane, she returned to Skinner, where her responsibilities became art glass, art pottery, and classic automobiles and motorcycles, in addition to her previous areas of expertise.

Some people don't see the relevance of Prentiss's scientific background to her current career. But, rather than being contradictory, Prentiss believes it adds another layer of depth to the rest of what she brings to her specialty. "It's useful, particularly when I'm looking at fakes," she said. It also comes into play when she's trying to determine what something's made of. Prentiss certainly understands soldering better than your average art history major. She understands steel and chrome. "And I know the glass process of Tiffany lamps versus other glass processes."

She also knows the market. On December 10, 2005, the top lot of the day was a Tiffany Studios Peony table lamp that made \$149,000 (includes buyer's premium). "Unlike my competitors, I traditionally don't try to go out and find ten or fifteen or twenty Tiffany lamps to put in one auction," she said. "I try to have a few, all from good homes. That way I am confident that what I am bringing to the public is correct, and I'm not making them compete against each other either. So that's my strategy, and it seems to be paying off for me."

At the other end of the price spectrum, there were items sold for \$88.13 (a "possibly" Steuben covered glass jar), \$70.50 (four laminated cubes, circa 1960), and even \$15.28 (a Rozsika Blackstone tea tile).

"Skinner operates a little differently from most other houses," Prentiss said. "We don't buy material, and we tend to do a lot of work with banks and lawyers who are working with estates. We get a lot of fresh material that way, and we also take the full range. We don't cherry-pick and leave the client with the rest of the problem. Most of this material came from just a handful of families."

We asked Prentiss if buyers of 20th-century material were driven, as a group, by design as well as history, like Shaker buyers are, for example. "Absolutely," she said, adding that there were a number of discrete subgroups within the whole. "If you noticed, during the auction there was ebb and flow. People came in to buy the Tiffany, then left. Then other people came in to buy the art pottery. My customers are thoughtful, extremely serious, and devoted. One couple came in and raised their paddle for one item only."

With her customers in mind, Prentiss said she arranges the catalog according to period as well as category. That's why this time the Wiltonware Art Deco covered porcelain urn, made in England, was offered just before the Paul Frankl Art Deco vanity, made in New York City, and why the Cartier Art Deco desk clock followed the Frankl. "So people don't have to go all over the sale looking for what they're after," she said.

In deference to Internet bidders, she puts the right key words in the titles (e.g., Daum, Marblehead, Rookwood), so that Web searches won't miss them. (Non-Internet bidders should note that getting a bargain for that reason won't happen here.) For a long time now, Prentiss, who is in her fifties, has been "very computer literate because of my science background."

Like Prentiss, the creator of some of the sale's most important pieces, George Nakashima, also spent time at M.I.T. In 1930 he graduated from there with a degree in architecture. "There tends to be more of his work close to New Hope, Pennsylvania," where the Nakashima Studios were established in the mid-1940's and still are in business today, under the direction of Nakashima's daughter, Mira. "But we do find it here."

Four of the seven Nakashima lots in this sale came from the estate of Albert and Miriam Goldman, whose house in Lexington, Massachusetts, was designed in 1952-53 by Hugh Stubbins, a student of Gropius at Harvard and later his assistant. In 1957 *Progressive Architecture* featured the house. According to Prentiss, the pieces almost 50 years later were still in just about the same positions as they had been when the magazine came to shoot the spread.

Since the Goldmans' Nakashima pieces were unsigned, we asked Prentiss if she experienced any fallout from Nakashima knockoffs coming to auction elsewhere. (See "Sale Brings to Light Nakashima Knockoffs," M.A.D., December 2005, pp. 16-18-C.) She had not. "The Nakashima Studios have excellent records, and they were very helpful," said Prentiss. "They found the Goldmans' original orders. Simultaneously, the family came up with the check stubs." There was good paperwork and "clear provenance" on the Nakashima pieces from all four consignors.

Material designed by Nakashima is sought internationally, and inquiries about these pieces came from many countries besides the United States, said Prentiss. All were bought by phone bidders, two of whom were private American collectors. The others went to phone numbers that Prentiss wasn't familiar with, but they were in the United States.

The top Nakashima lot was one of his Conoid dining tables, signed "George Nakashima, New Hope Feb. 1971." The property of "a Massachusetts gentleman," it made \$31,725. A Conoid chair, commissioned in the 1960's by the late Morton Broffman of Wellesley, Massachusetts, brought \$8812.50.

In Nakashima's book *The Soul of a Tree: A Woodworker's Reflections* (1981), he defines "conoid" as "a three-dimensional geometric form with a base that is a square or rectangle. One side rises in an arch, or parabola; the opposite side is a low rectangle. Between the arched and rectangular sides extends a rounded plane." The furniture may or may not have been named for the shape. "We call one of our buildings, which I designed after this geometric form, the Conoid Studio," Nakashima went on. "Designs developed in this building are called *Conoid* pieces."

We asked Prentiss about the term. "There seems to be some conflict about it," she said. "Those styles are called Conoid in the auction market." But when exactly they got those names is uncertain. "More research needs to be done."

Other highlights of the sale, including our favorite, the Frankl Skyscraper vanity, which made \$32,900, are detailed in the captions. For the most part, the dynamics followed those of sales in every other category and at every auction house in recent years. "What I saw in the sale was that the rare, the unusual, and pieces of great quality did well," said Prentiss. "People are buying up. They are being very particular about what they will buy and will spend a lot more money, more than normal, for something that's unusual, rare, historically significant, or of great quality. The mundane is selling, but not bringing a lot. Years ago, when the stock market money was going crazy, people had a tremendous amount of disposable income. Now people have choices to make."

The tally on the 550 lots that sold (79.6% of the total offered) was \$739,037.40. All major lots found buyers. "And the postwar market is rising," Prentiss said. We saw young couples, families, even babies and pregnant women at this sale. We saw people taking the Skinner Boston gallery's steps two at a time.

"I'm also getting a lot of Americana converts," said Prentiss. "They're people who say, 'I'd like a nice comfortable chair. What I've got may have been carved by somebody in New England, but I need something to sit in.'"

For more information, contact Skinner in Boston at (617) 350-5400, in Bolton at (978) 779-6241, or via its Web site (www.skinnerinc.com).