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The Sacred and the Profane at Books and Manuscripts Sale

by Jeanne Schinto

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Sotheby's, New York City
Photos courtesy Sotheby's

An original typescript of Yoko Ono's 1964 *Grapefruit* sold for \$485,000 (includes buyer's premium) to a North American private collector at Sotheby's sale of fine books and manuscripts, including Americana, on December 5, 2013, in its New York gallery. The final form of this early piece of conceptual art/performance art was an artist's book. It was published by Ono herself in Tokyo, in a first edition of 500 numbered and signed copies. The book consists of 150 so-called event scores, each of which gives an instruction, some humanly possible to carry out, others not.

"Dollar Piece," for example, says, "Select an amount of dollar [sic]. / Write it on a piece of paper. / Imagine all the things that / you can buy with that amount. (a) / Imagine all the things that / you cannot buy with that amount. (b)." A similar, mental exercise is performed by most of us every day.

"Clock Piece," on the other hand, commands: "Steal all the clocks and watches / in the world. / Destroy them." Good luck carrying out that directive.

Two of the finished books are on display at the Museum of Modern Art. One is opened; the other is closed to show its simple cover. The typescript that sold at Sotheby's consists of 150 cards, individually framed, presumably by their anonymous owner/consignor or a previous owner. These cards, mostly 5 1/4" x 4 1/8", were arranged in two parts on facing walls during the sale's preview. The catalog illustrations didn't hint at this pleasing idea for display, which transformed the item into a piece of visual art ready for hanging in a museum or someone's private gallery.

The catalog named George Maciunas (1931-1978) as the original owner of this lot. Founder in the early 1960's of the international avant-garde artists' group Fluxus, Maciunas gave Ono her first solo show at his AG Gallery on Madison Avenue in 1961 and had planned to publish *Grapefruit*. However, money for the project never materialized. Maciunas, nonetheless, received the draft as a gift from Ono with a note that was, appropriately, an instruction. It said he should "use this piece whenever and wherever you need money for your medicine." Then she added cryptically, "Since there is no country without a morning, you can use it anywhere you go."

One historical-documents expert expressed doubt before the sale that a work by Ono would be able to make its \$300,000/500,000 estimate. "It's Yoko, not John Lennon," this expert noted dryly. Certainly Ono is recognizable as Lennon's collaborator-wife and then widow, which has boosted the value of her stock over the decades. But in her own right, she was already a small force in the world of experimental art long before there was Beatlemania. Who knows how big a visual artist she might have become if she hadn't been sidetracked by such endeavors as the Plastic Ono Band?

As it happened, bidding for *Grapefruit* opened from the desk at \$180,000. On-line bidders took it to \$300,000, at which point a man in the room joined the battle. Sitting with another man in the front row, he was the eventual winner. The men, not young, not even middle-aged, and not dressed as hipsters or anything close, left the gallery directly afterward and, obviously unfamiliar with the auction house's layout, asked where to pay.

The sale was notable otherwise for its wide range of material, both sacred and profane. Treated more or less equally, there were 16th- and 17th-century Bibles, autograph letters and sketchbooks by Surrealist René Magritte, and a draft of Bruce Springsteen's "Born to Run" lyrics. Rarities and curiosities of other kinds included a documentary archive relating to the D-Day invasion, a William S. Burroughs manuscript, two F. Scott Fitzgerald manuscript poems, a David Foster Wallace archive, and a cache of letters written by Mick Jagger to a one-time girlfriend from America.

The Bibles, along with other early devotional works—15 lots in all—had been deaccessioned by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The estimates were strong, and bidders were conservative. A representative of the rare book firm William Reese Company, New Haven, Connecticut, took the second edition of William Tyndale's Pentateuch for \$305,000, just above the low estimate.

A first edition of Tyndale's translation was published in Antwerp by Merten de Keyser in 1530; this one followed four years later. The catalog said that this is the only copy of the second edition to have appeared at auction "in the 20th century and since."

Reese paid another just-below-estimate price, \$149,000, for a second edition of Tyndale's liturgical primer published in London in 1535. It was bound with an "engraver's mark" edition of Tyndale's New Testament, published in Antwerp in 1536.

An American institution, bidding by phone, won the church's top Bible, a first edition of John Eliot's Indian translation. The price was \$395,000 (est. \$400,000/600,000). Eliot, a Puritan, began ministering to Native Americans in 1646. Supported by the London-based Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, he worked with three tribal members to complete the translation into phonetic Natick, a language without written form. The Bible was printed by Samuel Green and Marmaduke Johnson in Cambridge, Massachusetts. They finished the New Testament in 1661 and the Old in 1663, when they bound and distributed the book in full. It was the first Bible printed in America. Twenty copies were sent to England; this copy is believed to be one of them.

A week and a half before this sale, philanthropist David Rubenstein bought the Bay Psalm Book at Sotheby's for \$14,165,000. (See the January issue, p. 10-A.) Eliot was one of 30 clergymen who had worked on that project.

All six lots of Magritte material sold well above their estimates, sometimes many times higher than expected. All were derived from one source, Suzi Gablik (b. 1934), an art critic and historian from the United States whom the catalog called "the first American expert" on Magritte's work. According to Internet sources, she lived with Magritte and his family for a time, became totally integrated with their circle of friends, and even took part in several of Magritte's short films. She published a book on Magritte in 1970. It's still available in various editions.

The materials were largely from the late 1950's and early 1960's. These included a letter to Gablik in which Magritte discussed his creative process, albeit obliquely. It is illustrated with seven little sketches, one of which is a glass balanced on the tip of an opened umbrella—to catch the rain, of course. The letter sold to a member of the European trade on the phone for \$62,500 (est. \$8000/12,000).

An earlier sketchbook containing 49 drawings was the top Magritte lot, going at \$209,000 (est. \$30,000/40,000) to a North American dealer on the phone. Dating from the Ring and II and immediately afterward, it contained images that recur in Magritte paintings of that period, e.g., disembodied human hair and leaves that resemble birds. Titled *Le Problème du Fantôme*, it is also full of ghosts. The same bidder paid \$31,250 (est. \$1800/2200) for a 5 1/2" x 4 1/2" ink-and-pencil study that the artist likely removed from the sketchbook. It was for a Magritte painting, *Le coup de grace*. According to Sotheby's, there is no other trace of that painting.

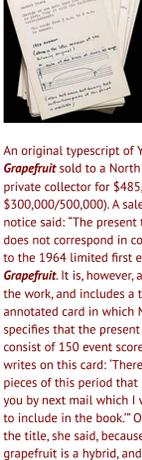
The single-page working manuscript of Springsteen's "Born to Run" was much hyped by the auction house before the sale. It evidently paid off. The piece of ruled paper penned with blue ink sold for \$197,000 to a private collector on the phone—nearly double the high estimate. The provenance was Mike Appel, who coproduced the 1975 album of the same name. It then went to a private collector and on to the consignor. As the story goes, Springsteen (b. 1949) started writing the song in West Long Branch, New Jersey, in 1974. There are other drafts extant. Even today, he is said to go through a grueling long song-writing process. But this manuscript is only one of two identified that contain the song's most famous lines and phrases. Right there on the page one can see, for example, "everlasting or never ending kiks"—he hadn't yet decided which would be right; "suicide trap (rap)"—again, he had not yet made his choice; and, most importantly, "get out while your [sic] young...cause tramps like us baby we were born to run."

Mick Jagger's letters to Tish Ladden of Philadelphia sold for a within-estimate \$10,000 to the same member of the European trade who bought a couple of the Magritte lots along with other items. The Jagger lot consisted of three letters and one autograph poem from circa 1965—ten pages in all. Ladden, who lives in Florida now, wrote on Facebook on the day of the sale: "Now if I could only find the Ring from the Beatles movie *Help!* that Bob Friedman gave me! He was their photographer and did the closing titles for the film. He gave me the Ring in 1965. I lost the Ring way back then."

She also claims on Facebook to have been the inspiration for the Rolling Stones' song "Paint it Black," written by Jagger and Keith Richards in 1966. "When [Jagger] called he said he was at the Beverly Hills Hotel and I would love his room—it was huge with a huge round bed in it," she recounted. "I asked him if the sheets were black and he said no, so I said 'well Paint it Black—you'd look so good on black.' Then when he came to NY and I met him there at Faye Dunaway's apartment he asked me if I would be his US girl and that he wanted someone else (Marianne Faithfull) to be his London girl. I broke up with him then (as he knew I probably would) because I wouldn't do that." Well, who's to argue with her at this point?

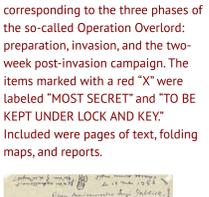
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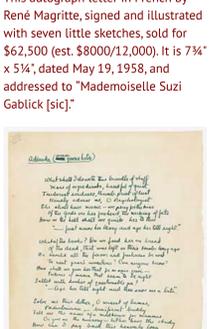


An original typescript of Yoko Ono's *Grapefruit* sold to a North American private collector for \$485,000 (est. \$300,000/500,000). A salesroom notice said: "The present typescript does not correspond in completeness to the 1964 limited first edition of *Grapefruit*. It is, however, a draft of the work, and includes a typed and annotated card in which Ms. Ono specifies that the present draft consist of 150 event scores. She also writes on this card: 'There are more pieces of this period that I can send you by next mail which I would like to include in the book.'" Ono chose the title, she said, because the grapefruit is a hybrid, and so was she. At least, that's how she felt after a childhood and adolescence spent shuttling between Japan and the United States.

The top image shows One-half of the original typescript of *Grapefruit* that was on display during the preview. The middle images shows copies of *Grapefruit* on display at the Museum of Modern Art. The label reads: "Yoko Ono, Japanese, born 1933. *Grapefruit* 1964. Artist's book, offset. Publisher: Wunternaum Press (the artist), Tokyo. Edition: 500." Schinto photo.



An archive relating to the D-Day invasion sold to a phone bidder for \$62,500 (est. \$50,000/75,000). Sotheby's said the materials had come from Bernard Pettingill, Omar Bradley's aide-de-camp, and had descended to the consignor. The documents were in three parts, corresponding to the three phases of the so-called Operation Overlord: preparation, invasion, and the two-week post-invasion campaign. The items marked with a red "X" were labeled "MOST SECRET" and "TO BE KEPT UNDER LOCK AND KEY." Included were pages of text, folding maps, and reports.



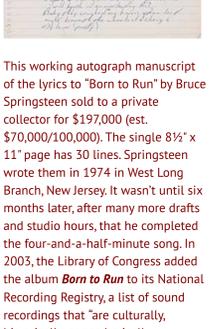
This autograph letter in French by René Magritte, signed and illustrated with seven little sketches, sold for \$62,500 (est. \$8000/12,000). It is 7 3/4" x 5 1/4", dated May 19, 1958, and addressed to "Mademoiselle Suzi Gablick [sic]."



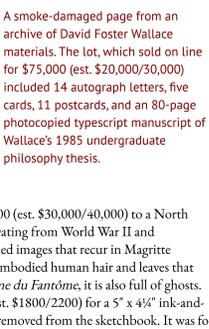
Two autograph manuscript poems (one shown) by F. Scott Fitzgerald sold to a member of the European trade for \$40,625 (est. \$20,000/30,000). The two pages were written in green ink in 1931 and 1937, respectively. They were both dedicated to Mary MacArthur, daughter of Fitzgerald's close friends Charles MacArthur (one of the models for *Tender is the Night's* Dick Diver) and actress Helen Hayes.



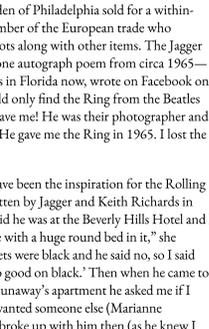
This hand-lettered 7" x 12 1/8" sign by Norman Rockwell sold on the phone for \$9375 (est. \$5000/7000). It was stolen by Alan Rado, an art student at the Pratt Institute, while visiting a girlfriend in the Berkshires in 1971. When the girlfriend heard what Rado had done, she was appalled, and she suggested that he at least replace the sign with one they would make themselves. They fashioned one and went to deliver it. At the same time they fessed up to Rockwell, who, to their surprise, said he liked their sign better than his. When Rado visited again a year later, the sign was protected by Plexiglas and secured to the building with screws. Accordingly, the provenance said: "Alan Rado (by exchange with the artist)." Schinto photo.



The red-ink typescript by William Burroughs of "The Mayan Caper," the central episode in his novel *The Soft Machine*, sold on line for \$21,250 (est. \$8000/12,000). The ten leaves were annotated with numerous autograph corrections and changes. The final page of this account of a time-traveler was signed and dated by the author, "Tangier, Morocco, 1964."



This working autograph manuscript of the lyrics to "Born to Run" by Bruce Springsteen sold to a private collector for \$197,000 (est. \$70,000/100,000). The single 8 1/2" x 11" page has 30 lines. Springsteen wrote them in 1974 in West Long Branch, New Jersey. It wasn't until six months later, after many more drafts and studio hours, that he completed the four-and-a-half-minute song. In 2003, the Library of Congress added the album *Born to Run* to its National Recording Registry as a list of sound recordings that "are culturally, historically, or aesthetically important, and/or inform or reflect life in the United States."



A smoke-damaged page from an archive of David Foster Wallace materials. The lot, which sold on line for \$75,000 (est. \$20,000/30,000) included 14 autograph letters, five cards, 11 postcards, and an 80-page photocopied typescript of Wallace's 1985 undergraduate philosophy thesis.

The archive of David Foster Wallace, author of *Infinite Jest* and other books, was consigned by Susan Barnett. She was not a girlfriend but a writer friend of the late author. The two only corresponded, never met. It sold on line for \$75,000 (est. \$20,000/30,000). Wallace wrote 14 letters, five cards, 11 postcards—over 20 pages of correspondence—to Barnett from 1997 to 2007. He took his own life at age 46 in 2008. The lot also included an 80-page photocopied typescript manuscript of his 1985 undergraduate philosophy thesis. At Sotheby's sale of fine books and manuscripts on June 11, 2013, another archive of correspondence addressed to Wallace's writing professor Richard Elman fetched \$125,000 (est. \$10,000/15,000).

The sale totaled \$3,791,132 on an offering of 175 lots, 117 of which sold. Among the 33% unsold lots was the one with the heaviest estimate, \$500,000/700,000. It was an autograph letter signed by Thomas Jefferson as president in 1805; the subject was the Lewis and Clark expedition. On December 13, 2002, a Jefferson letter on the same subject sold for a record that still stands, \$1,439,500.

A broadside of another piece of Jefferson's writing—the Declaration of Independence—sold on the phone for \$233,000 to a member of the White Plains, New York, this first printing to include the names of the signers came from the press of a woman, Mary Katharine Goddard of Baltimore, in 1777. Only a dozen are known, and all but this one are in institutions. That's a rarity for sure, but Sotheby's \$150,000/250,000 estimate took the document's condition into account.

"The visible parts of the John Hancock and Charles Thomson signatures are not original," Kaller said. "If the whole document hadn't been so damaged and mistreated, it would easily have brought seven figures. But I don't expect another chance to buy a Goddard Declaration. I had to take a shot at this one."

For more information, call Sotheby's at (212) 606-7000 or see the Web site (www.sothebys.com).

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