

The Sale of the Martin Johnson Heade

by Jeanne Schinto

Some dealers who attended the sale at John McInnis Auctioneers on December 7, 2003, tried to act as if it were no different from any other.

The conceit was impossible to maintain for long. After all, in their midst were the famed Keno brothers, Leigh and Leslie. There were also TV cameras and newspaper reporters. Most important, there was a painting in a protective glass display case.

The Kenos were dressed in identical knee-high rubber boots. They had come from New York City through a blizzard. The snowfall was the biggest on record for early December in many parts of the East, including Amesbury, Massachusetts, where the auction took place.

Before the day was over, other records would be set, thanks to the painting. Consigned to McInnis by a woman, who at her request will be known only as Pat, the landscape by Martin Johnson Heade (1819-1904) was found in her late mother's attic in a suburb just outside Boston. An oil on canvas so dirty even the experts couldn't say exactly whether it was a river scene in Florida or a salt marsh in Massachusetts, it brought the most ever for a Heade at public auction, \$1,006,250 (including buyer's premium).

The sale was also the most successful ever for McInnis. The gross for the entire sale, the Heade plus 499 other lots, was \$1,914,514.25.

The Kenos were at the auction to film a segment of *Find!*, the PBS program inaugurated in October 2003. Its concept is that they find some wonderful object in the wild (a private home) rather than waiting for somebody to bring it to the Antiques Roadshow.

The Heade painting was actually found by McInnis and his 11-year-old son, Joey, on a routine house call. McInnis then alerted the twins. "Didn't I tell you we found something valuable?" a beaming McInnis said to Joey when the applause died down.

Skeptics may have trouble believing how well the elements of the story came together. The house itself, where the first of two segments about this find was filmed, looked as if it had been stocked like a trout pond. Besides the Heade, there were a pair of 18th-century fire buckets, one of them being used as an umbrella stand near the front door and its match found somewhat too easily in the basement by the Kenos; a mint-condition quilt with an audience-pleasing pattern of cats; a dollhouse (kids will like that one, some television producer must have decided); a Rose Medallion bowl with no cracks (one of the Kenos pinged it as proof); a Chinese vase in rare orange; and a signed banjo clock.

And how fortunate that McInnis and his wife, daughter, sister, cousin, and nephew, as well as Joey, all of whom worked the sale, made for a good-looking, photogenic cast—a "find" in themselves.

There were plausible explanations for this dramaturgical perfection. Pat descends from a family with roots in early Salem, Massachusetts. The items had belonged to her grandmother. Unfamiliar with auctions (Pat had never attended one until the day the Heade sold), she called McInnis and no other auctioneer, having been given his name by her mother's lawyer. McInnis in turn had been prompted by the Kenos to phone if he ever came across anything suitable for the show.

Still, cameras can make reality seem inauthentic, despite a production team's best efforts or sometimes because of them. After arriving at the auction, the Kenos greeted Pat four times before the camera crew was satisfied. Pat said the Kenos were at her mother's house four hours to film ten minutes. The dialogue seemed wooden anyway, and the Kenos were often too vivacious in contrast to sedate Pat on the umpteenth take.

Leigh Keno, in a conversation with us, stressed how he tried to preserve the spontaneity of those that *Find!* wanted to film. "When John started describing this thing [i.e., the Heade], I said, 'Whatever you do, don't tell the lady [how valuable it might be]. Just try to be patient.' John had mixed feelings. He wanted to tell her right away, but we wanted to give her the good news with the camera on her. First, though, we wanted, of course, Stebbins to look at it."

Theodore E. "Ted" Stebbins Jr., author of *The Life and Work of Martin Johnson Heade: A Critical Analysis and Catalogue Raisonné* (Yale University Press, 2000), is the foremost expert on Heade. Formerly a curator of American painting at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, he is currently distinguished fellow and consultative curator of American art at the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard University.

McInnis took the painting to Stebbins, having seen Heade's signature peeking out from the edge of the frame. "So he had a hunch," said Leigh Keno. "But the fact is, Stebbins is the expert. And you can see anything you want, but until Stebbins sees it...."

Again in the interest of preserving spontaneity, the Kenos wouldn't let Stebbins see the Heade, much less remove the frame, until the cameras were ready to record. "I really wanted to see it beforehand," Stebbins said, "because I told John McInnis, 'I'm going to say what I believe.' And most times, when someone brings me a Heade, it's not a Heade, or it's a bad one. And I told him, 'So you're taking a chance.' And he was confident enough to take that chance."

The odds of finding an unknown Heade are better than one might expect. "It's because of who Heade was," said Stebbins. "I was talking to Abigail Gerdtts, who is doing the Winslow Homer catalogue raisonné, and asked her how many Homers turn up. In the last twenty years, there have been a handful, whereas Heades continue to turn up regularly. I get a new genuine Heade once every six weeks."

Stebbins said it happens because those who bought Heade's artworks in his day were ordinary people. "They weren't the moguls or great collectors. So they took their painting home from New York, Massachusetts, Florida, or wherever they bought it. This is especially true of the Florida pictures. Heade retired there in 1883 but painted for another twenty years. So people who bought a Florida painting were tourists. And then they took it back to Wisconsin or wherever they lived, and hung it on the wall.

"Now generations have gone by. The grandchildren or great-grandchildren look up and see this little marsh scene or flower picture. It's gotten very dirty—no one knows it's a painting of value—and they put it in a tag sale, whereas Homer and Whistler and Frederic Church were bought by the most prominent New York and Boston collecting families. So those paintings were always known to be important works of art."

Most M.A.D. readers probably realize that not all Heades are equal in importance and value. Much depends on their subject, size, condition, and provenance. This Heade measured 12 inches x 26 inches; it had never been out of Pat's family; it had never been lined or cleaned. The original frame retained its old nails. Even the hanging wire was thought to be the original.

"You can't see the wire in the [PBS] segment," Leigh Keno said. "The cameras were packed up. And I commented then, 'That looks like an awfully old wire,' and I remember Ted saying—and it makes perfect sense—that the wire was most likely the original wire it hung from, because it's very long. And in the late nineteenth century, of course, they used mostly picture molding. The wire was visible and came down the wall. The thing was probably taken off the wall, wherever it was hung initially, and ended up in the attic."

McInnis's catalog described the Heade as a southern view. Stebbins mentioned that location as a possibility on *Find!*, but he also said on camera he can't be sure what the picture shows. As he told us, "It's so dirty. I can't see enough to be positive. If I had to guess today, I'd say it's not southern. I think it's probably northeastern, but no one will know for sure until they open the package—until they clean it."

Jim Wright, whose studio is in Somerville, Massachusetts, is one of the nation's leading conservators of paintings. He has probably restored more Heades than anyone else. He certainly has examined more of them than anyone. Wright is the most likely candidate for the cleaning job on this Heade. At the time of his conversation with us, however, he wasn't at liberty to confirm that supposition. Nor did he want to speculate about what the painting depicted. "I have a hunch, but I am not sure, and I'll leave that up to Ted to declare."

Stebbins and Wright saw the painting just briefly on the day PBS filmed them. They saw it for the second time at the sale. Like everyone else who made it to Amesbury, they drove in the blizzard to get there.

Lots of people, McInnis included, were surprised to see collector and Fidelity chairman Edward C. "Ned" Johnson III in the gallery. Not surprising to see were many of McInnis's regular customers. Dealers Dan and Luanne Meader of Haverhill and Georgetown, Massachusetts, sat as usual in the front row. Richard W. Oliver of Kennebunk, Maine, sat a few seats down the line.

Bob Frishman of Bell-Time Clocks, Andover, Massachusetts, drove his wife (this reporter) to the sale. They had followed the truck of Paul Martin Antiques up the highway from the Martin brothers' base in Haverhill.

Dealer/collector Peter Markham of Kingston, New Hampshire, got there all right. So did dealer Richard A. Kenney of New Castle, New Hampshire. Peter J. Clarke of Boston's Richardson-Clarke Gallery lives next door to Amesbury in Newburyport. "I had two feet of snow to dig out; after that it was a smooth ride," said Clarke, who coveted the Heade and felt "pretty sure" it was a Newburyport picture. "I'm very familiar with the areas around here. I go fly-fishing on some of these rivers." His belief that it was a hometown scene gave him a special reason to want it. "I have an affinity for it in that respect," he said.

Pat lived in the house where the Heade was found until her graduation from college at age 22. She lives now in a suburb north of Boston with her husband of 36 years. It was he who drove her to the sale, but the two didn't sit together. The cameras preferred that she sit between the Kenos.

In the 90 minutes before the Heade came up, Pat's 19th-century painted rocking horse was sold. On the *Find!* episode, one of the Kenos estimated it at \$800 to \$1200. "It would be worth three times that if it were in good shape," he said. Phone bidders got busy, and it brought \$2012.50. Three bidders in the room vied for Pat's 18th-century Queen Anne walnut highboy. One bought it for \$16,100, slightly above the high estimate.

Pat's pair of painted leather fire buckets sold to Richard Oliver for \$4025 (est. \$3000/4000). "That basement. I had a feeling if we had spent another hour, we would have found even more things," Leigh Keno told us, referring to the place where Pat's second fire bucket was found.

Items consigned by two other estates got the audience's momentary attention. An oil on canvas signed by 19th-century American marine artist William York opened at \$19,000 (est. \$6000/9000). At least two bidders in the room, including Peter Clarke, were trying for the ship's portrait in its original frame. McInnis said it came from a house in Marblehead, Massachusetts, where he had done an appraisal ten years earlier. He was grateful for the follow-up phone call a decade later. Upon its sale to a phone bidder for \$67,850, Pat said to the Kenos, "I hope mine goes up like that." She had purposely been kept uninformed by the Kenos about the intense presale interest in her Heade, the better for spontaneity's sake when the painting reached its zenith.

The American poet Ogden Nash (1902-1971), author of such immortal lines as "Candy is dandy but liquor is quicker," had a summer place in Amesbury, and McInnis was selling some of its contents. When he offered the Nash family's Baltimore Classical paint-decorated game table, bidders responded, especially those on the phones. "Keep your fingers crossed that there are phone bidders for me," Pat, a quick learner, said to her twin escorts when the table made \$135,125, more than eleven times the high estimate.

Finally it was time for the Heade painting. "I'm nervous," Pat said. "Excited but nervous." From the podium McInnis thanked experts Stebbins and Wright then took an opening bid of \$100,000 from Clarke. Clarke's battle with the phones—more than a dozen were primed—and with bidders at the sale was short-lived. He dropped out at \$500,000. Ned Johnson was on it for a while, then he quit. As the bidding slowly escalated from there, Pat's face flushed, and the Kenos fanned her with their catalogs.

In the end, it was New York City dealer Michael Altman against a phone bidder, both in the rear of the room. The latter's increments were being taken not by a McInnis employee but by a McInnis customer. Because the storm had increased phone-bidding activity on all lots, McInnis had pressed some civilians into service. In the last few minutes of the preview, the dealer with the underbidder on his line had grumbled, "I hope it happens fast [the sale of the Heade] so we can get down to real business." He had gone on to describe an altercation with a camera crew at another newsworthy auction. Now he seemed pretty pleased with himself to be part of this one.

When the bidding reached \$875,000, McInnis asked several times for another \$25,000 raise. It didn't come, and Altman was the winner. In the next moment, he had greatness thrust upon him. As reporters from the Boston Globe and elsewhere girdled him, he tried to explain he had bought it for a client.

McInnis joined the media frenzy at the rear of the gallery, while his nephew sold the mundane items (a cast-iron frog doorknob, a bisque doll head, a flame-stitched purse) that immediately followed the Heade.

With no time to celebrate, McInnis returned to selling consignments found in the attics and basement of people less lucky than Pat: an 18th-century Boston Chippendale mahogany game table (\$28,750); a Middle Eastern battle scene in oil on canvas (\$10,062.50); a 19th-century ornately carved hardwood Chinese armchair (\$1725); a pair of audacious lion's heads (\$2070).

Of a dining table by contemporary furniture maker Henredon, McInnis said, "The lady paid twelve thousand dollars for it new. She didn't know about going to auctions." It sold to a room bidder for \$2185.

A couple of hours later on another break, McInnis ate a bowl of chowder and declared himself to be elated with the outcome of the Heade sale but also relieved that it was over. The PBS people, the Kenos, and Pat all had gone home.

As the snow continued to fall, he announced that refreshments from the caterer were on the house. When his audience chided him for his erstwhile Yankee thrift, he appeared more media savvy than ever, telling us with a grin, "Don't put that in the paper."

Other high points of the sale are in the picture captions. For more information, call (978) 388-0400 or see the auction website (www.johnmcinnauctioneers.com).