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# Tiny Calder Stable Is Giant at Art Sale

by Jeanne Schinto

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Skinner, Inc., Boston, Massachusetts

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Photos courtesy Skinner

"We had crazy interest in it from all over the place," Skinner's Robin S.R. Starr said of an unsigned painted sheet metal stabile by Alexander Calder that easily fit in the palm of her hand. Titled *Shoe with Split Heel*, the 1946 sculpture was consigned by an elderly woman who had bought it in 1967 and kept it in a box that she made. There it lay for decades between pieces of Styrofoam until it sold for \$148,125 (includes buyer's premium) to a member of the trade bidding by phone at the auction house's sale of works of art in Boston on September 9. The sale's top lot, it had been estimated at an unassuming \$30,000/50,000.

At previews, people were clearly enthralled by the black, blue, and red construction that stood just 4½" tall. "I think part of its appeal was that even though it was tiny, it absolutely spoke, just as Calder's monumental pieces do," said Starr.

The artist began making things on this scale in the 1930's, Starr continued.

Eventually, he started turning them into the large works that they resemble. "He didn't design them to be maquettes." They became maquettes in retrospect, one might say. "But Calder works of any size have the same inherently joyful quality that his international audience simply responds to."

Another crowd-pleaser was a 19th-century oil on canvas portrait of a young woman reading by Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot. No fewer than five phone bidders tried for the French painting. It sold to an absentee dealer for \$65,175 (est. \$25,000/ 35,000).

Doing nearly as well as the Corot was a 1954 drawing in mixed media by Zao Wou-Ki that sold to a dealer bidding in the room for \$53,325 (est. \$18,000/20,000). "If Miró's hand had been more delicate and calligraphic, you would get Zao Wou-Ki," said Starr of the Chinese-born artist who studied in the West, eventually settling in Paris. "He has both a European and a Chinese sensibility. Over the last five or ten years we have had a number of his works, both prints and drawings, and they usually do very, very well."

Indeed, during the earlier prints section of the sale, two of his color lithographs sold for \$9480 (est. \$1000/1500) and \$4594 (est. \$800/1200), respectively. One was from 1956; the other, 1960. Like the drawing, neither was titled.

"The litho that was more saturated in terms of its palette and also in great condition took off," said Starr. Its buyer was a New York City dealer on the phone. The less-expensive litho went to a bidder in Taiwan via the Internet, said Starr's associate, Kathy Wong.

The bidding on the sale's cover lot, a 19th-century oil on paper board of a snowy street scene in Montmartre by Maurice Utrillo, did not go as well as it did for the Calder, Corot, or Zao works. Estimated at \$100,000/ 150,000, it opened from the desk at \$60,000, then two phone bidders made their slow, labored climb to \$85,000 hammer. The next bidding increment should have been to \$87,500. Instead, Starr, who was auctioneering at that moment, agreed to a raise of just \$1000. When no response came from the other phone bidder, it was finally, mercifully, sold for \$101,910.

"I feel like I've just been to the dentist," Starr remarked when it was over. Some days later, she said by phone, "We would like to have seen it go for more, but right now the market is tough. When people wanted things, they were more than happy to spend big. If they were in, they were really in and were going to duke it out." If they weren't feeling it, however, they used the slow-mo method of bidding or, worse, didn't bid at all.

One of the passed lots was an 1889 oil on canvas of a scene in Trouville on the Normandy coast by Eugène Louis Boudin (est. \$70,000/90,000).

Another was American Impressionist Theodore Robinson's *Hansom Cabs*, a small (6 7/8" x 10½") oil on panel that carried the top estimate of the sale (\$120,000/ 180,000). From a private collection in Vermont, Robinson's depiction of horse-drawn cab drivers waiting for fares in New York City was bought in at \$80,000.

"I felt all along that the Boudin estimate was on the aggressive end," said Starr. She didn't feel that way about the Robinson prediction. "I thought that painting had everything going for it, but that's the perfect example [of the current market]. If people wanted it, they were beating each other up. But if they didn't warm to it...I have to say that [failure of the Robinson] was my biggest disappointment. I had it hanging by my desk. I couldn't resist it. Unfortunately-or fortunately-it's still here by my desk, and I'm loving it before it goes home."

The sale was a long one, offering 600 lots, 493 (82%) of which sold for a gross of approximately \$1,991,000. Conspicuous among room bidders was a man who bought paintings all the late afternoon and into the evening. In my catalog I made a note of his paddle number 32 times.

"He was not a dealer," said Starr. "Actually, he's from the South and is a businessman." While he was unusual because he bought so many things, at least in one way he exemplifies the current roller-coaster ride of a market-"at least this week," Starr qualified with a laugh, "because he was rarely an underbidder. When he was bidding, he meant it."

We had never seen the man before at Skinner, and Starr confirmed that he was a new customer. As a result, during the sale, the back office decided to do a little checking on his bona fides. "In this day and age, we do that more and more," Starr said. "We are being increasingly cautious."

To that end, as of October 1, the first of Skinner's two-day Asian sale, the auction house's conditions of sale have changed. The company will now ask certain bidders at higher-end levels to leave a deposit, just as New York City auction houses do. Specifically, the new wording reads: "Any bidder that plans on spending in excess of \$100,000 should make arrangements with the accounting department at least five (5) days in advance of the sale, as a deposit may be required to participate."

Of the change, Starr said, "The good news is that we have all these new people from all over the globe bidding with us, and that's terrific. It's really changed our business tremendously." The bad news is that sometimes successful bidders "just walk away." If a piece does "fabulously well" but isn't paid for, the consignor still has the object, it's true, but "it's been sullied, fairly or not," Starr explained. "It's not a question of someone walking away because they've decided something's a fake. They're walking away because they're walking away."

Was the southern businessman decorating a house or diversifying? Whatever his motivation, he bought across the board, including 19th-century genre scenes by Dutchman Jozef Willemszoon Hoevenaer (\$2370) and British artist Francis Stephen Cary (\$9480); 19th-century marine pictures by American Wesley Webber (\$4444) and an unnamed British school artist (\$1778); seascapes, landscapes, a cow picture, and a bronze eagle; and a John Joseph Enneking picture of a harbor (\$2726).

On the Enneking the southerner exceeded the picture's \$1500/2000 estimate, but that was a rare splurge for him. More often, he was well under the money, especially when he bought his most expensive piece, Maxfield Parrish's *Summer*, for \$30,810. Inscribed on the reverse "Maxfield Parrish./ Windsor: Vermont," it depicts a lovely sleeping nude partly obscured by boughs of flowers. The oil on a canvas laid on board was estimated at \$40,000/60,000.

An absentee bidder got another nice buy, paying \$47,400 (est. \$50,000/ 70,000) for *Hungarian Figures in a Field* by József Rippl-Rónai, who was active in the Budapest art scene of the early 20th century. The painting might have gone for less if not for the persistence of Starr.

The modernistic oil on board showing farmers scything a field "came out of a house," she said. "[The owners] had no idea what it was. So it really was a founding" and needed verification. When she sent digital images of it to the Hungarian National Gallery, however, the experts there initially "dismissed it out of hand." Undaunted, Starr followed up with unsolicited transparencies, which elicited from Hungary a "maybe." Given that encouragement, she sent the actual painting. They were convinced. That got her the letter of authentication that accompanied the lot.

Starr and her staff don't always go to such lengths. "You do pick your battles," she said. "Some pieces don't pan out, and it's not a surprise. In the case of others, like this one, everything about it just screams that the piece is what it purports to be. So we pushed on this one because we felt it was the right way to go."

Returning to the theme of reoffered art, at Skinner's art sale on January 28, *Desert Landscape at Sunset* by Grant MacDonald (b. 1944) sold to someone in the room for \$7110. Possibly depicting New Mexico, where the artist lives, the 1996 acrylic on canvas, 44" x 72", had hung behind the podium at that winter sale. Then lo and behold, the same painting was back again at this sale, selling for \$6518 to a phone bidder.

Afterward, Skinner CEO Karen Keane, who did the selling this time around, asked her audience, "Did you hear why we had this painting again? It didn't fit in the previous buyer's house, so they reconsigned it." Her wry smile carried a message she didn't feel the need to spell out, but we will. Carpenters have their rule: "Measure twice, cut once." A paraphrase of it might well serve auction-goers.

Two untitled oil on canvas abstracts by Tadeusz Kantor (Polish, 1915-1990) hung behind the podium this time. Each did well, going to the same Polish phone bidder for \$26,070 on estimates of \$4000/ 6000 and \$2000/3000, respectively.

The paintings were bought in Poland in the 1960's by a New England collector who first saw them in a gallery, then went to the artist's studio to discuss them with their maker. Despite the language barrier, the two men were able to communicate in bad French, and the collector made his decision to acquire the works. Because of the political situation at the time, the American had to go back to the government-run gallery to buy them.

The paintings are good examples of Kantor's work, but the story of their acquisition and the way it illuminates a particular moment in history is one of those intangible extras that sometimes accrue to works of art. "Because of the story that goes along with those pieces, they become a reminder of a place and a time and an experience that's over and above the experience of viewing the paintings themselves," Starr said. "So there's that much more richness to them."

For more information, phone (617) 350-5400 or see the Web site ([www.skinnerinc.com](http://www.skinnerinc.com)).

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**Shoe with Split Heel** by Alexander Calder (1898-1976), 1946, 4½" x 3 3/8" x 2¼", an unsigned painted sheet metal stabile that had been in a private Massachusetts collection since 1967, sold to the trade for \$148,125 (est. \$30,000/ 50,000). It was the top lot of the sale.



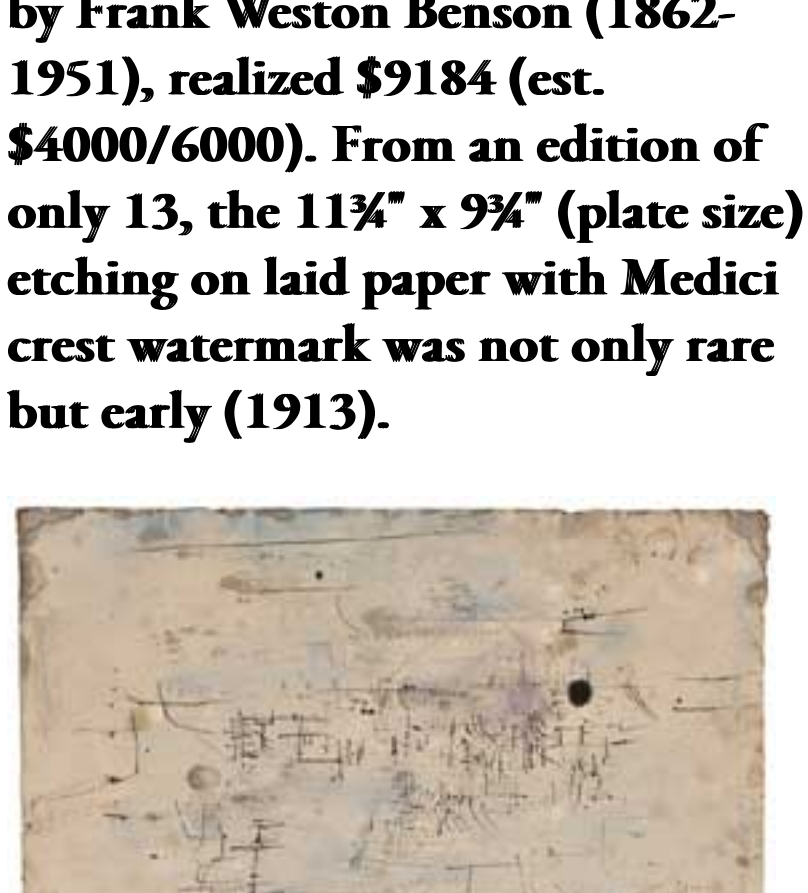
**Jeune fille assise lisant, les cheveux sur les épaules** by Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot (1796-1875) went to an absentee bidder at \$65,175 (est. \$25,000/35,000). The 12¾" x 9¾" oil on canvas came to the sale from a private collection.



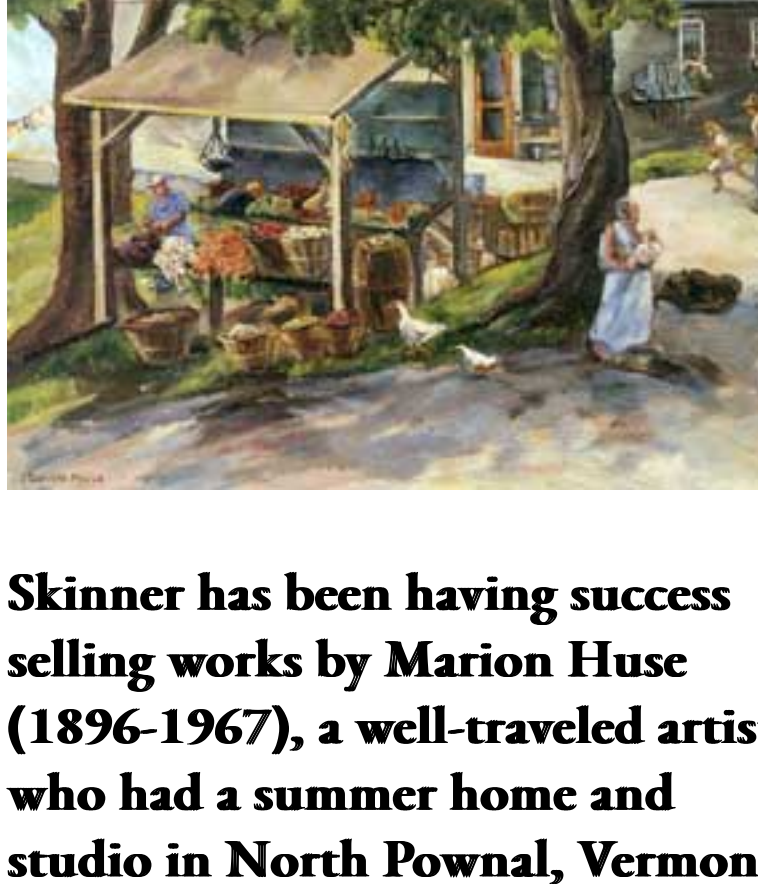
**Calder's 1963 Void's Edge, a 9¾" x 13¾" (sheet size) gouache on BFK paper, came to the sale from the same collection as the Calder stabile. It sold to a dealer in the room for \$22,515 (est. \$8000/12,000).**



**Impasse traînée sous la neige à Montmartre** by Maurice Utrillo (1883-1955) sold on the phone for \$101,910 (est. \$100,000/150,000). The 21" x 26" oil on paper board from a private Massachusetts estate was inscribed "...24-7-44." Schinto photos.



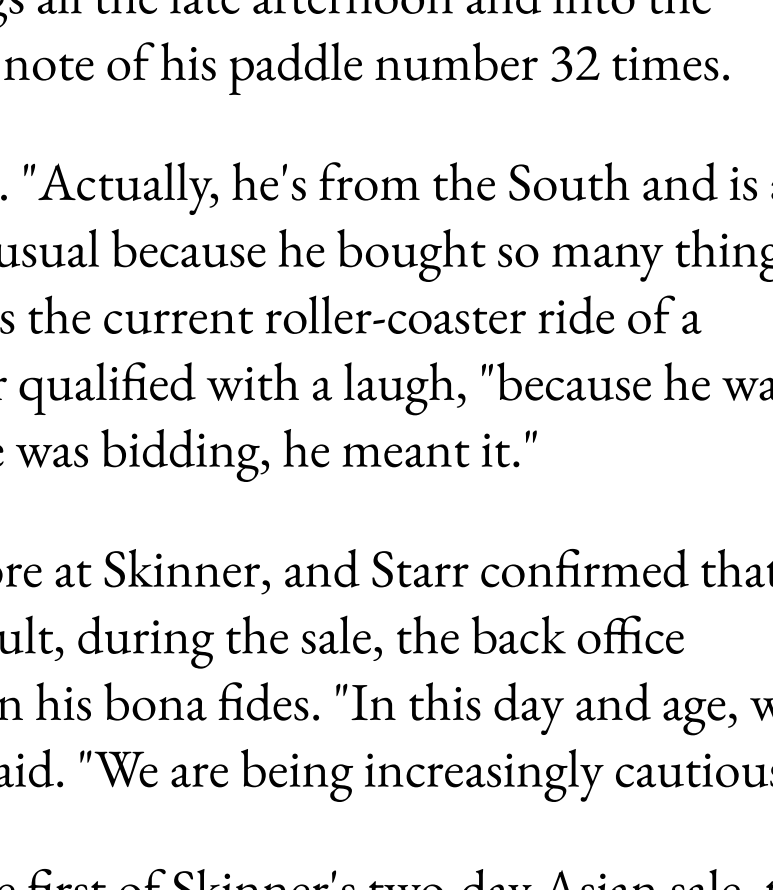
**The dramatic Fish Hawk, a print by Frank Weston Benson (1862-1951), realized \$9184 (est. \$4000/6000). From an edition of only 13, the 11¾" x 9¾" (plate size) etching on laid paper with Medici crest watermark was not only rare but early (1913).**



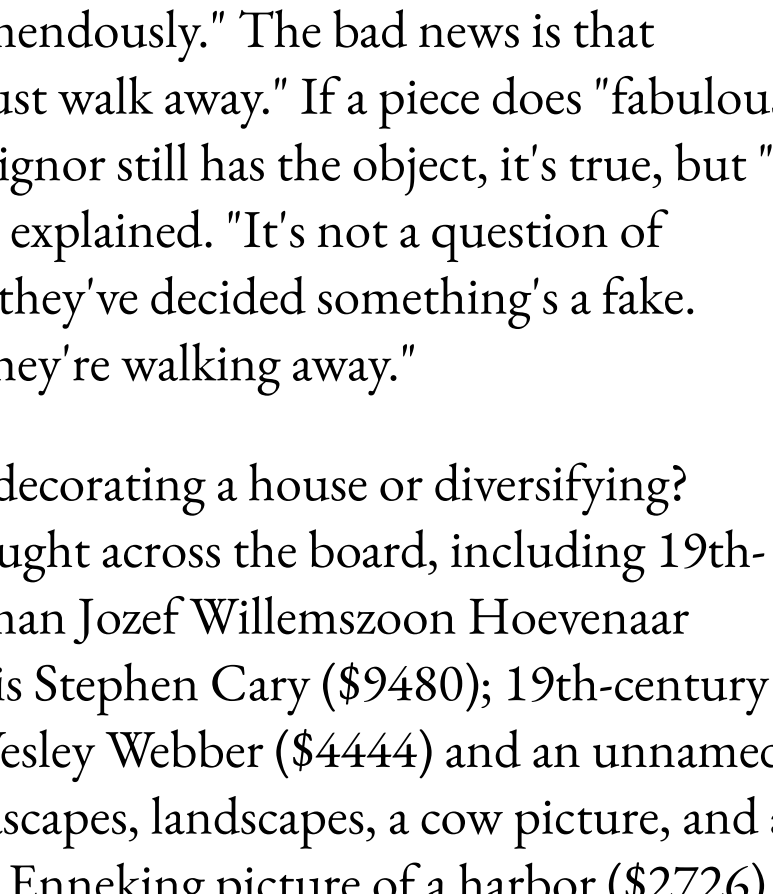
**An 8" x 10 7/8" untitled drawing in mixed media on paper by Zao Wou-Ki (b. 1921) sold for \$53,325 (est. \$18,000/ 20,000). It is signed and dated "...Zao 54."**



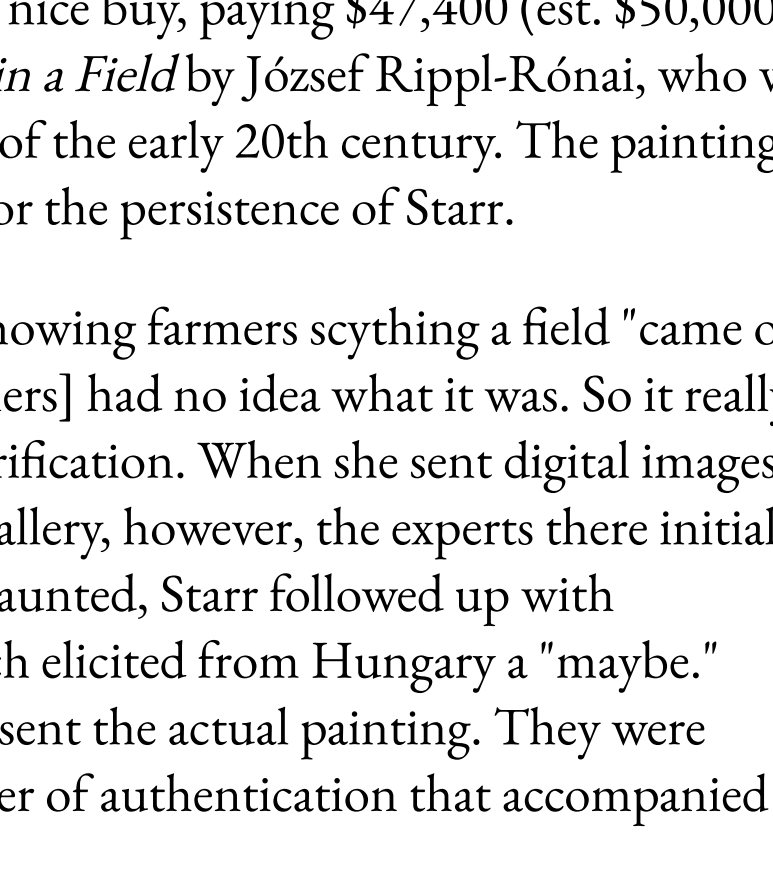
**Grüne Erde/ Sketch for a Composition** by Josef Albers (1888-1976) is small, just 4¾" x 6 5/8" (sheet size), but the circa 1940 oil and graphite on Albemarle paper made a big price, selling to a phone bidder for \$28,440 (est. \$3000/5000). The title translates to "Green Earth."



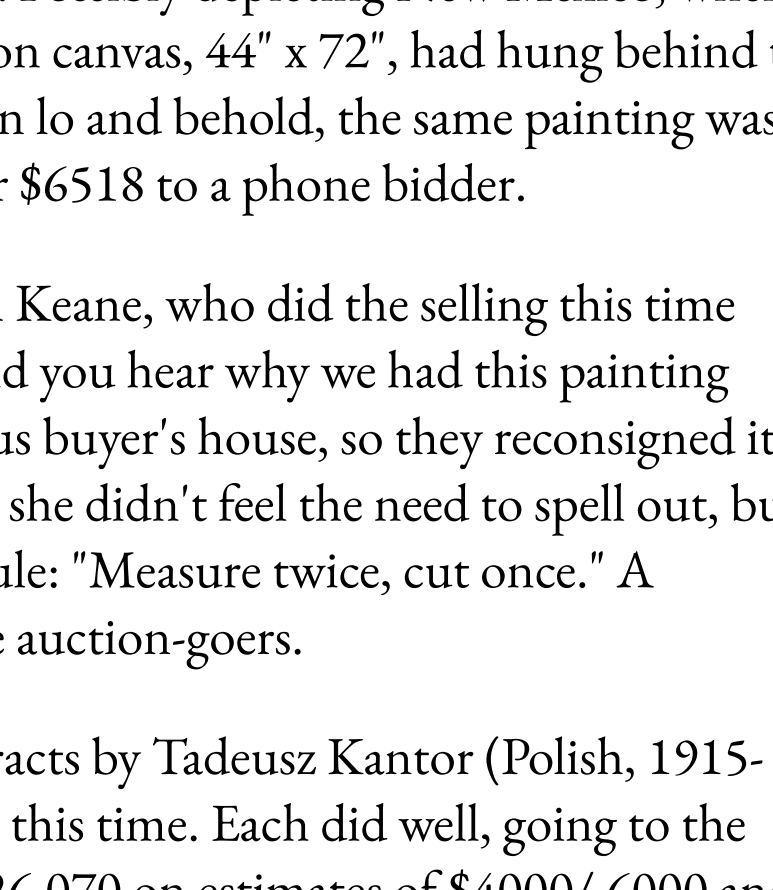
**Skinner has been having success selling works by Marion Huse (1896-1967), a well-traveled artist who had a summer home and studio in North Pownall, Vermont, in the 1930's. At this sale, her Roadside Stand sold to an absentee bidder at \$18,960 (est. \$800/1200). The 30" x 32" oil on canvas came from the New Britain Museum of American Art by way of the Fuller Museum of Art in Brockton, Massachusetts, as have other Huse works Skinner has sold in the past.**



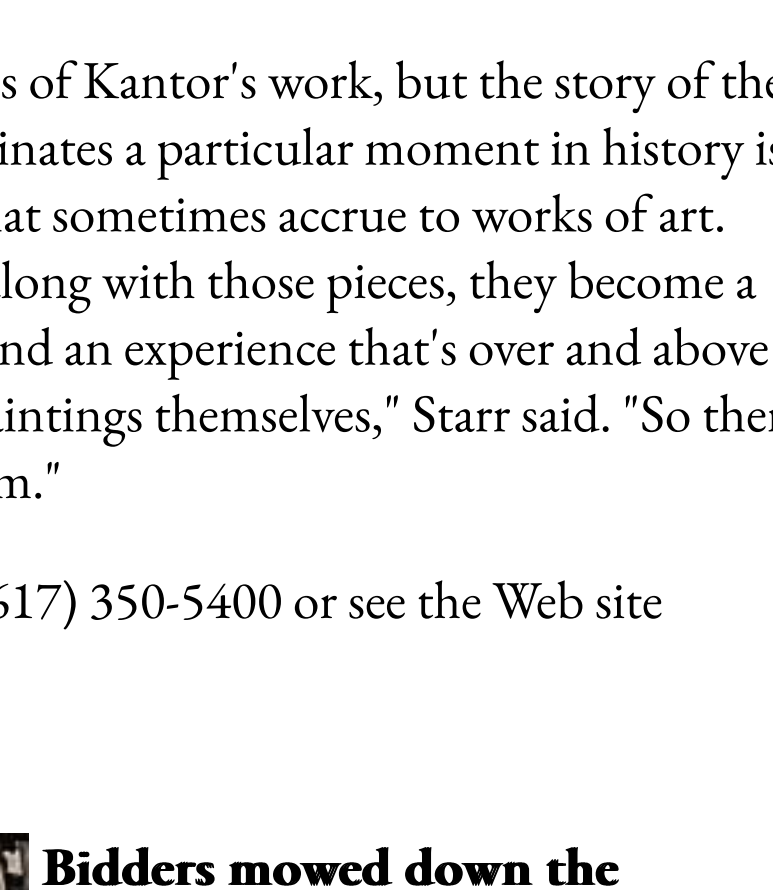
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