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Two Phone Bidders Tango for Sunlight in the Studio

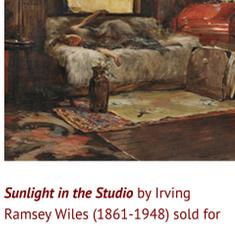
by Jeanne Schinto



Skinner, Inc., Boston, Massachusetts

Photos courtesy Skinner

Like the auction houses I'm assigned to write about, I too look for the super high-end piece. Whenever I open a catalog, I am hoping to see something that will provide me with a headline. It's not fair to the rest of the art being offered, worthy though it may be, but that's the reality of the situation. By coincidence, at Skinner's all-day two-session sale of paintings, sculpture, prints, and photographs on January 23 in Boston, the three works with the highest estimates and the biggest potential for good newspaper copy were oil on canvas portraits of women. Again it's not fair, but a sultry, bare-limbed odalisque sleeping (or perhaps passed out) on a couch in an artist's studio, painted by American Impressionist Irving Ramsey Wiles, was much preferred by bidders over images of staid, upright female subjects by Frank Weston Benson and John Singleton Copley.



Sunlight in the Studio by Irving Ramsey Wiles (1861-1948) sold for \$219,000 (est. \$100,000/150,000). The signed and dated ("1888") oil on canvas measures 18 1/8" x 22 3/16" without its period frame. Sold along with this lot was a group of books and ephemera about World's Columbian Exposition (1893), where this painting had been exhibited.



Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986), Banyan Tree with Palms, Bermuda, unsigned, titled, and dated ("...1934"), 21 3/4" x 14 3/4" (sheet size), graphite on paper, \$237,000 (est. \$40,000/60,000).



Alfred Stieglitz, The Steerage, 12 3/4" x 10" photogravure on vellum printed in 1915, \$27,060 (est. \$12,000/18,000).



Attributed to Adriaen Isenbrant (Flemish, 1490-1551), Madonna and Child in an Interior sold on the phone for \$92,250 (est. \$25,000/35,000). The unsigned 6 3/4" x 7" oil on panel came to the sale from a private Maine collection. "All of the things that did really well were super-fresh to the market," said Robin Starr.



Big Island of Hawaii by David Howard Hitchcock (1861-1943) fetched \$30,750 (est. \$15,000/20,000). The 14 1/4" x 20 1/4" oil on canvas was signed and inscribed "D. HOWARD HITCHCOCK H.I."

Wiles titled his 1888 work *Sunlight in the Studio*. That's the true theme of the scene in which window light filtered through a shade does interesting things, not only to the reclining model but to an Oriental rug, a slant-front desk, metal lamp, artist's bulging portfolio of drawings, glass decanter (half filled with a gold liquid the model may have drunk), and other appointments in the bohemian interior. Estimated at \$100,000/150,000, the painting, fresh from private hands, inspired two phone bidders to tango, one of whom eventually claimed the piece for \$219,000 (including buyer's premium). No such luck for Benson's *Figure in White*, the subject of which may have been the artist's sister, and for Copley's portrait of Rebecca Dudley Gerrish, a Nova Scotia merchant's wife. Estimated at \$350,000/550,000 and \$150,000/250,000, respectively, they were the evening's designated wallflowers. Neither sold.

Auction-goers, at least those in seek of entertainment value alone, enjoy surprises. These days especially, when so much happens on the phone and Internet rather than in the room, an unanticipated bidding war keeps an audience awake. This sale had a few of those moments. On expectations of \$40,000/60,000, a drawing by Georgia O'Keeffe soared to \$237,000, making it the top lot of both the afternoon and evening sessions. The unsigned graphite on paper was titled *Banyan Tree with Palms, Bermuda* and dated 1934, a time during which O'Keeffe stayed on the island to rest and recuperate after a nervous breakdown and seven-week hospital stay in the previous year. This drawing was not a quintessential O'Keeffe. She did only 14 drawings in Bermuda, but the respite was an important one for her creative development. While there, she expressed in correspondence her early thoughts about moving to New Mexico, where arguably her most important work was done.

Although not a signature O'Keeffe, the drawing was what might be considered an affordable example. "Not everyone can spend \$44.4 million," said Robin S.R. Starr, head of Skinner's art department. It was a reference to a floral painting by O'Keeffe that sold for that price at Sotheby's in New York City on November 20, 2014, setting a new record for an artwork by a female artist. So for those who can hope to have an O'Keeffe priced at more modest levels, this drawing was an opportunity to compete for one. Of course, they did have competition from another collector category, Starr added. "People who collect 'Bermuda' are a very strong and tenacious group," she said without divulging anything about the ultimate buyer.

The sale had two catalogs, one for prints and photographs, the other for paintings and sculpture. Starr made an interesting choice for the latter's cover. It was *Tropical Splendor* by Mario Carreño (Cuban, 1913-1999). The oil on canvas was signed and dated 1950. By that time, the Havana-born Carreño no longer lived in Cuba but returned frequently until the revolution, after which he was considered a counterrevolutionary for being a modern artist. He spent some time in New York City, but after a visit to Chile in the invitation of Pablo Neruda in 1948, he moved there permanently. For the painting offered at this sale Carreño used a palette of earth tones to demarcate geometric shapes of color reminiscent of Mondrian. Into those brown and green and gold squares and rectangles he put symbols of his lost island homeland: palm trees, elements of Spanish-influenced architecture, fruit in a bowl, and silhouettes of two stylized women, one balancing a bowl on her head. Estimated at \$30,000/50,000, the painting made \$38,130.

The painting was consigned by a "sometime dealer, sometime collector," who had it hanging on his wall for some time, said Starr. He had gotten it from a Massachusetts estate. Since Skinner opened a satellite office in Coral Gables, Florida, the auction house has been seeing more Latin American items. The fact that this painting did not come from there but came from "a local" was ironic, observed Starr.

The cover of the prints and photographs catalog was a 1984 Robert Motherwell print, *On the Wing*, which appeared not to sell at the auction but which is listed in March as sold for \$4797 (est. \$5000/7000). Among the offerings of multiples that bidders liked especially well were prints by Paul Cadmus, Albrecht Dürer, Sol LeWitt, Jean-François Millet, James Abbott McNeill Whistler, Mary Cassatt, Andy Warhol, and Zao Wou-Ki; ceramics decorated by Pablo Picasso; and Alfred Stieglitz's famous photograph of immigrants arriving in the United States.

Stieglitz made *The Steerage* in 1907; the photogravure on vellum that sold at this sale was printed in 1915. It had once been in the collection of artist and collector Mina Boehm Metzger. A buyer on the phone paid \$27,060 for it—better than twice the low estimate—making it the top lot of that section of the sale.

Only later did I realize that the Stieglitz photogravure was an excellent counterpoint to the top lot of the other part of the sale, the O'Keeffe drawing. Stieglitz met O'Keeffe in 1917 and became obsessed with her. He married her, his model and muse, in 1924, the same year he divorced his first wife. It was also the year in which O'Keeffe painted her first giant flower. The relationship wasn't a bed of roses or any other flora, however. Although Stieglitz is credited with helping O'Keeffe realize her talent and with championing her work in the marketplace initially, his affair with Dorothy Norman is considered the reason for the nervous breakdown O'Keeffe suffered prior to her time in Bermuda. As noted above, that was an important period in O'Keeffe's creative life, but she probably could have done without the grief that prompted it in the first place.

After the sale, I tried to get some information about what would happen next to the portrait by Frank Weston Benson. I was particularly interested in its fate because the painting of a demure woman in white arranging flowers in a small Chinese export vase was the property of the Salem Public Library in Salem, Massachusetts. Benson, a native son of the city, had been a library trustee from 1912 until his death in 1951. The children of the artist had donated the painting to the library in 1957. The painting had been there all these years, but the library had decided to deaccession it because security issues made displaying it impossible.

The potential sale had received local media attention before the auction. Afterward, the *Salem News* reported that the painting had been sold. When I phoned the paper to tell them this was in error, managing editor Helen Gifford said that her reporter, as he listened to the live audio feed on the Internet, believed that the painting had been sold at \$300,000. When I told Gifford about reserves and buy-ins, she admitted her staff was not knowledgeable about the ways of auctions. Within a couple of hours, the paper had confirmed the no-sale and corrected its story in its online version. The correction said, "It is now up to the owner, the Salem Public Library, to determine whether to seek a private buyer or try to auction it again." My own phone call to Nancy Tracy, director of the library, was not returned.

Starr, for her part, said, "We were obviously disappointed that it didn't sell, but given where it came from, it needed to be protected [with a reserve]." Aside from that buy-in and the Copley, she and the auction house were very pleased with the sale's results overall.

For more information, contact Skinner by phone at (617) 350-5400 or see the website (www.skinnerinc.com).

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