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April 28th, 2009 White and Woodruff Sell Best at African-American Art Sale

by Jeanne Schinto

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Swann Galleries, New York City

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Photos courtesy Swann

Bidders chose carefully at Swann's African-American fine art sale in New York City on February 17, spending \$1,268,160 on 109 lots, while leaving behind 60 others. After Swann had the world's first auction dedicated exclusively to this specialty in February 2007, its heady results were reported in these pages. This time, restraint was the watchword. Participants wanted the best, most emblematic examples of an artist's work or they wanted a bargain. The sky did not appear to be anybody's limit. Only two dozen lots went over estimates. The sale as a whole was estimated at \$2,011,200/2,901,800.

One of the sale's successes was *Move On Up a Little Higher*, a 1961 drawing in charcoal and crayon by Charles White. Estimated at \$200,000/250,000, the large (39½" x 47½") work on illustration board sold for \$228,000 (includes buyer's premium).

"Despite the uncertainty of the art market in today's economy," Swann department director Nigel Freeman said, the auction house was "thrilled" to sell its cover lot for the biggest price of the day to "an important museum."

The well-known image shows a seated African-American woman with her arms raised heavenward. It has been used to illustrate a number of books on the artist and on African-American culture in general. The title refers to the gospel song written by W. Herbert Brewster and recorded in 1948 by a then little-known gospel singer, Mahalia Jackson. Its theme is anticipation of a hard life's heavenly reward. The recording went on to sell millions of copies, making Jackson an international star by the time she sang at John F. Kennedy's inaugural ball in the same year that White drew this image.

Cinque Exhorts His Captives by Hale Woodruff (1900-1980) sold for \$156,000 (est. \$75,000/100,000). Not only did it bring a new price record for Woodruff, it is the fourth consecutive record set for him by Swann in the last four years.

The 1973 oil on canvas was commissioned from the artist by Robert H. Jordan and Millicent Dobbs Jordan of Atlanta, Georgia, then passed down to its consignors. As its title suggests, its theme is the slave revolt aboard the slave ship *Amistad*. In 1939 Woodruff created a series of "Amistad Murals" for Talladega College in Talladega, Alabama. The record-breaking work is a revisiting of that series.

At Swann's African-American fine art sale on October 7, 2008, an artist's auction record was set by a hexagonal-shaped painting by Alvin D. Loving Jr. The 1967-69 work sold for \$156,000 to the Sheldon Museum of Art on the campus of the University of Nebraska in Lincoln. This time, Loving's *Cube 27*, a 1970 hexagonal acrylic on canvas, sold to another institution for \$84,000 (est. \$60,000/90,000).

At that same sale last fall, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston bought *The Juggler #1* by Hughie Lee-Smith for \$90,000. This time an earlier work by Lee-Smith, untitled (*Rooftop View*), sold to a dealer for \$102,000 (est. \$50,000/75,000). The 1957 oil on masonite features a solitary figure in an urban landscape—a young African-American man standing on a brick rooftop in sunlight sharply divided by shadows. It is the artist's most recognizable subject. The MFA's purchase was a 1964 oil on canvas showing three figures standing on a concrete pier bathed in surrealistic light.

Two late 19th-century works in oil on canvas by Henry Ossawa Tanner were offered at the opening of this chronologically organized sale that ended with contemporary artworks. Both Tanners came from a private collection in Chevy Chase, Maryland, and both were sold to collectors. *The Annunciation to the Shepherds* fetched \$66,000 (est. \$60,000/90,000); *Adoration of the Golden Calf* made \$72,000 (est. \$40,000/ 60,000). While these Biblical theme paintings do have their visionary elements (angels, ethereal light), they also have qualities based on Tanner's direct observations of the Holy Land landscape.

A 19th-century oil on canvas by Tanner's near-contemporary James Bolivar Needham, *A Morning with the Yachts & Houseboats*, sold for a respectable \$10,800 (est. \$12,000/18,000). Although below estimate, the price was significant for being this artist's first recorded auction record. The scene is Chicago's lakeside docks, where Needham "worked quietly" throughout his life, said Freeman. In 1998 Robert Henry Adams Fine Art, Chicago, mounted the first exhibit of works by this neglected artist, who reportedly exhibited only once during his lifetime. He died in 1931 while trying to save his paintings when his studio caught fire.

That scarce Needham work went to yet another collector. In fact, besides the Hughie Lee-Smith, only one other lot in the top 20 sold to a dealer. The trade does seem to be in a holding pattern, and that continuing trend clearly had its impact on this sale's results.

The other major purchase by a dealer was Norman Lewis's 1949 oil on canvas *Fireflower*. An Abstract Expressionist work in shades of red, purple, and black, it sold for \$28,800 (est. \$30,000/50,000). Another Norman Lewis work, a double-sided watercolor from his earlier, representational period, was passed (est. \$25,000/35,000).

Additional lots rejected by bidders included a Charles White work in tempera on paper that Swann's research shows was the first significant painting by the artist ever brought to auction. Titled *Hope Imprisoned*, it features an African-American woman bereft, head in hand. Behind her, a row of sharply pointed black fence posts suggests symbolic imprisonment. Closely related to other White works of the period in public and private collections, the 1946 image was estimated at \$150,000/200,000, reflecting a reserve that apparently was not what anybody had in mind for this picture.

Bidders also were unwilling to extend themselves for a circa 1968 oil on canvas by Hale Woodruff, *Celestial Gate*. A late addition to the artist's series that incorporates African symbols (Ashanti gold weights, the doors of Dogon chiefs' dwellings), it was estimated at \$60,000/ 90,000 but remained unsold. Woodruff's distinctively horizontal (10" x 34½") oil on plywood panel from a private Ohio collection did not sell either. The transitional circa 1950 untitled work (*Abstracted Landscape*), featuring dark lines that resemble hieroglyphics and light-colored shapes that resemble clouds, was estimated at \$30,000/50,000.

Among the Hughie Lee-Smith works that bidders let pass were two 1951 portraits of sweet pig-tailed African-American girls. From a private Detroit collection, the oil on masonite artworks were estimated at \$18,000/22,000 and \$15,000/20,000. Bidders also nixed two of the artist's light, airy watercolors from the mid-1990's, each projected to bring \$12,000/18,000.

The four unsold Lee-Smith examples are cheerier paintings than his urban dreamscapes. It didn't matter. They aren't what the artist is best known for. Besides, the more unsettling ones so much better fit our current national mood.

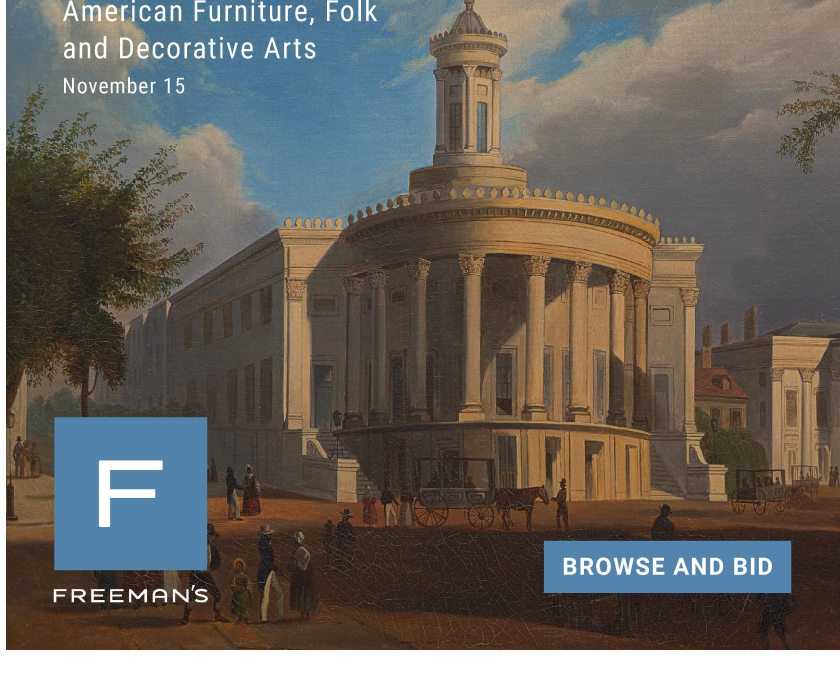
In addition to the artist's record for Woodruff, Swann reported that others were set for Bernard Casey (\$1320), Louis Delsarte (\$3120), Marie Calloway Johnson (\$1560), and John Outterbridge (\$2880).

After the sale Swann reported that some post-auction deals were made. The most significant was Elizabeth Catlett's *Black Head*, a 1973-74 black-marble sculpture from the Jule and Joanne P. Glazer collection. Estimated at \$75,000/100,000, it sold for \$63,600.

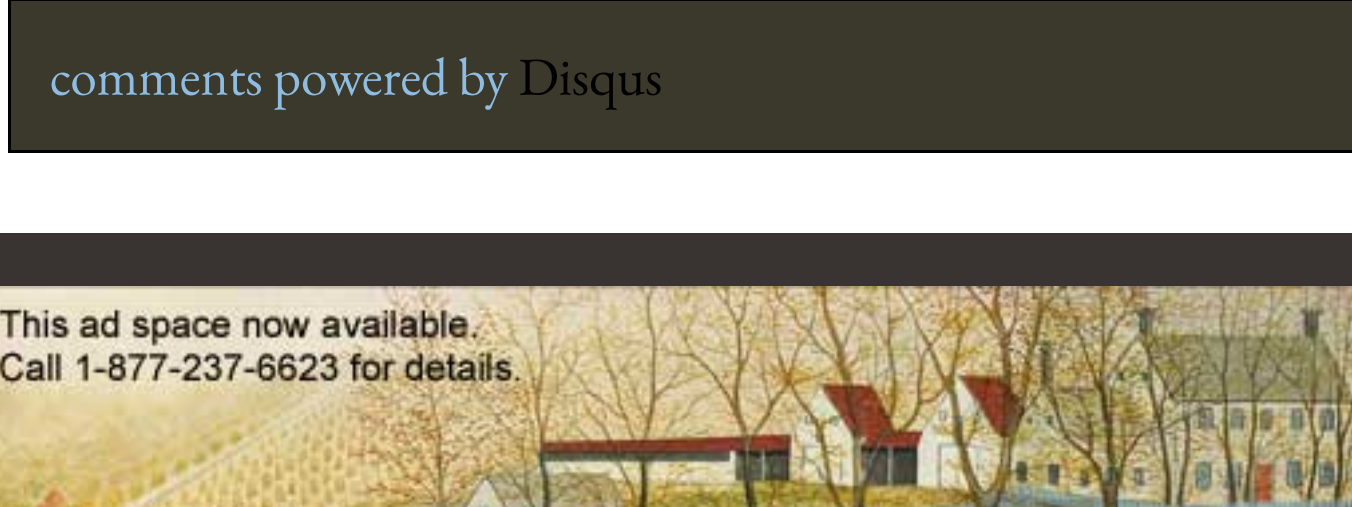
"In a tight economy, it's the images that are scarce—the unique pieces, of course—that are going to be the ones that people can't let go," said Swann's Freeman.

Swann's next African-American art sale is scheduled for the fall. For more information, phone (212) 254-4710, ext. 33 or e-mail nfreeman@swanngalleries.com; Web site (www.swanngalleries.com).

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***Home to Louis and Duke*, a 26½" x 17½" offset color lithograph by Romare Bearden (1911-1988), sold for \$6480 (est. \$2000/3000). The circa 1975 print is unnumbered and most likely a proof. Cataloged by Swann as "very scarce," it is believed to be one of only two known impressions of this image auctioned in the last 20 years.**



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