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You're a Good Man, Frank Stanton: Skinner Sells Snoopy

by Jeanne Schinto



Skinner, Inc., Boston, Massachusetts

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A reception for friends of animals was the prelude to Skinner's March 7 auction of American and European paintings and prints at its Boston gallery. The Frank Stanton collection of *Peanuts* artwork by Charles Schulz prompted it. Proceeds from the 19 lots, consigned by the estate of Frank Stanton, were earmarked for the Animal Rescue League of Boston and the New England Wildlife Center of South Weymouth, Massachusetts. Skinner's hopes were high for the original cartoons and other items, the material's official cumulative high estimate of \$88,900 notwithstanding. The happiness-producing results were \$156,156. (Prices include the buyer's premium.)

The party on the night before the auction was heavily themed. Dog water bowls were the receptacles of choice for the mixed nuts at the bar. Waiters passed hot hors d'oeuvres with names like Chihuahua quesadillas. Dog-bone-shaped cookies were the dessert. But the best part of the evening was the chance to see animals that the organizations have sheltered.

There were puppies, appropriately named Linus and Snoopy; a barred owl whose injured wing had been successfully amputated; and a giant tortoise that looked as inert as a sculpture-until given some flower garnishes from an hors d'oeuvres tray. Into his reptilian mouth fuchsia-colored blossoms disappeared.

"You're a good man, Frank Stanton," Skinner's art department head Colleene Fesko said in remarks to the crowd, paraphrasing one of the Schulz comic strip's signature lines.

Stanton (1908-2006), who throughout his life supported nonprofit organizations committed to animal welfare, was a central figure in the development of television in the United States. President of CBS from 1946 to 1971, he initiated, among so many other things, the first televised U.S. presidential debates—Nixon v. Kennedy. In the 1950's he oversaw the development of the network's most famous symbol, the CBS logo known as the Eye, designed by William Golden. In the next decade he was chiefly responsible for shepherding into existence CBS's headquarters at Sixth Avenue and 52nd Street, the International Style Manhattan skyscraper known as Black Rock, whose architect was Eero Saarinen.

In 1965 Stanton convinced colleagues to air *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. A Schulz fan almost from the beginning, Stanton wrote to him as early as 1959 asking to buy a piece of art.

"Charles Schulz was not only a forever influence on cartooning, he crossed over into American fine art," Fesko said later that evening, "When we were cataloging these lots and looking at them closely, we realized just how good an artist he really was."

His originals can sell for \$20,000 or \$30,000, sometimes well beyond, depending on subject matter, age, and condition. The top Schulz lot at this sale, going at \$35,550, was a Sunday strip from 1975, showing Charlie Brown and Snoopy at odds over watching TV. Snoopy is shown asleep atop the set, his nose hanging down over the picture screen. "How can I see anything with your stupid head in the way?" Charlie asks and stalks off, whereupon Snoopy takes his master's seat, front and center, on the floor.

Going at \$30,810 was another Sunday strip from 1982, featuring Snoopy, Lucy, a jump rope, and an errant dog bowl. It's a little complicated to relate in words, so we'll show it.

Four daily strips from 1959 to 1964 brought good prices: \$16,590, \$17,775, \$21,330, and \$22,515, respectively. The top one, from 1959, shows Snoopy in the final frame leaning against Charlie Brown and thinking, "Thank goodness for people." The second highest-priced example from this group had a baseball theme, with Snoopy catching a ball in his mouth ("Klop!"). "I wonder why he wears a glove," Schroeder muses.

Like both Sunday strips, three of the four dailies were signed and inscribed to Stanton. All six were won by the same phone bidder, identified by Fesko as the Charles M. Schulz Museum and Research Center in Santa Rosa, California ([www.schulzmuseum.org](#)).

"Frank Stanton was a great friend of *Peanuts*," noted a statement issued by the museum, "and Mr. Schulz appreciated Mr. Stanton's and CBS's loyalty to the *Peanuts* TV show, which they hosted for thirty years or so. In view of this and the charitable intent of Mr. Stanton's gift, it seemed the right thing to do. Visitors to the Schulz Museum will now enjoy the original comic strips when they are displayed."

Then of course there was the rest of the auction, which began at noon with prints. Among its highlights was a gorgeous color woodcut by Gustave Baumann. *Spring - New Mexico* was in shades of pumpkin (for the adobe), robin's-egg blue (for the sky), and powder pink (for the tree blossoms). The circa 1920 image was signed, numbered, and stamped with Baumann's hand-in-heart chop and sold for \$13,035.

For the same price, someone bought an item of much more recent vintage, *Still Life* by Roy Lichtenstein. The color screenprint from his *Geldzahler Portfolio* was signed, numbered, and dated "PP 7/8 Roy Lichtenstein '97."

Other name-brand prints performed as expected. A color lithograph by Marc Chagall, *L'accordoniste*, from Chagall Par Jacques Lassaigne, brought \$11,257.50. *Der Seiltanzer* by Paul Klee, his famous red and black lithograph of the tightrope walker, brought \$28,400. (Skinner sold another copy of it in March 2007 for \$31,725.) Henri Matisse's *La Pompadour*, a lithograph on chine-collé of a woman's head, made \$16,950. A James Abbott McNeill Whistler drypoint and etching, *Nocturne: Palaces*, brought \$20,145.

On January 1, Skinner introduced a new buyer's premium: 18.5% on the first \$200,000; 10% thereafter. That means \$850 on the hammer is now the first increment that brings a bidder just over the \$1000 mark, to \$1007.25.

At this sale, that money bought, among other prints, an etching and aquatint by caricaturist Albert Hirschfeld, *My Fair Lady - Julie Andrews and Rex Harrison and Cast*. It also bought a 1974 photograph by David Hockney, *Yves-Marie Asleep*, from *Twenty Photographic Pictures*.

At that level or a little higher, plenty of other print material could be had. There were, for example, a dozen Frank Benson etchings and drypoints, of which the highest price was \$1896; the lowest was \$355.50. There were two color woodcuts of dreamy water scenes by Arthur Wesley Dow from the artist's estate that sold for \$1540.50 and \$2844. There were 19 Rockwell Kent lithographs and wood engravings, including *Deep Water*, *Oarsman*, and *Diver*, which made \$3851.25, \$2133, and \$2370, respectively.

It was harder to get lucky with a painting, but opportunities did exist, especially if the work was unsigned. A nice 19th-century British school oil on board portrait of a field spaniel sold for \$1422. An oil on canvas of a lively New York street parade, cataloged as 20th-century Eastern European school, fetched \$2488.50. A still life attributed to Raphaele Peale brought \$4147.50. Even if it's "after" Peale, that's a more than decent price for an oil on canvas of the sort.

The sale as a whole grossed \$2,474,102 on a total of 676 lots (80% of what was offered). It also set six new auction records, according to Skinner. The price paid for *A Walk Through the Fields* by American Impressionist Philip Leslie Hale was one of the record-setters.

The top lot of the evening, the Hale was exhibited at Vose Galleries in Boston in 1966. A Vose label was affixed to its reverse, and a copy of the exhibition catalog accompanied the lot. The painting's palette is almost completely dazzling yellows. Through a marshy field of gold a woman in a long dress walks carrying a parasol over her head, looking a little like a large, exquisite, human flower.

Hale, the son of prominent Bostonian Edward Everett Hale, grandson of Nathan Hale, and husband of artist Lilian Westcott Hale (his former student), often worked in coastal Matunuck, Rhode Island. This canvas was signed, dated, and inscribed "Philip Hale, Rhode Island. 95." Estimated at \$30,000/50,000, it sold for \$177,750.

The painting came from "a wonderful private collection formerly of New England," said Fesko. The winning phone bidder was a member of the New York trade.

The second record-setter of the evening was of circus performers by 20th-century American artist Jacques Zucker (1900-1981). The oil on canvas brought \$11,850. The previous record had been set just days earlier, on February 27, when someone paid \$3750 for Zucker's *Figures on a Desolate Alley* at Doyle in New York City.

Third was Luis Marti Gras's oil on canvas of a reclining nude, signed and dated "L Martigras 1933," which brought \$10,072.50. There are no previous records listed for the Spaniard on Artfact ([www.artfact.com](#)), so it's assumed it was a record-setter by default.

Fourth was Miklos Suba's oil on masonite *Smith Street*, a Charles Sheeler-esque scene of geometrical industrial architecture in a Brooklyn, New York, neighborhood. Skinner estimated it at a mere \$300/500. After all, the last Suba that it sold on November 22, 1991, brought only \$385. According to Artfact, Freeman's of Philadelphia sold another on October 5, 2007, for \$4000. But that was then, and this is now. The 1930 Suba at this Skinner sale had eight Internet bidders chasing it to \$8500, after which the phones took over. The winner, at \$27,255, was a New York dealer.

The fifth and sixth records of the evening were set by large abstract works in oil on canvas from the 1950's. Both were deaccessioned by the Chrysler Museum of Art in Norfolk, Virginia, to benefit its acquisitions fund.

The bidding for Tetsuo Ochikubo's *Cosmos* started out modestly on the Internet at \$500, half the low estimate. Sixty-eight bids later, the composition of fuzzy geometric shapes sold to a phone bidder for \$34,365.

William Douglas McGee's *Warrior*, a poor man's Franz Kline, set the new high-water mark for that artist at \$7702.50.

Other high points of the evening session came when a portrait of a Pueblo Indian by Ernest Martin Hennings was sold for \$94,800, and an Italian coast view by Rubens Santoro brought \$112,575. The most imposing artwork in the upstairs gallery, a nearly life-size banquet scene, attributed to 17th-century Flemish artist Jan Cossiers, struggled a bit but finally sold to an Internet bidder within estimate for \$20,825.

There were some genuine disappointments at this sale. An Op Art work in acrylic on canvas from the 1980's, *Korlat* by French artist Victor Vasarely, was supposed to have been a barnburner. Instead it reached only \$70,000, courtesy of an Internet bidder, \$10,000 below the low estimate and not enough to meet the reserve.

Two other significant buy-ins were the catalog's cover lot, *Fallen Tree* by Charles Burchfield (est. \$30,000/50,000), and a British farm scene in winter by John Frederick Herring Sr. (est. \$150,000/250,000).

In the past few months, I've been collecting dire news clippings about what's in store for the art market. Sluggish sales, hesitant clients, and canceled deals are the frequent predictions. When asked in an e-mail for her thoughts on the seemingly unavoidable downturn, Fesko wrote this reply: "I think 'corrections' in the market are inevitable and probably even appropriate, but I also believe that because the market has become so global, fuelled by huge new buying populations and economies eager to enjoy the fruits of their wealth, the demand for the deluxe will continue for quite some time."

Indeed, Skinner has actually increased the size of its art department recently, adding Kathy Wong as its third assistant, after Robin S.R. Starr and Laura Conover. Wong's specialty is a new one for Skinner, contemporary art.

Skinner also wisely continues to court new customers, as it did with its reception for the animals and their friends. Specifically for that event, the marketing department printed up a pamphlet understandable even to the greenest would-be auction-goer, "How to Buy at Auction." We've probably all fielded the one about how to buy a ticket to an auction. As Skinner's primer stresses, "There is no charge to attend, and everyone is welcome."

For more information, contact Skinner in Boston at (617) 350-5400; in Bolton at (978) 779-6241; or visit ([www.skinnerinc.com](#)).

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