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Bidders Pounce on Black Panthers at Best African Americana Sale

by Jeanne Schinto

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Swann Galleries, New York City

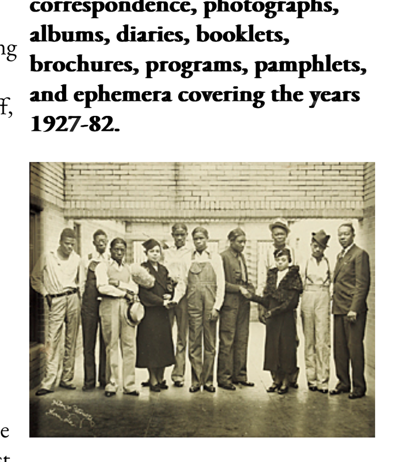
by Jeanne Schinto

Photos courtesy Swann

"This is unquestionably the most successful sale of African Americana we have had," said Swann's African-Americana expert Wyatt H. Day after his department's 15th annual auction on March 10 in Manhattan. Estimated at $721,700/1,049,900, the sale fetched a total of $927,226 (including buyers' premiums).

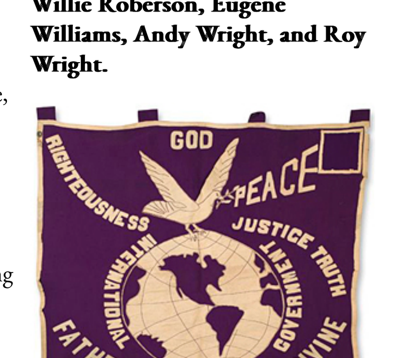
The top lot was an archive of published and unpublished writings of Charles Harris Wesley (1891-1987), historian, author, and educator. An institution paid $43,200 (est. $30,000/40,000) for the approximately 35 cartons of correspondence, photographs, albums, diaries, booklets, brochures, programs, pamphlets, and ephemera covering the years 1927-82.

Day cited two reasons for its stellar results. One was quality of the material. "It's not every year that, either through circumstance or by my annoying people, calling them, and badgering them to give me stuff, I can put together this kind of material, this kind of balanced sale," he said. "I had good material in just about every category"—i.e., slavery and abolition, civil rights, politics, music, military, sports, film, education, and business.



A group photograph of the Scottsboro Boys with attorneys Juanita E. Jackson of the National NAACP and Laura Kellum of the Birmingham NAACP sold to an institution for $12,000 (est. $1500/2500). The 7½" x 9 3/8" silver print was taken by a Crisis Magazine photographer and appeared in the January 1937 issue. According to the catalog, Jackson was the first African-American woman to pass the bar in the state of Maryland. The "Boys" were Clarence Norris, Charlie Weems, Haywood Patterson, Olen Montgomery, Ozie Powell, Willie Roberson, Eugene Williams, Andy Wright, and Roy Wright.

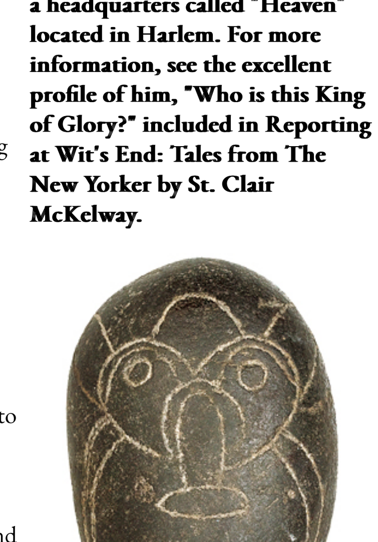
The other reason was the number of "very knowledgeable and aggressive bidders in almost every area," several of whom represented institutions. Six of the top 20 lots went to public collections. Those places were unidentified in Swann's press release, but Day said the Smithsonian Institution always buys for the National Museum of African American History and Culture, whose building is scheduled for groundbreaking in 2012 and completion in 2015. In addition, dealer William S. Reese of New Haven, Connecticut, who bought 70 lots for both public and private collections, said Yale University was among the institutions that he had been bidding for by phone.



An institution paid $36,000 (est. $750/1000) for a 54" x 53" purple and white handmade banner celebrating Father Divine (1876-1965). Born George Baker, the controversial evangelist and cult leader, who called himself "Dean of the Universe" as well as "God Almighty," operated out of a headquarters called "Heaven" located in Harlem. For more information, see the excellent profile of him, "Who is this King of Glory?" included in Reporting at Wit's End: Tales from The New Yorker by St. Clair McKelway.

To virtually everyone's surprise, the lots that more consistently pumped up the volume than any other were from the 20th century. Many bidders paid genuinely phenomenal prices. In perhaps the most astonishing moment, the iconic Huey Newton poster of 1968—showing the Black Panther Party's minister of defense wearing a beret and sitting in a fan-back wicker chair, a spear in one hand, rifle in the other—sold to a collector for $19,200 (est. $1500/2500). Swann said the price paid for this staple of every head shop of the period was a record.

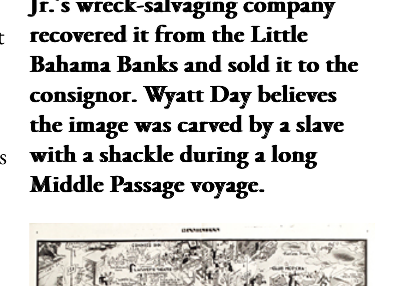
Many other items pertaining to the era's Black radicalism achieved prices that defied belief. A poster by Rupert Garcia—captioned "DOWN with the WHITENESS" and recently parodied by Shepard Fairey—sold for $18,000 (est. $400/ 600). Another, depicting Fred Hampton, deputy chairman of the Panthers' Illinois chapter who was killed by Chicago police in 1969, brought $9600 (est. $800/1200). A third, showing Panther chairman Bobby Seale and headlined "KIDNAPPED"—a reference to his arrest as one of the original "Chicago Eight"—sold for $7200 (est. $1000/1500). An original color print designed and signed by Emory Douglas, the Panthers' minister of culture, sold for $8400 (est. $1500/2500). Just to name a few.



A collector paid $24,000 (est. $8000/12,000) for this carved ballast stone recovered in 1992 from the wreck of a 16th-century English slave ship. It is an ovoid, approximately 8¾" x 5½", weighing 15 pounds, and bears the image of an African elephant that strongly resembles the elephant masks of the Guro people of West Africa (now the Ivory Coast). Captain James Herbert "Herbo" Humphreys Jr.'s wreck-salvaging company recovered it from the Little Bahama Banks and sold it to the consignor. Wyatt Day believes the image was carved by a slave with a shackle during a long Middle Passage voyage.

"I was stunned by what something like the Huey Newton poster went for," said Bill Reese. "What this sale shows is the market's strength in modern times, from the civil rights movement onward."

Day himself called the 20th-century results "amazing." Then again, he has been "beating the drum for modern stuff, advising people" to collect it for years now. He cited a lecture on collecting trends that he gave at Wayne State University in Detroit a decade ago. "I said, 'Collect civil rights material, Black radicals, Panthers.' That's because it's serious history and will be hard to get at some point. And it's been going up steadily, but this year it took a quantum leap."

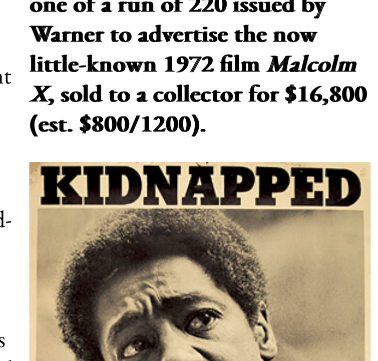


"A Night-Club Map of Harlem" by E. Simms Campbell (1906-1971), the first African-American cartoonist to be published in nationally distributed slick magazines, sold to a dealer for $16,800 (est. $600/800). This was the 16" x 23" centerfold of *Manhattan Magazine*'s Volume 1, No. 1 for January 18, 1933. Reproduced in *Esquire* nine months later, it shows the Savoy Ballroom, the Cotton Club, and many of the other famous places of the Prohibition period.

This market development, he added, is gratifying but simultaneously causes him concern. "I have to find this material every year." It's never easy. "Or else I will have people calling me with the material and expecting to see a repeat of what they saw in this sale." Obviously, there's no guarantee, especially if baby boomers who learn of these prices go searching for their rolled-up poster stashes of yore. If followed by a flooded market, this sale may be chalked up as an anomaly.

A 41" x 26¾" full-sheet poster, one of a run of 220 issued by Warner to advertise the now little-known 1972 film *Malcolm X*, sold to a collector for $16,800 (est. $800/1200).

Unlike the posters, other wildly successful 20th-century lots were unique. They included a purple and white handmade banner honoring the highly controversial cult leader Father Divine (born as George Baker, 1876-1965). Made of heavy felt and decorated with an image of a dove on top of the world as well as the words Father Divine, God, Righteousness, Justice, Peace, and Truth, the banner sold to an institution for $36,000 (est. $750/1000).



A collector paid $7200 (est. $1000/1500) for a 28½" x 22½" poster of Bobby Seale, chairman of the Black Panther Party, printed circa 1970 in Oakland, California. Swann said the price was a record.

Day said the banner came from a "dealer/collector" who "had acquired a whole bunch of Father Divine material years back. He has a great eye, but he had no clue [the price] would get up there. I had no clue either. Who could have thought it would go where it went?"

A collector paid another huge price of $31,200 (est. $7000/10,000) for an original pen-and-ink portrait of Marcus Garvey by Robert Kastor on which Garvey wrote this statement: "The difference between men is that some, during a lifetime find their stars-their purpose, their calling. And by preparation, lift themselves to the heights of success. Others fail because they do not know themselves, cannot find their stars and thus drift out of the way of time and opportunity. As of individuals, so of races. Other races have found their stars for centuries; only recently has the Negro found his, and he is now about to demonstrate to the world his fitness as a man."

The portrait is from a portfolio of famous authors by Kastor, all inscribed. Thirty-two of the portraits, including this one, were sold at Sotheby's on June 17, 2010, at the third Copley Library sale. The Garvey sold there for $1250 to a dealer who reportedly doubled his money selling it to the person who consigned it to Swann. The profit, nothing short of a bonanza, is proof that putting something in the "right" sale can achieve extraordinary results.

These sales invariably offer great archives. Last year's James A. Porter archives, we can report now, went to Emory University in Atlanta. This time, the archives of scholar, educator, and author Charles Harris Wesley (1891-1987) was sold to another, currently unidentified, institution for $43,200 (est. $30,000/40,000). Among Wesley's many accomplishments was his development, with his friend Carter G. Woodson (1875-1950), of African-American studies, once a controversial academic discipline. Two years ago, Swann sold an archive of correspondence between Wesley and Woodson for $21,600 to a dealer probably acting as agent for an institution.

All three archives came from the same source, Constance "Coni" Porter Uzelac, whose mother, Dorothy Porter Wesley (1905-1987), married Wesley after her first husband-Coni's father, James A. Porter-died. "So the three archives [Porter's, Wesley's, and the Woodson-Wesley correspondence] were all intertwined," said Day. "We [he and Coni] were unsuccessful at placing them together [privately], so we divided them and offered them the way we did."

At next year's African Americana sale at Swann, the fourth and final archive (of Dorothy) will be offered. An important figure in her own right, she was the librarian/curator who built the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University in Washington, D.C., into what is considered to be one of the largest and most comprehensive collections of African-American history in the world.

While undeniably successful, this 504-lot sale had a buy-in rate of 25%. Among unsold lots were several important slavery and abolition items. One was a first edition of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* that Douglass bound in 1848 in his North Star office in Rochester, New York. According to Day, only four other copies of that edition are known—two in private collections, one at the New-York Historical Society, and one recently in a dealer's catalog. Quoting Swann's bidding policy, Day said this could have opened—and sold—at half the low estimate of $25,000, but nobody was willing to go there.

"When you consider that a decent copy [of the same book] sells for nine or ten thousand dollars, why would you not pay half the low for a copy that you know Douglass held in his own hands?" a clearly miffed Day asked.

Another no-sale was a collection of 20 autographs of African-American politicians elected to Congress during Reconstruction (est. $20,000/30,000). "I don't understand it," said Day. "I really thought the Smithsonian should have bought it. It's not a private collector's thing. That took me by surprise."

More understandable to Day was the buying in of a "signed" copy of *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, A Bondswoman of Olden Time* (est. $20,000/30,000), published in Boston in 1875. "Signed" is in quotes because the abolitionist and women's rights activist was illiterate and didn't normally sign her name to anything. Yet marks in this copy were purportedly made by her, and the original owner wrote on the front free endpaper, "Bought of Sojourner Truth in a Caboose near Lansing, Mar. 5/78."

Still, Day said, "I can understand people's trepidations. There is no way to guarantee the signature. She couldn't write at all. It had a solid provenance, but...."

Bidders also declined three lots of original cartoons by Oliver Wendell Harrington (1912-1995), an African-American cartoonist who, according to Swann, had never before been at auction. "[Those works] caught people by surprise; people just didn't understand," Day said. Bidders were willing to buy a Harrington book for $360 (est. $500/750) and a Harrington portfolio for $210 (est. $300/ 400). Two of the rejected lots, by contrast, were estimated at $6000/8000; a third anticipated $8000/12,000.

Bill Reese had something to say about the sale's estimates in general. "A quarter of the sale being bought in says something to me about the nature of the estimates and the degree to which very, very strong estimates, and reserves are being used to push the prices. I think there is a lot of genuine competition, and to some degree, strong estimates are justified because of that. But I also feel that competition is very uneven, and the result is that you're seeing some estimates and reserves that are simply beyond where the market really is."

People, particularly those representing institutions, are often bidding against the reserves rather than each other, he said in sum. Then again, bidders are sometimes hotly competing against each other, he acknowledged. "This auction is doing what anybody selling material seeks to do. It's creating a very competitive atmosphere. And I have to congratulate Swann on that."

He noted, for example, *The Bull-Dogger* poster advertising a film by African-American rodeo cowboy Bill Pickett that sold to a collector for $12,000 (est. $5000/7000). Swann sold a similar one on February 26, 2009, for $6480 (est. $5000/ 7500). Reese said he bought one privately at a book fair, for much less, then sold it in the range of the Swann estimates.

"So [Swann] generated real competition that wasn't taking place in these other pretty public forums," Reese continued. "So it does show if you bring bidders together with a group of good stuff, they will go after each other and end up paying more money than they could have bought it for someplace else."

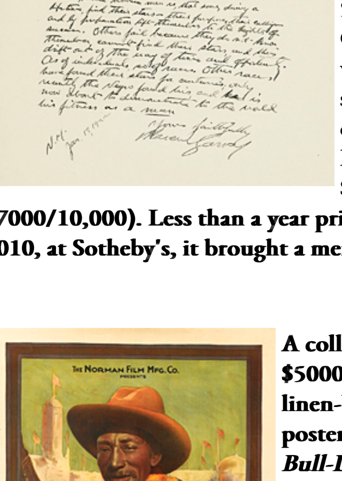
The sale is called officially "Printed & Manuscript Americana," but perhaps the most intriguing item in the sale—and the oldest—was a carved ballast stone recovered in 1992 from the wreck of a 16th-century English slave ship on the Little Bahama Banks by Captain James Herbert "Herbo" Humphreys Jr. On one side of the 15-pound ovoid stone is the carved face of an elephant that bears a strong resemblance to the elephant masks of the Guro people of West Africa (now the Ivory Coast). At the auction previews Day exhibited photos of those masks to help people make the comparison themselves.

Day believes a slave used the edge of "one of those Middle Passage shackles," made of wrought iron, to carve the design. "An English sailor would not have had any idea of how to carve this particular design," he declared. "It's a symbol of survival, endurance, and power. More than the lion in Africa, the elephant is a true king. It just blew me away." It apparently did the same to some bidders, one of whom took it at $24,000 (est. $8000/12,000).

Every year, academic libraries, including one at Harvard University, request catalogs from this sale for binding, showing they consider these marketing tools to be valuable references. "I think of myself as a historian," said Day, who writes long descriptions of many lots. "I try to put everything in context. It's fine to put something in a sale with just its nuts and bolts if it pertains to a written history that people are familiar with. What you're dealing with here is a history that's fifty percent crimes of omission, fifty percent crimes of commission—[a history that's] covered up, hazy, lost, forgotten, or whatever. And I guarantee that much of this material would otherwise be too dry. People would not understand it and would not buy it unless they could get excited by the descriptions."

One lot Day took particular care with this time was a homemade book of poetry, both original and copied. It was produced as a school project in 1941 by 15-year-old schoolgirl Lorine Robinson. Day remarked in the catalog on her sophisticated choice of poets, including T.S. Eliot. He went on to quote one of her poems: "My Plea is for the dark races/ to be treated like those with light faces/ To be able to go anywhere/ and not be restricted to a certain chair...." He then quoted her teacher, who gave her a B+ and wrote, "An interesting piece of work. I should like to discuss it with you." The lot description concluded with Day's editorial comment, "Interesting indeed!" The book sold for $2040 (est. $600/800).

For more information, contact Swann at (212) 254-4710 or see the Web site (www.swanngalleries.com).



"I had no doubt that the Marcus Garvey piece was going to go up, the reason being...that it is the most important Garvey piece I've ever seen," said Wyatt Day of Robert Kastor's 10½" x 9" pen-and-ink portrait of Garvey, on which Garvey wrote an eloquent statement of his philosophy of life and racial progress. It sold to a collector for $31,200 (est. $7000/10,000). Less than a year prior to this sale, on June 17, 2010, at Sotheby's, it brought a mere $1250.

A collector paid $12,000 (est. $5000/7000) for this one-sheet linen-backed 41" x 27" film poster of Bill Pickett in *The Bull-Dogger*, published in 1921. Pickett was an African-American Wild West star considered to be the inventor of bulldogging, which is the act of wrestling a steer to the ground by twisting its horns, then biting the tender part of its upper lip to subdue it.

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