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Early War Shirt Is Star of Tribal Arts Sale

by Jeanne Schinto

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Skinner, Inc., Boston, Massachusetts

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A spectacular 19th-century Native American war shirt from the Plains, made of two bighorn sheepskin hides, was the top lot at Skinner's latest American Indian and ethnographic art sale on Sunday, September 23 in Boston.

The auction house's expert, Douglas Diehl, said it had been collected in Minnesota during a railroad survey in the 1870's, not long after it was made, then descended in the family of Robert C. Towsley. Terry Winchell of Fighting Bear Antiques, Jackson Hole, Wyoming, said he had known about the existence of the shirt for several years but could never locate it. Then it turned up on the front cover of the Skinner catalog. After previewing it on the morning of the sale, Winchell bested at least five other contenders to take it for a client at $303,000 (includes buyer's premium). The underbidder was on the phone. Considering that final price, exactly $103,000 more than the high estimate, observers believe the underbidder must have been a collector or another dealer bidding for one.

Winchell praised, first of all, its remarkable condition. "It's very difficult to find a shirt of that vintage with such supple hides," he said. "It's untouched, original, and it's certainly as early as Skinner estimated it to be, possibly a little bit earlier." He also noted its artistry-the animals' dangling tails, legs, and dewclaws, retained as decorative elements; the two small lines of blue beads on each side of the quilled panels; and the blue paint on the chest, which, in his opinion, sets off the design of the whole shirt. "And then there are both the human hair drops as well as the ermine drops," added the dealer, who planned to fly back with it on a private plane. "It'll be on a padded hanger inside a suit bag."

The sale grossed an impressive total of $1,566,272. All but 8% of its 426 lots sold. One unsuccessful major lot was another Native American shirt, featured on the catalog's back cover and estimated at $60,000/80,000. Like the shirt that became the applauded lot of the day, this one was in excellent condition. Made of buckskin on the Northern Plains toward the end of the 19th century, it was collected in the early 20th century by author-photographer Walter McClintock (1870-1950) and pictured in his book, The Old North Trail: or, Life, Legends and Religion of the Blackfeet Indians (1910). Decorated with beadwork and fringes of ermine strips, it was described in a catalog addendum as having been made specifically for members of the tribe's Mad Dog Society.

Why didn't it find a buyer? It may have been hurt by comparison with the sale's star. It didn't have that same silky touch. It was just that much later. And, perhaps, there was the matter of its beadwork's color. "The 'pink' kept a lot of people, myself included, away from it," one dealer said. Pink? That's harsh. Lavender was what we'd call it and how the catalog described it. For his part, Terry Winchell said the color concerned him too. "But had I not been successful on the other shirt, I probably would have pursued it. It had wonderful provenance."

John Molloy of New York City and Santa Fe, New Mexico, said he thought the differing outcomes on the two shirts succintly reflected the general state of the market. He didn't mention the color. Instead, said the dealer, who had hoped for the sheepskin example but didn't even get his card up, "We've got the haves and the have-nots. Some material has it, some doesn't. People want that early, unrestored quality. Anything a little bit later, a little bit touristy, a little bit ordinary tends to linger. And the bottom material gets eaten up by the Internet. I also think it's a reflection of the bigger problems in the economy, particularly in the real-estate market."

On the subject of real estate, Molloy added that he was planning to close his two-year-old SoHo gallery and open a new one on Manhattan's Upper East Side, in partnership with fellow tribal arts dealer Ron Nasser. It will be called Nasser-Molloy Gallery and scheduled for a mid-November launch. Asked why he was making the change, Molloy said, "It's a chance to be in partnership with one of the top, top dealers in the field, and it's in a better location." Molloy called the collaboration a "natural" progression. "We've been friends for twenty years, and while we're not exclusive of each other's specialties, we have different strengths."

Molloy bought six lots at the sale, including one of three Germantown weavings on offer. He is known for his dealings in Native American beadwork and textiles. Nasser, by contrast, isn't a buyer of "Indian soft goods." Rather, he executed jump bids to buy two of the best pipe pieces. While phone bidders were dickering in the low five-figure range on a Plains quilled wood stem, Nasser shouted $18,000. All were silenced. "And that's what is called a power bid," said auctioneer Stuart Whitehurst, who hammered it to him for a final bill of $21,150. In the same manner, Nasser bought a Great Lakes stone and wood pipe with a spiral stem for $29,375.

Equally focused bidders in other categories were willing to pay strong prices for the best, the freshest, the least restored, and/or the rarest lots. These included several African carvings, such as a wooden Janus figured rattle that brought $19,975 from an absentee bidder and an ivory fly whisk handle that sold at the same price to a phone bidder. The buyer of the fly whisk handle also bought a wood head with a stylized heart-shaped face, cataloged as Warega, for $25,850 and a Fang standing figure in wood with a honey-colored patina for $21,150.

All seven lots of Polynesian carved wood clubs did well, especially one of those consigned by a New England library museum. A 19th-century Fijian example, carved in the so-called pineapple style with short spikes, went to an absentee bidder at $2820. Another Fijian club of the same vintage, with a chip-carved grip and bone or ivory inlays, sold to a room bidder for $4406.25.

Bidders also liked the collection of Hawaiian tapa cloth fragments consigned by a New Hampshire antiquarian society. Bearing an old tag that read "Native cloth from Sandwich Islands," the dozen or so items excited multiple bidders on phones and the Internet, with the latter prevailing at $6737.50, nearly ten times the high estimate.

We'll close with this. Prices for great examples of African art, its modernist feel fully acknowledged, continue to rise, making old-fashioned pronouncements like one we found recently in the May 1935 issue of The Magazine Antiques seem particularly obtuse. In an unsigned Museum of Modern Art show review, "Art from Darkest Africa," the anonymous critic wrote in part: "A good deal of twaddle has been written about the extraordinary plastic value of African sculpture. I judge the term to mean that these objects are so fluently composed and happily poised in their three dimensions that, viewed from any angle, they strike the eye effectively and stir the tactile sensibilities. That the forms are simplified to the point where major masses are neither confused nor obscured by excessive detail goes without saying. The same thing is true of many an old shanty-made duck decoy from Chesapeake Bay. Hence I see no reason for becoming overheated on the subject."

So much for outdated opinions about works by tribal artists and the Ward brothers.

For more information, contact Skinner at its general information phone line at (617) 350-5400 or the ethnographic department at (978) 779-6241 or through its Web site (www.skinnerinc.com).

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