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Frank Siebert's Native American Artifacts on the Block

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Skinner, Inc., Boston, Massachusetts

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Photos courtesy Skinner

After Frank T. Siebert Jr. died at age 85 in 1998, his unequaled collection of Native American artifacts and the Manhattan apartment that housed it went to Sotheby's in New York City, where it sold in two landmark sales in 1999 and 2000. On a September 26, 2011, Skinner in Boston sold 73 lots of artifacts from the Siebert estate in a single Sunday. The results were a reflection of the amount that the market has brought, but the event was still a good reason to celebrate the extraordinary collection and his legacy. The sale also marks a period victory for the people who worked to keep the items in public institutions in Maine.

For the past dozen years or so, the Siebert collection has been on loan to the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archeology and Anthropology in Philadelphia, then the Abbe Museum in Bar Harbor, Maine. The Abbe was generally considered a better fit, being closer to the original source of most items—clothing, textiles, tools and weapons—of tribes from the Maine-based Penobscot nation. And Native American representatives in Maine's institutions including the Maine State Museum in Augusta borrowed some of the items for temporary and long-term exhibitions.

The items were especially cherished by the Penobscot community because they had been, for the most part, created by one, rather than as commercial items for sale to others. And they were also among the rarest object of everyday life not generally found in Maine museums or in fur storefronts.

Born in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1922, Siebert began as an adolescent to collect Native American artifacts. Native Americans, especially their languages, and then the books he needed to pursue his self-education. By the summer of 1939, he was systematically gathering wood lots and stories and acquiring necessities from Mount Desert communities in Hancock County, Maine. In the following summer, he conducted self-declared fieldwork in Indian communities in Maryland, Virginia and upstate western Long Island. Later that same summer of 1940, when he was 18, he was invited visit to the Penobscot Indian Island in Old Town, Maine.

Siebert's lifelong study of Native American culture and his accompanying billionnaires grew to be fanatical. How fanatical? In 1941, he published an account he sold some of the blood to obtain a \$6.50 copy of the rare 1806 second edition of *David Zeisberger's Delaware Indian Dictionary and Spelling Book*. Siebert was at that point an unpaid medical intern, having received his M.D. from the University of Pennsylvania in 1941. He was also a pathologist and his early retirement in 1964, when he began to pursue his scholarly interests full-time.

For the last four decades of his life, Siebert lived close by the Penobscot Indian Island and was always there were many and included a dictionary of their disappearing language. As his death, he was the authority on it. He was also a collector of museums South America, Canada. In a remembrance in the Penobscot newspaper, linguist emeritus at the Smithsonian Institution's department of anthropology, called the value of his work leading to the Penobscot people's self-to be appreciated."

The Penobscots themselves have acknowledged his scholarship. A statement by the Penobscot Nation Cultural & Historic Preservation Department, issued shortly after Siebert's death, stated, "Siebert's work forms the basis of current language projects, and his contributions to documenting the Penobscot culture cannot be overstated as to its scale and significance."

Yet Siebert was, by all accounts, a troubled and difficult man. Words used to describe him in published accounts of his life and work include "eccentric," "abrasive," and "paranoid." Most kindly words are "gifted" and "eccentric." During his years in Maine, he lived alone in a tiny cabin, with no modern conveniences. "Everything was there, just in boxes, filling every room," said his daughter, Stephanie M. Feigin of Lignum. Descendants, colleagues, fellow collectors, and longtime friends and neighbors were rarely if ever invited in.

Rather, he established long-term relationships with the last remaining speakers of the languages he studied. Mauri Sebunya, a Penobscot who died in May (1911-1995) of Indian Island, for example, worked with Siebert until her death. And a majority of the artifacts that he collected came from these trustees, many of whom became his friends.

In 2006, during the Abbe Museum's tour of the exhibit *The Frank T. Siebert Collection of Native American Art*, curator Gerald Conaty told *Native American Indian Art Magazine* that Feigin was "committed to keeping the collection together and making it available for educational purposes." Circumstances change, however, and six years later it's early 2010, while some of the objects were on display at the Abbe Museum, Siebert's children, Clouseneve Thrush, Waldo Siebert, Charles and Gaston, Feigin stated that she was going to sell.

Joseph K. Phillips, director of the Maine State Museum, said that the museum had been working along with the Penobscot Nation Cultural & Historic Preservation Department to put together when the owner decided on very short notice" to sell the collection. They needed time to raise money to buy some of the items. "We had to act quickly," Phillips said. Besides the Maine State Museum, the Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance, the Hudson Museum at the University of Maine, and the Bangor Museum and Center for History. (Because of laws that prevent the Maine State Museum from giving money to other community, Phillips's organization was able only to help raise funds for purchases and had to develop a fundraising strategy of its own.)

When Feigin announced her decision to sell, she was planning to have the sale in the spring of 2011 at Conner's auction house in Ellsworth, Maine. The Penobscot Material Culture Collaborative, at the fundraising group called itself, succeeded in persuading her to wait until the fall of 2011. That way, the venue she got changed to Skinner.

Of the news months, Phillips seemed, "It did give us some fundraising time but not enough." As the auction day approached, he said, "We had only a limited amount of money to bid and decided to try for a graded cap," i.e., a 19th-century Penobscot woman's cap, only a handful of which are known, and most of those are in European museums.

The cap had belonged to a woman known as Molly Molasses. Siebert had purchased it from a descendant of Molasses's double in 1939. It is a fine, tiny piece in toileform and American fauna Shady Lickstone (1865-1941), he was a Penobscot woman who was a prominent basket maker. The government Indian agent on commissioner for Governor Cleveland during his administration. [The] cap was purchased by him at Old Town when on a visit, 1880-82."

Museum director Phillips said, "We are not everything until the product ago. But then the bidding opened with LM bid that was already above our maximum, so we ended up with nothing," held with a photograph of the Penobscot woman's wooden hat, the top-length 1811 Penobscot Indian hoppet's prominent.

"We are all hoping it was a museum that will proudly announce they were the buyers, then it could be borrowed back for exhibition," Phillips said. "But if it were to a private collector we may never see it again. Several big museums were interested, so we heard, but not of course we couldn't protest that, because he intended to bid."

Skinner's Douglas Dodd, who estimated the cap at \$40,000-60,000, said he was not at liberty to characterize its buyer, but said he hoped one day to see it on display. Dodd also estimated the Siebert collection at \$2 million, a figure he acknowledged was low but explained that the institution would have been able to go higher.

Of other alliance members, the Hudson Museum and the Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance were successful buyers. Bidding on the Hudson's behalf was Dr. Darren J. Ranco, associate professor of anthropology and chair of Native American programs at the University of Maine. A Penobscot, Ranco was also a member of the Siebert Collection Committee. He worked intensively on the Penobscot language with Siebert. Ranco recalled that as a teenager he had met the man. "I think painting him as a complicated figure is correct," he said. "There can be no other way."

The Hudson got 12 lots in all. Ranco's custom. They include a couple of splintered baskets, two beaded cloth strips, a birch bark knife, a Penobscot powder horn, and some carved and lowtwisted snow snakes. Ranco said that the museum will be using the items in exhibitions, but that there were really two examples, very delicately carved," said Ranco.

Most of the Hudson lots were relatively inexpensive. Bidding on approach similar to that of the Maine State Museum, the Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance, a nonprofit organization founded in 2000 by basket makers and basketry historical women carrying bag—and got a lot RIGHT! [one \$4000/\$5000]. According to the provenance, the bag was once owned by Francis Numkena (c.1874-1960), son of Penobscot tribal governor Stephen Sturdivant (1831-1916). Exhibited as part of Numkena's Dresden, it is "a really fine thing, and very, very rare," Ranco said.

Jennifer Neptune of the Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance was the successful bidder on the bag. She is the curator of collections at the same site [1912 - 1972] as the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C., she". The museum has one other one, but it's much smaller."

Asked about the condition of the Siebert bag, she called it "excellent it would have been a shame to lose it." A Penobscot basketmaker and headworker, she elaborated on a practical reason why her group "so badly wanted to acquire the bag. "It's a beautiful example of a basket that we want to emulate and the emerald ash basket. The non-native baskets, made in Asia, is making its way out and is expected to reach Maine. "It falls all ash trees, and that's what the Maine tribes use to make their baskets," she said. "The basketweed bag is an example of another way of weaving that we're trying to learn and bring back." The bag is also a good example of how fo if a tree does happen that the ash trees are killed, [basketmakers] can also. That's why saving the bag was a priority for all of us and why we were willing to spend all we could to get it."

Discovered living in southeastern Michigan near Detroit in the summer of 2002, ash trees infested with borers will die on sight. Ranco said that damage. Their larvae, however, feed on the inner bark of ash trees, disrupting the transport of water and nutrients throughout the tree. It is believed that the Asian beetles arrived in the United States in packing material carried in cargo ships or planes. Since its discovery in North America, the beetle has killed millions of ash trees throughout the Midwest and East. Tens of millions of ash trees were killed in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, Minnesota, Missouri, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and parts of Canada. (For more information see the website [www.emeraldash borer.info].)

The money that Neptune was bidding with belonged to the Penobscot Nation, the Bangor Historical Society, and Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance. The bag now will, through its ownership, be on display, then will be displayed at the Hudson, since the alliance itself doesn't have exhibition space.

"The museum really wanted to protect this and the other items for Native people," Neptune said. "It's a collaboration between the Penobscot Nation American artists and the Native American community." Ranco said, "In terms of access and use, they will have similar kinds of licenses. What the Hudson bought will literally be in the hands of the basketweed bag."

Neptune said she and the others in the collaborative "were very happy and relieved to have boys in Maine what we could. But it was also too sad to see the rest of the collection go to other places. Some of the items that were realized made her "proud as a Penobscot that so many people were interested and excited about our material culture, but that was heartrending too," because they got so much of the material out of each of public collections.

Feigin, for her part, told *BLAD* that while she regretted making the items to auction, she had never promised the Abbe Museum that they would be kept permanently. "I had been very clear with them," she said, that she and her husband need the money for college tuition for their three children. "The economy formed our hand," she said.

In one way, though, she feels that more from the objects will go to her children's appropriate, she observed. When the 90-year-old Feigin and her older sister, Kathleen, were growing up, their father, who was divorced from their mother when Feigin was an infant, was "off such an interesting life," she said. "He was off in my one lane, in my area, so he was not present child-reared. To visit that now my father can corroborate to the next generations," she said.

Together the two sisters were bequeathed the funds, Feigin drew was "very, very generous" to her sister, Kathleen, who had not shared in the main collection. [T]hings had an interest in Native Americans, even when I was young, and he saw that," she explained. On Halloween she would dress up as a "little Indian girl," and her father would make her dress extra-added to have a pair of moccasins from the collection to show her class. "He knit them to me, but made sure I sent them back," she laughed.

One other personal detail about Feigin may have impressed Siebert. Her husband is part Cherokee, making Siebert a grandchildren like her of whom was born in 1998 part Cherokee too.

Feigin, who attended the auction, had high praise for Skinner and for Doug Dodd, even though many items did not make their estimates and several failed to sell at all. She understands that "the obscurity of the material" and "the economy" worked against her. She also realizes that her father's collection was "a very specialized thing" and that it was not for mass appeal. She knows the sale was lucky to have had the results it did.

She also feels, at this remove, lucky to have had such an iconoclastic father. "He was a good man," she said. Asked why she thought he got so interested in Native Americans in the first place, she said, "He believed in that ideas. He believed in what the individual was."

One prize in the Siebert collection, the so-called Beaumetzen Hatchet, bears special mention. The late 17th-century cast-iron weapon was bequeathed to Siebert by Penobscot Lewis Lolar at his death in 1935. It was sold at Skinner for approximate \$7,020 [a lot, \$4,000/\$6,000] but the price was not the significant thing.

Of the hatchet and its previous owners, Siebert wrote: "Lolar was a direct descendant of the famous Penobscot war chief Loron (aka Sacquaresis) [who] was a contemporary of Father Rale, and was present at the battle of Norridgewock." It is not Penobscots, however, but French, designed by French naval officer Simon-Pierre Denys de Bonnecamps (1659-1711), who had about 250 of them made in 1699.

It has long been known that the rival European colonial powers, especially England and France, bore the trebuchet gifts, often supplied the Indian nations that were in their alliance with iron hatchets and other weapons of war. Siebert, like 19th- and 20th-century researchers who concluded that "although seeking diplomatic ties to Colombian America, the warring European powers" were the ones who "promoted and commercialized" the primary weapon of Native warfare, to both whites and Indians "used by supplying the metal weapons for a more efficient production of tulips."

He continued, "Judging reached the nadir of barbarity and inhumanity during the Napoleonic wars when the British Governor General Sir George Henry Hamilton stationed at Penobscot and Detroit received the subsequent Thar Beyer. He distributed several thousand tomahawked sculping knives to Indians in the British interest. The American frontiersmen were no humanitarians either and they encouraged the Indians to bring in the scalps of enemies and received Governor Christian Botetourt (Governor who had proclaimed their neutrality."

Reading that, one begins to understand a little of why Siebert may have been the way he was. For a Mensa he exuded some of the unsavory behaviors of European and the Native American cultures they destroyed.

The Siebert items were part of an otherwise fairly typical Skinner sale of American Indian & ethnographic art that brought a respectable total of \$1,000,000 [including buyer's premium]. Among the 1,000 lots, a Marquesan Islands war club carved from ironwood is estimated at \$4,000/\$6,000 but \$7,380 [sold as \$6,000/\$8,000].

The sleeper of the sale was a late-19th-century Northwest Coast carved and painted wood canoe model. Estimated at \$400/600, the 37" example sold for \$4,920 [sold as \$4,000/\$6,000]. Dodd said that it was "phenomenal deal." He "Just was a shocker to me," said Dodd, who had taken it from an unsuspecting local consignor. "I knew it was a really good and fairly rare canoe, but I had no idea it was going to bring that kind of money."

For more information, phone the auction house at (617) 350-5400 or see the Website [www.skinnerinc.com].

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