Skinner, Inc., Boston, Massachusetts

Skinner's Americana: Time to Adapt

by Jeanne Schinto

Photos courtesy Skinner

The supply of little old ladies with old-fashioned names like Cora and Agnes is dwindling. Names of places like the Newburyport Society for the Relief of Aged Women sound creaky and never would be adopted today. Yet the furniture that Cora's and Agnes's families handed down to them, then got moved with them into retirement homes, doesn't turn to dust when they do. Instead, it goes to auctioneers.

At the auction house previews, the dealers inspect it. If only someone hadn't lost the finial or lowered the legs or skinned the top, they'd say. At Skinner's latest Americana auction, in Boston on November 6, 2005, we heard a lot of such comments about furniture that had been treated like, well, furniture, rather than antiques.

A dozen or more of the faulty pieces had been consigned by Wheelwright House, an assisted living facility in Newburyport, Massachusetts, that is still answering the telephone but is now closed after serving aged women for 118 years. Descendants of Timothy Pickering of Salem, Massachusetts, consigned a half-dozen other pieces, including some of the best of the 807 lots.

Timothy Pickering (1745-1829) was a Harvard grad (class of 1763), a lawyer and politician, a Revolutionary War figure, and a statesman. Pickering is still a big name in Salem today—tourists know Pickering Wharf; Pickering House, built in 1651, is Salem's oldest building; and Timothy is buried in the cemetery across the street—but the Pickering descendants had no headline-maker stashed in an attic somewhere. There was no bombé high chest with a King Hooper provenance and no japanned treasure in an upstairs bedroom. No million-dollar piece came to Skinner's from any quarter this time. There wasn't even a hundred-thousand-dollar item.

The top lot of the day, a silver salver, punched in at a mere $99,500 (including buyer's premium). Journalists will have to wait until next time, or the next, to write hyperbolically.

Yet there is something important to say right now. We thought of it when we saw the Federal worktable lent to the Girl Scout Loan Exhibition of 1929 by Mrs. Charles Hallem Keep and consigned to Skinner's 76 years later by a private collector. "I've got one at home, and it's better," said one collector. It probably is. For the truth is, this piece from the landmark exhibition derives its greatest importance today not so much from its place in the history of our country's decorative arts but from its place in the history of collecting. It's yet another reminder that the kind of collecting that Mrs. Keep and others used to do is a thing of the past, and instead of wishing it were otherwise, auction-goers need to adapt.

The ability to adapt is its own kind of talent, just like anything else that not everyone is endowed with in equal measure. To walk into a sale like this and see only furniture with problems is not what the smarter buyers did. They examined the items that appeared to be unique and the ones that legitimately posed intriguing questions. They didn't complain, they dug in for the chase, and some of them came up lucky.

One piece, among them all, was the cause of the greatest suspense. It was a chair that looked very early and came up in the sale very late. Saved out from the rest of a consignment that Skinner sold last August, it was given an estimate that struck many people as exasperatingly low, but who knows what would have happened had the numbers been otherwise. In the end, the Brewster armchair, possibly the work of the Tinkham joiners of Plymouth County, Massachusetts, fetched $54,050.

There was another group of lots whose eventual price was literally impossible to gauge before the sale took place (sounds like an auction, doesn't it?). The 85 works in watercolor, pencil, and ink on paper from the scrapbook of U.S. Navy Captain Henry Schreiner Stellwagen dated from the late 1820's to the early 1860's. Divided into 35 lots, the views of Stellwagen's travels around the globe, from the Caribbean to California, from Lima to Algeria. "Instead of bringing his camera, he brought his paintbrush," said Skinner CEO Karen Keane.

The works were small—most of them smaller than a piece of typing paper—and as highly detailed as China trade paintings of the period. They showed ships and sailors and ports of call and sometimes included intriguing little tableaux, for example, a sailors' disagreement on deck that had led to the pulling of pistols. They looked like the kind of thing that someone might bring to Antiques Roadshow, except they were being deaccessioned by the Henry Ford Museum.

In the end, there really was no contest for these lots. A man sitting in the front row with his young son swept 29 of them, his competition coming mainly from absentees. That room bidder, real estate developer Philip DeNormandie of Lincoln, Massachusetts, who bought no other items and left directly after the group went up, told us after the sale that he'd wanted them because they were "unique." We agreed, even though there are other examples of Stellwagen holdings at the U.S. Naval Academy Museum in Annapolis, Maryland, and at the Philadelphia Maritime Museum.

The 35 Stellwagen lots brought a total of $48,674.38, making the artworks together one of the five top offerings of the day (estimates on the individual lots ranged from $1500/2500 to $400/600). DeNormandie's share of the total was $40,126.25, a sum that he hadn't even calculated yet when we spoke ("I'll see it when I get the bill," he said). That's today's kind of collector, folks. Indeed, he

wasn't even aware of where they had come from until we told him of the Henry Ford Museum provenance, plainly printed in the catalog. His reply, meant to be communicated to the museum: "I'm interested in finding the binding." (So, what do you say, Henry Ford Museum? Have you got it?)

In the captions, you'll read about some other noteworthy buys and about two major no-sales. All told, the day brought $2,357,115 with a sell-through rate of 83.4%.

There were two other million-dollar-plus auctions at Skinner leading up to Americana. Fine books and manuscripts on October 30 brought $1,291,972, while dolls, toys, science, and technology on November 3 fetched another $1,036,479. (A complete report on the sci-tech sale appears on page 1-B.) Together, the three sales grossed $4,685,566 in a period of seven days. Years ago, that would have been a headline. Today, it pays the bills.

Is it Venetian? No, it's Chinese export porcelain, 1710-25, painted with barbershop swirls of orange on white to resemble glass from Venice (est. $800/1200). According to the catalog, a pair of similar vases was exhibited in *Made in China: Export Porcelain from the Leo and Doris Hodroff Collection at Winterthur* in 2005. A phone bidder paid $11,162.50 for this 12 5/8" tall bottle vase with gilded flower blossoms on the rim band.

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This transfer-decorated earthenware pitcher, one of the sale's several significant small items, commemorates the landing of General Lafayette at Castle Garden, New York City, on August 16, 1824. By then, he was the oldest living major general of the American Revolution, about to embark on a year-long countrywide tour. There are less rare souvenirs commemorating this hero's journey, which began at what is now called Castle Clinton National Monument (named for DeWitt, not Bill, Clinton) at the edge of Manhattan. The 8 7/8" tall pitcher had some discoloration, and previewers were undecided about whether a conservator should remove it, but now that's the decision of the phone bidder who bought it for $10,575 (est. $1500/2500).

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This was the best of three whales' teeth in the sale. The 8¼" long early to mid-19th-century tooth carried two captions, "South Sea Fishery" on one side and "Port Owharre, Huaheene" on the other. The fishery side showed a whaling bark and three longboats pursuing two surfacing whales, while the other depicted a threemasted sailing vessel flying a British flag. "Huaheene," a misspelling of Huahine, part of French Polynesia, is the last place the *Bounty* visited before the mutiny on board in 1789. It sold for $70,500 to a phone bidder competing against absentees (est. $25,000/35,000).

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One of the consignments from the Timothy Pickering family of Salem, Massachusetts, was this wool canvaswork picture of a hunting scene from the last half of the 18th century. The hunter on horseback wears a black tricornered hat and red frock coat. He and his two dogs are in jubilant pursuit of a leaping stag, while overhead are a butterfly and a bird. Besides being a beautiful composition, the 9" x 14" piece had its original stitching around all four sides and retained its original, bright vegetable-dyed colors (est. $15,000/25,000). "Is it really as bright as it looks in the catalog?" Fletcher said potential bidders had asked him on the phone. "Yes" was his reply. At the auction it went to a phone bidder at $58,750, underbid by Boston dealer Stephen Score in the room.

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Residents of Marblehead, Massachusetts, at the preview were able to identify many of the former storefronts in this pictorial attributed to Jonathan Orne Johnson "J.O.J." Frost (1852-1928). According to the stories, Frost didn't start to paint until age 70, after he had become a melancholy widower. Unsuccessfully, the self-taught Frost tried to peddle his paintings from a wheelbarrow along Marblehead's streets. His works have been highly sought since the 1950's, the more specific the scene, the more desirable. This one sold to an absentee bidder for $58,750, the low estimate.

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We don't think it occurred to anyone previewing the sale that this silver salver was destined to become the top lot. Not that it wasn't expected to do well, but other pieces were expected to do better than they did. A rare form by Myer Myers (1723-1795) of New York City, one of the most recognized silversmiths of the 18th century, the 8¾" diameter signed circular flat tray weighing approximately 11 troy ounces went at $99,500 to a phone bidder (est. $20,000/30,000). Myers was the subject of a major touring exhibition organized by the Yale University Art Gallery, *Myer Myers: Jewish Silversmith in Colonial New York*, which opened in 2001.

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This 19th-century American school miniature portrait of a little girl in profile in a blue dress with white ruffled collar was inscribed "Daughter of Minister Mallery New England 1827" in pencil on the reverse. The 3 7/8" x 2¾" watercolor on paper, more naively than formally painted, went to a phone bidder at $4700 (est. $200/300).

Of the five tall clocks in the sale, this late 18th-century one was the most interesting example, as well as the best seller. It went to a phone bidder at $30,550, underbid by Peter Eaton of Newbury, Massachusetts. Steven Fletcher of Skinner said he had found it in the consignor's cottage on a lake in Rindge, New Hampshire—in the cellar. It was accompanied by a 1933 bill of sale for $125. Its carved cherry case was small, 83" tall including the finial, and it still had its old finish except on the door, where someone had started to refinish it. (Fletcher said the family pinned the crime on "the grandmother.") The engraved brass dial of its 30-hour movement was inscribed "Wm Crawford Oakham." Not a great deal is known about William Crawford (born 1745), but according to a letter written in 1934 by the town clerk of Oakham, Massachusetts, Crawford's birthplace, the clockmaker had served as a sergeant in the Revolutionary War. The same cannot be said of his much more famous contemporary, Simon Willard, born three years earlier, who served in the war for only 26 days before returning home to Grafton, Massachusetts, where he enlisted a replacement (see *The Willard House and Clock Museum and The Willard Family of Clockmakers* by Roger W. Robinson and Herschel B. Burt (1996), page 11).

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An early, tightly composed painting by the Chinese artist known as Sunqua (active 1830-65), the sale's catalog cover lot, fetched $47,000 (est.$10,000/15,000). Like the Stellwagen artworks, *The Foreign Factories near the City of Canton*, an 11½" x 14½" watercolor and gouache on paper, was consigned by the Henry Ford Museum. This circa 1832 depiction of daily life around the hongs includes an American flag on one side, a British flag on the other, and incorporates details that could spark one's imagination. One sailor, just arrived on shore in a rowboat, is shown walking away with his oars, hedging his bets against thievery.

Another early Sunqua from the Henry Ford Museum (not shown), *The City of Macao*, the same size and medium and carrying the same estimate as the cover lot (but with less detail and in less good condition), made just $9987.50. Both went to the same phone bidder.

This stunning shelf clock was cataloged as having been made by "Samuel Mulliken (1764-1846)," and its iron dial was signed "S. Mulliken." Standard references, however, list only "Samuel Mullikan (1761-1847)." Were Mulliken and Mullikan one and the same? Dial painters who misspelled surnames were common enough, but another stopper for some potential bidders was, again, the dial. When one opened the top door, painted flowers were revealed on the dial that couldn't be seen when the door was closed. Bidders wondered why that would have been done. "This is a good example of how the market is vigorous for examples that don't pose any questions," said Fletcher. Because this detail presented a quandary, and because the piece wasn't deemed "textbook," it rose only to $31,725, its high estimate, from a phone bidder competing against a bidder in the room.

As for the banjo clock, it was made by Lemuel Curtis (1790-1857) of Concord, Massachusetts, 1810-15, and brought $4700 (est. $1500/2500). Another banjo clock (not shown), that one by Aaron Willard Jr., Boston, circa 1820, also made $4700 (est. $1500/2500). Was the Willard a bargain? Its tablet stated "...Willard Jr.," not the whole name, and collectors like to see hook, line, and sinker. Also, the time of its manufacture was a period of high production for Willard family banjos, and its finial and chimney were missing. Bidders were entirely unimpressed by a third banjo clock (not shown) with a replaced tablet that said "S Willard's Patent." It was bought in at $3750 (est. $4000/6000).

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This Chippendale carved mahogany and mahogany-veneered slant-front oxbow serpentine desk, circa 1780, was another consignment from the Timothy Pickering family of Salem, Massachusetts. Hamilton said she and Fletcher were "confident" that it was the work of William King, who worked in Salem. There is a similar piece by the idiosyncratic King at Salem's Peabody Essex Museum. This one, with old finish, was missing its prospect door, but they're often gone.

Timothy Pickering (1745-1829) held several positions in George Washington's cabinet, and his former desk got a twopage spread in Skinner's catalog. The $30,000/50,000 estimate was substantial but not outrageous. Fletcher said later he wished it had been more conservative. "I think if it had been, it would have reached fifty thousand." In reality, the desk sold in the room for $28,200.

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This circa 1940 oil on canvas American school *Portrait of a Gray Tiger Cat Wearing a Red Collar with a Brass Bell, signed "A Besser," 10" x 8"*, was housed in an ugly contemporary wooden frame. Ask yourself what it might bring at an antiques show. Bidders at Skinner's didn't give up until one had it for $7402.50 (est. $400/600).

The untouched surfaces of two 18th-century English or American Queen Anne mirrors in the sale rendered them mirrors no longer but objects of desire for other reasons. This 17¼" x 9¾" example with walnut and parcelgilding fetched $6462.50 in the room (est. $3000/5000), while the larger one (not shown), 23½" x 12¼", went to a phone bidder at $4112.50.

prcf2856.jpg (6022 bytes)

The Massachusetts Federal mahogany and mahogany and satinwood veneer inlaid worktable from the landmark Girl Scout Loan Exhibition of 1929, cataloged as probably Salem, 1805-10, sparked a genuine bidding war, first between two room bidders and then among three on the phones. It went to one of the phone bidders at $43,475 (est. $6000/8000).

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This 27¾" x 23¾" 19th-century American three-dimensional textile picture in stuffed and embroidered wool felt, mounted in a deep gilt gesso frame, brought $7050 (est. $800/1200). Steven Fletcher called this Brewster armchair "a little bit of an enigma" during his and Martha Hamilton's gallery walk. Later he said to us, "From the get-go, I thought it was early." Apparently other bidders arrived at the same conclusion: 17th century. One of them, bidding by phone against someone in the room, paid $54,050 (est. $500/700) to take it. Chairs resembling it were, of course, made during the Colonial Revival period, and Fletcher himself owns one from the late 19th century. "It's carved with the date 1620," he told us. "I bought it for four hundred dollars at a Discovery sale of ours." This one, though, with lowered legs and its original seat retrofitted with upholstery, seems to be real. "We have begun to think it was made in Plymouth County [Massachusetts], possibly by joiners named Tinkham," said Fletcher.

A Massachusetts dealer paid $5875 for this 1710-25 Massachusetts banister-back side chair in old black paint whose legs had neither been cut off nor rotted off, though its original rush seat had been replaced with a plank seat (est. $6000/8000).

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Bidders found these twins, identified as Audrey and Adelia Brownell, much more appealing than the Puffer family. The 29¼" x 36" unsigned American school oil on canvas of circa 1840, when the twins were six years old, according to family history, came from Brownell descendants living near Tampa, Florida. The twins' off-the-shoulder dresses are coral, and the painting has no background detail, but the patterned carpet has perspective. The winner, who paid $35,250, was on the phone.

prcf2844.jpg (7852 bytes)

Pictured is one of 85 watercolors taken from a scrapbook of Henry Stellwagen, who is most famous for having discovered Stellwagen Bank at the mouth of Massachusetts Bay in 1854. Designated a National Marine Sanctuary about 20 years ago, it's a spot visited annually by thousands of whale watchers. At his painterly best, Stellwagen could be much more than a documentarist. The relative quality of artistry from piece to piece seemed to drive some of the bidding, but the mantra "location, location, location" was the stronger indicator of how well a lot would do. Caribbean scenes made the most, and African ones the least. The prices paid by Philip DeNormandie, who bought 29 of the 35 lots, ranged from a high of $2820 to a low of $352.50. Consequently he dropped out of bidding for what ultimately became the group's top lot, two views of Caribbean islands, inscribed *St. James Martinique* and *Saint Thomas,W.I.* (pictured here). At $7050, the lot went to another private collector bidding as an absentee.

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Attributed to J. Howard, West Bridgewater, Massachusetts, this 12¾" tall rooster weathervane in cast iron, copper, and a zinc-based material had vestiges of paint, dents, and the requisite bullet holes. Reassuringly grungy, it was found on a workbench in a New Hampshire garage and belonged to the same family who consigned the Crawford tall clock, said Steven Fletcher. Dating from the third quarter of the 19th century, it made $16,450 on the phone (est. $800/1200).

prcf2846.jpg (7491 bytes)

This 1760-80 Chippendale mahogany blockfront chest of drawers from the North Shore of Massachusetts had the wrong feet and two replaced brasses (third handles down on the right and left) and was missing its bracket base. Nevertheless, it's a relatively uncommon form, another Pickering piece, and nearly reached its high estimate, going to the phone at $24,675.

prcf2848.jpg (5381 bytes)

A Federal mahogany and mahogany-veneered serpentine inlaid sideboard, probably New York, 1790-1810, with old refinish and one repaired front leg, went in the room at $25,850 (est. $10,000/15,000).

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This early 18th-century gumwood *kast* from the Hudson River Valley of New York, 79" high and with replaced back feet but having a good patina with a pleasant glow, went at $22,325 to a dealer in the room (est. $8000/12,000).

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This unsigned 19th-century Chinese ancestral portrait, a 31" x 24" oil on canvas in a black and gold frame, was the only significant lot that went to an Internet bidder. It was not leaving the country, said Fletcher, who hammered it down to the computer at $8225 (est. $1500/2500).

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One of the consignments from Wheelwright House in Newburyport, Massachusetts, was this attic find, a set of six painted late 18th-century Massachusetts Chippendale side chairs that retained their early brown grain-painted surface (est. $1200/1500). A room bidder got them for $8812.50.

For more information, contact Skinner in Boston at (617) 350-5400, in Bolton at (978) 779-6241, or through its Web site (www.skinnerinc.com).

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