September 20th, 2013

Skinner Sells a Fitz Henry Lane View for $1,384,000

by Jeanne Schinto

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A Fitz Henry Lane painting was the undisputed star of a three-catalog art sale at Skinner Inc. on September 20 at the auction house's Boston gallery. Estimated at $1.2 million/1.8 million, *Camden Mts. from the Graves* opened from the desk at $850,000. Competition came from phone bidders and someone in the room, who took it for the low estimate. Department expert Kathy Wong said the new owner, who paid $1,384,000 (includes buyer's premium), is a private collector.

Camden Mts. from the Graves by Fitz Henry Lane (1804-1865) sold to a private collector for $1,384,000. The 13" x 22" oil on canvas was signed and dated "FH Lane 1862" on the front and inscribed on the reverse: "... F.H. Lane to J. L. Stevens Jr./ Gloucester 1862/ A Souvenir of our excursion to Penobscot Bay, Septr. 1855." Schooners often ran aground on the ledge known as the Graves trying to make Camden harbor in storms. Schinto photo.

The oil on canvas is a Maine scene that glows with a palette of golden pinks and reds that Lane used to light up the sky in his best Luminist fashion. The native of Gloucester, Massachusetts, used the same color values to create reflected light in the sails of vessels in the harbor. The painting is dedicated and inscribed on the back to its first owner, Lane's close friend and neighbor Joseph L. Stevens Jr., with whom the artist made three well-documented trips to Penobscot Bay in the 1850's.

The painting is signed and dated 1862, meaning there's good probability that Lane painted it from sketches and memory several years after his trips to Maine. Department head Robin S.R. Starr said that there is a gap in its provenance between Stevens's ownership and that of the Quester Gallery (now in Greenwich, Connecticut). Curators at the Cape Ann Museum in Lane's hometown—owners of a preliminary sketch for the painting—say it also had passed through the hands of Godel & Company in New York City. The painting came to Skinner from a private New Hampshire collection.

The offering of this Lane made us somewhat nostalgic for the old days of fresh discoveries and crazy money, a time when it was difficult to keep up with all the record prices being made. Skinner is known for having sold several freshly discovered Lane works for millions during that heady period—before Lane's middle name was discovered not to be "Hugh." On November 19, 2004, the run culminated in the auction house's sale of Lane's *Manchester Harbor* for $5,506,000, an auction record for the artist that still stands. The buyer, private dealer Michael Altman of New York City, said at the time that he had bought it for resale.

Such a risk didn't seem all that risky back then, and apparently it wasn't. "I sold it within a year, I guess," Altman said in a phone conversation a few days before this most recent Lane went up at Skinner. "It was a great picture, and Lanes are very rare."

We asked Altman to recount high and low points that he has experienced since then. "Well, there's absolutely no question that things have been challenging," he said. "You know, I've had a hard time, like everybody else, but I work very hard, and I'm continuing to sell great things. I probably have the best inventory for sale that I've ever had, right now. All is good. It's a great business—to be able to deal with wonderful institutions and private collectors and beauty. I still represent several major collectors. I like working with anybody who's interested in art. I love selling at all different levels, but I concentrate on the best quality art that I can possibly afford to buy or get on consignment."

Like many gallerists, Altman is dealing in more examples of postwar art these days, but he is still very much committed to American art of earlier periods, he said. He mentioned that in mid-July he sold a John Singer Sargent painting to the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth, Texas. It is what he called "an absolutely magnificent portrait of Edwin Booth, the classically trained Shakespearean actor and brother of the infamous John Wilkes Booth." Since 1890, when Sargent painted it, the painting had been owned by the private club The Players in Manhattan. (The club was founded in 1888 by Booth and others.) In 2002, debt forced the club to sell it to a private collector.

From now until December 6, Altman is having a Sargent show at his gallery. He said that the current exhibition of watercolors by the artist—formerly at the Brooklyn Museum and now on view at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston through January 20, 2014—was the impetus. "It inspired me to gather up all the Sargents I had sold over the course of my career," which began 28 years ago. "Plus I have several in inventory. There will be about fifteen things in the show for sale." For more information, contact Michael Altman Fine Art and Advisory Services at (212) 879-0002 or see the Web site (www.mnafineart.com).

A complete story about the Skinner sale will appear in a forthcoming issue of *M.A.D.* For more information, contact the auction house at (617) 350-5400 or see the Web site (www.skinnerinc.com).

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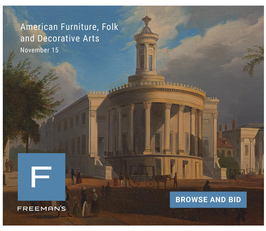

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