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The market demand for southern art began to rise sharply about ten years ago, according to Shannon C. Foley, a private art dealer born and raised in New Orleans. "Before that, there was interest, but not the prices that there are now," said Foley, whose namesake business is in her native city. "These paintings always hung on the walls of older homes on St. Charles Avenue here or were passed down in families. Then all of a sudden, they started bringing money, and so more of them got freed up."

Ruth M. Winston, auctioneer and director of business development for New Orleans Auction Galleries Inc., traces the start of the arc from 20 years back. "Paintings I was estimating from five to eight thousand [dollars], when I moved home to New Orleans from New York in 1986 [after working for a time for William Doyle] are now selling for a hundred thousand," she said. "So in two decades you've got that kind of escalation."

Shannon Foley's father, Tim Foley of New Orleans's Tilden-Foley Galleries, remembers back even farther, to the time when some of the earliest collectors of southern art were already making purchases. He estimates having sold over a hundred paintings to Martha Ann Samuel, whose exceptional collection, begun in the 1960's, fetched record prices at New Orleans Auction Galleries on May 20 and 21, 2006.

"For three or four years I also sold paintings to Roger Ogden," the elder Foley said of the man who began to collect as a Louisiana State University student in the mid-1970's and established the Ogden Museum of Southern Art at the University of New Orleans in 2003. "We knew in the 1980's that there was a window of opportunity. Everyone thought we were paying outrageous prices; that's why they were willing to sell to us. But it was just the beginning of what we knew would happen to the market."

How did he know? "I'm an anthropologist by training," said Foley, "so I'm interested in the evolution of things—it's what got me into art in the first place. It's not science; it's intuition. You could just sense it happening. You could sense what would be discovered and what needed to be discovered."

Until recently, southern art was narrowly defined, and most people had little idea of the range and quality of what artists working in the South over the centuries had produced. In 1960 the first modern-day exhibit of southern art was held at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Emphasizing portraiture, it featured, among others, works by three members of the painterly Peale family, whose roots are in Maryland; Charles Fraser of Charleston, South Carolina; and Gilbert Stuart, who painted the face of our country's most recognized Virginian, George Washington. But the curators of *American Painters of the South* knew they'd only scratched the subject's surface.

"In spite of the devastations of wars, fires, and other catastrophes," the catalog's introduction stated, "a vast amount of 18th and 19th century pictorial material remains, much of it in private hands, much of it known only to local antiquaries."

By the time of the next significant museum survey exhibition of southern art, 23 years later, the country was readier to embrace the concept, and the show's curators made bolder, broader selections that reached almost to the end of the 20th century. *Painting in the South: 1564-1980*, including works by English-born Mark Catesby, who recorded the flora and fauna of the Carolinas, Georgia, and Florida, itinerant Jacob Frymire, and former slave Bill Traylor, was organized by Richmond's Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and opened there in 1983.

It then traveled for the next two years, to the Birmingham Museum of Art in Birmingham, Alabama; the Mississippi Museum of Art in Jackson; the Speed Art Museum in Louisville, Kentucky; and the New Orleans Museum of Art. Three-quarters of it also traveled to a northern venue—New York City's National Academy of Design—a booking that constituted a coup, said Martha R. Severens, curator of the Greenville County Museum of Art, Greenville, South Carolina, since museums above the Mason-Dixon Line had not previously welcomed southern art shows. For other reasons, too, Severens described the Virginia show as "pivotal."

"Remarkable groundwork was done there," Severens said. "Curators were invited to convene in Richmond to discuss this issue of 'southern' art. The definition got looser at that point."

In fact, all curators, collectors, dealers, and auctioneers who spoke with us as we prepared this piece included in their definition of the term "southern art" not only works by natives but also by artists born elsewhere who settled in the South; artists who wintered or taught there; and artists who merely visited there, perhaps just once in a lifetime, but still managed to bring a fresh perspective to the subjects they found there. They even included artists working outside the South who happened to paint works with southern themes.

The list of these artists is a long one and contains some unexpected entries-Georgia O'Keeffe, George Bellows, and Norman Rockwell—along with names like William Aiken Walker, William Henry Buck, and Richard Clague Jr., that we are all coming to know better from the continuing news about their record sales at auction. There are, as well, a whole raft of artists—Jean Joseph Vaudechamp, George Louis Viavant, George Biddle, William Posey Silva—whose works are currently selling for less spectacular prices, but who are part of the larger story that southern art tells.

"One key to truly understanding any school of art, be it the Hudson River or New Hope or Texas, isn't the major figures," according to Gary R. Libby, former director of the Museum of Arts and Sciences, Daytona Beach, Florida, and author of *Celebrating Florida: Works of Art from the Vickers Collection* (1995)-i.e., early collectors of Florida material, Sam and Robbie Vickers of Jacksonville, whose first purchases date from circa 1970. "It's the additional figures, many of whom were major in their own time but have been overlooked or forgotten," he said. "Mountaintops" are easy to see; scholars and collectors are also interested in "the hills, foothills, and valleys."

Bear in mind that individual artist's values can vary widely in a marketplace where regionalism comes into play. "While Frank Shapleigh has been known as a White Mountain painter, he also produced a body of Florida views," said Libby, whose forthcoming opus is *An Illustrated Dictionary of Florida Art*. "But his Florida work is incredibly significant and important because of its topographical nature. So in the Florida field, Shapleigh's work has become incredibly expensive as a result. Whereas a White Mountain painting by Shapleigh could be worth ten thousand dollars, an important Florida view by him could be worth a hundred thousand dollars."

Even a matter of a few hundred yards can make a difference to regionally minded collectors. Jean Bragg of the Jean Bragg Gallery of Southern Art in New Orleans said, "The majority of the time paintings of the French Quarter buildings tend to bring more money than other things, when you're talking about certain artists, such as William Woodward, who was involved in the preservations of those buildings. For example, if you have a twenty [inches] by twenty-eight [inches] Woodward painting of a French Quarter building, it will bring approximately one hundred and fifty thousand; however, if you take that same size, and the painting is of another house, off the Avenue, it would bring maybe half that price. Another desirable William Woodward would be of the Gulf Coast, because he moved to Biloxi [Mississippi] after he retired from Tulane University. And those scenes are very collectible. Less desirable are his scenes of California, where he traveled."

The same kind of market distinctions apply to works by Joseph Meeker, said Bragg. "If it's a bayou scene in Louisiana, it will sell for more money than, say, a scene closer to St. Louis, from where he came. He was a riverboat captain who traveled down the Mississippi. Anytime we see that bayou scene, the people in Louisiana fight for it."

Of course, the South isn't the only place where regionalism has affected the market. Claudia Kheel, who was a museum curator in Indiana and Louisiana before joining New Orleans's Neal Auction Company as an American paintings expert, reminded us that the "continuous rise" in the market is part of "a general appreciation of regionalism in America."

Andrew Brunk of Brunk Auctions, Asheville, North Carolina, who, like Kheel, came to auctioneering after time spent in academia and museums, said, "It's not just a southern thing. A lot of regional buying happens in New England and in the Middle Atlantic states too."

According to Martha Severens, when the Greenville County Museum of Art decided to collect southern art in the 1980's, regionalism had already been in the air for some time, an outgrowth of growing interest in American art in general. "People like [art historian] William Gerdts led the way with scholarship, and institutions like the Whitney Museum of American Art turned us away from Europe," she said. "Another reality is that [European] Impressionism had become unaffordable. It's a trickle-down effect. That's how a market grows."

And yet, for a variety of reasons, there is an intensity about the southern regional art marketplace that seems unmatched by any other. Johnson Hagood of Carolina Galleries, Charleston, South Carolina, said, "It's got to be the demographics, with all the people moving down here. It's become quite a movement, with people buying second homes or moving to the South permanently."

But several others noted something even more powerful than sheer numbers: the sense of a southern identity. It is extraordinarily strong, whether a family still lives in the South or not, and when they decide to collect art, southern themes are what has drawn many of them.

Maybe they have passion for the art precisely because they no longer live where they once did. Family relocation surely is why the art is so scattered and why so much fresh material is found in unlikely places. "A large group of southerners moved north after the Civil War and took their furniture and paintings with them," said Kinga Bender of Charlton Hall Galleries, Inc., Columbia, South Carolina. "That's why so much is being discovered up there. We've also had Huttys and Verners sent to us from overseas," Bender said, referring to works by two major Charleston Renaissance artists, Alfred Heber Hutty and Elizabeth O'Neill Verner. "Southern families moved back to England after the Civil War; they returned in the early twentieth century as tourists and picked up souvenirs of where 'Grandpa' once lived."

Robert M. Hicklin Jr. of the Charleston Renaissance Gallery in Charleston added that Charleston's art was carried away by tourists from the very beginning of the movement after which his gallery took its name. "When tourists began to trickle in, particularly after the First World War, they were enamored of the beauty and took a little bit of Charleston home with them, so to speak," Hicklin said. "The same thing happened in Florida. Henry Flagler, after he built the Hotel Ponce de León in St. Augustine [in 1882], invited artists to live there instead of renting studios, and people came and bought the artwork of folks like Martin Johnson Heade.

"What happened after that was, the tourists, back home again, sitting around in snowy February in Detroit or Boston, would show others their wonderful paintings of the tropical climate. It engendered enthusiasm. The revitalization or 'renaissance' in Charleston was in many ways an outgrowth of the art, as local scenes, produced here, began to decorate homes across America."

Besides Hutty and Verner, another major Charleston Renaissance figure—by some accounts the greatest of all-was Alice Ravenel Huger Smith. "Hutty and Vernon and Smith were much more prolific than, say, Birge Harrison," said Hicklin, "and that has fueled their prices. People understand their art—they've seen enough of it to know what it is." Rarity is one thing; a full body of work is another? "Exactly," the dealer said.

Many of those Charleston Renaissance works are views of the city's greatest assets, its distinctive architecture, lush gardens, and landscapes dripping with Spanish moss. But those artists also painted portraits and genre scenes of African-Americans engaged in hard work or unwinding afterwards—the impoverished world of Porgy and Bess. As Martha Severens notes in her book *The Charleston Renaissance* (1998), Hutty was especially inclined "towards stucco surfaces in disrepair and stooped figures relaxing in doorways."

Kinga Bender, whose auction house claims to hold seven of the ten top Hutty etchings price records, thinks that attitudes towards certain subject matter, which is seen by some people as "politically incorrect" but by others as simply part of the southern heritage, have been fueling the market at both ends—supply and demand. "The quintessential subjects, typical of the South, are often paintings that families decide not to keep," she said. "In a lot of instances, you see things that were at 'mother's house.' They'll say, 'I don't dare hang it in my house.' They're not collectors; they're just ordinary people dealing with an estate."

Meanwhile, a new group of people "is not ashamed any longer," Bender noted. "This is just a part of their past. They may not be proud of it, but it's what made us who we are today."

And then there are the measurable market effects wrought by the hurricanes. "Historically important scenes of Jackson Square or buildings in the French Quarter are highly desirable," said Shannon Foley. "So are any kind of wharf scenes. Boats used to park behind the Quarter to unload. And now, with the Gulf Coast having been wiped out by Katrina, you also see an interest in paintings that documented those homes along the Mississippi that were completely wiped out. All that's left is slabs." In addition to the usual nostalgia for the past, there is "definitely sentiment involved," she said.

"Because of Katrina, an amount of inventory has been swallowed up or damaged," said Jean Bragg. "We will never see or be able to enjoy some pieces ever again. People who experienced losses come in and say, 'You know, I used to think I needed my sofa before I picked my painting, but now I want a piece of art on my wall first.' It makes you feel happy, it makes you feel good, and then it turns out to be a good investment."

By the same token, the storms have brought more material forth. "People need money, because of Katrina," Bragg said. "And they know the market is there and want to capitalize on it." Claudia Kheel, likewise, has witnessed the push and pull. "You do see people replacing lost collections, but you also see people divesting." It may not be because of financial struggle; sometimes, they are simply unwilling to "caretake" art any longer. "You can't put it in the car and drive it away every time," Kheel said. "There's a great transition going on. These storms affected everyone's life in a different way. Everyone has had to decide what to do and how to proceed."

Ruthie Winston thinks that, besides condition and provenance, what makes a difference in the marketplace is "the story that's told by the painting." Certainly the stories are more complicated in this post-Katrina-Rita-Wilma world. She also believes the continuing zeal for southern art relates to environmental concerns.

"When you look at a nineteenth-century southern painting you cannot help but see what we have done to ourselves," Winston said. "At Lake Pontchartrain, you used to be able to see the crabs playing in the sandy bottom. Thank God, twenty-five or thirty years ago, we did save our lake. But there's so much more to be saved, and a nineteenth-century southern landscape will demand that you take a hard look. Paintings do not lie; they do not fabricate. They show what incredible colors you get when the sky isn't polluted; they show the water without the toxins, the enormity of the flora and fauna, the richness of this life. The more painterly the painting, the bigger the window into our past."

The past is almost palpable in View of Asheville, North Carolina, painted in 1850 by Robert S. Duncanson. "Anything particularly regional painted in the mid-nineteenth-century South tends to be very salable," said Andrew Brunk, whose auction house sold the painting on May 31, 2003, for an artist's record, $352,000. (All prices include the buyer's premium.)

"The Duncanson was a compelling scene to anyone who lives here or who's interested in the history of an area. That's true of southern landscapes of Asheville, or towns in Virginia, in South Carolina, and elsewhere. Those views are hard to find and highly sought after when they are found," Brunk said.

The final bid for the Duncanson was made by a staff member of New York City's Babcock Galleries on behalf of the Greenville County Museum of Art. "The first owner of the painting, James Patton, was a hotel owner, supporter of the railroad, land owner, and slave owner," said Martha Severens, who noted that Duncanson, an African-American who had established himself in Cincinnati, Ohio, went to Asheville on a sketching trip while North Carolina was still a slave state with strict laws about the movement of free Blacks.

"The painting remained in the family until we purchased it from a descendant," Severens said. "She was a lovely lady in her upper eighties or older who wanted to experience the pleasure and thrill of seeing this family heirloom—a painting that she had lived with for most of her life—being sold at auction." But some entities were not pleased by the museum's purchase. "They were disheartened by the fact that the painting was going to leave Asheville," Severens said. "We maintain it's better off fifty or sixty miles away in a museum dedicated to American art than in a private collection."

That sale and the disappointment some people felt about its outcome illustrate another force that's driving the southern art market: the desire of some southerners to bring it all back home. "I gather these southern paintings from all over," said Claudia Kheel, "and they generally go back to the state where they were produced."

Kinga Bender said she knows of "about ten collectors who are dedicated to keeping some of these things in the South. They are wealthy individuals who are starting to amass southern things, in all fields—pottery, silver, furniture, art-with the intent of keeping it here."

Bender told the story of a middle-aged man who did not collect anything until five years ago. "The first item he bought from us was a piece of southern pottery, after being told by friends that a large group in New York collects southern pottery. And he essentially told me, 'I'll be damned if this one doesn't stay here in the South,' and he bought it for one hundred fifty thousand dollars. That was the beginning of his collection." With help from a group of specialists who vet his purchases, he has been buying "the absolute cream of the crop," she said. "He came literally out of nowhere, and now he's on a mission."

But the collectors in New York, as well as other sizable groups, notably on the West Coast, are often southern transplants who believe they have no less of a claim on the material just because they no longer live on southern soil. And so the bidding wars are waged, and prices continue to climb.

As any market grows, the market's makers may be outspent by newcomers. We asked our sources if that was happening to the early collectors of southern art and, if so, what their reaction had been.

"Maybe ten years ago, when the market started to climb, there was some grumbling as painters like Clague and Buck hit the hundred-thousand-dollar mark," said Kheel. "But the ascent is just a sign of the times. The early collectors were wise to collect early, because, consequently, their collections are worth a lot now. I do feel we're also offering more diverse paintings from the South now," she added. "We try to offer a range of material in order to cultivate the new collector who may not have as much money to spend."

Tim Foley, for his part, said, "Frankly, the prices are still way lower than paintings from other, better known regional schools, like the Hudson River. New York is a region too, you know, and the Hudson River painters were regional painters." The million-dollar mark, it is true, has yet to be reached by a painter of the South. "I think Clague and Buck will reach that number," Foley predicted.

For now, the relative affordability of southern art means that museums are very active buyers. "Typically, forty percent of our business year in and year out is with museums," said Rob Hicklin. "I have sold hundreds of paintings to museums."

Those sales don't always happen quickly. Hicklin bought Everett D.B. Julio's *The Last Meeting of Lee and Jackson* on speculation. It was several years before the sale was made to the Museum of the Confederacy in Richmond, Virginia. At least, during the interim, he had a story to dine out on. "The painting came out of a house in the Garden District of New Orleans," he recounted. "The original frame came with it but was still up in the attic when we got there. It had been disassembled, and insulation had been blown in over it. And it was July. And we took the pieces of the frame, which, assembled, weighs hundreds of pounds, out of the insulation, down three flights of stairs, loaded them on to the truck, and then the gentleman from whom I bought the painting said, 'Let's have a drink.' I was about to fall over, but I sat down and enjoyed a stiff glass of bourbon with him. Anyway, we made it out alive."

Martha Severens said the Greenville County Museum of Art continues to add works, and that it is now in the process of acquiring a painting by Alice Ravenel Huger Smith, among others. How much the museum will have to pay for the Smith is something Severens feels she helped to determine, since she wrote *Alice Ravenel Huger Smith: An Artist, a Place, a Time* (1993). "That book incredibly altered her price range, for which we jokingly kick ourselves," she said. "'If it wasn't for what we [scholars] were doing, we [museums] would be able to buy her work more cheaply!' So we're kicking ourselves and patting ourselves on the back at the same time."

That museums undertake scholarship that often affects the marketplace was a truth acknowledged by every source for this piece, but only Angela D. Mack, chief curator at the Gibbes Museum of Art in Charleston, gave an example of the reverse effect: a market event that prompted scholarship. It came in the form of a museum show, *Edward Hopper in Charleston*, on view at the Gibbes in 2006.

In 1929 Hopper visited the city for his first and only time, spending three weeks and producing about a dozen watercolors, including one that came up at Christie's on May 23, 2001. Called *Charleston Slum* in the Edward Hopper catalogue raisonné compiled by Gail Levin, it sold for $1,876,000 to a private individual, who shortly after the sale lent it to the Gibbes. "That prompted me to gather together the others that we know he did in Charleston," said Mack.

Mack is currently working on a major traveling exhibit, *Landscape of Slavery: The Plantation in American Art*, set to open at the University of Virginia Art Museum in Charlottesville in January 2008. It will also be on view at the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art in Memphis, Tennessee, at the Gibbes Museum of Art, and at another venue that was undetermined when we spoke.

Mack was not having success booking the show at a northern museum venue, she said. That ideas still tend to flow from North to South instead of the other way around is "nothing new," said Mack. "It's the age-old concept since the Civil War. It doesn't just pertain to art. But that's not to say our efforts, as an institution that collects southern art, haven't made a difference."

There's no question that southern furniture is finally getting its due in the North. "I think that's a combination of institutional response and efforts of people like Sumpter Priddy," said Rob Hicklin, referring to the Alexandria, Virginia, dealer and author of *American Fancy: Exuberance in the Arts, 1790-1840* (2004). "He's quite a scholar and has written beautifully on the subject of southern furniture. Sumpter has sort of figured it all out, and we like to think we're doing the same thing with southern art."

To that end, Hicklin has published several books through his Saraland Press, including *The Charleston Renaissance* by Martha Severens, which also served as the catalog for a 1999 museum show, and *The Sunny South: The Life and Art of William Aiken Walker* by Cynthia Seibels.

"Seasoned collectors are often a step ahead of the scholarship," Andrew Brunk said, "but certainly scholarship can help." It's all part of the same process, as he sees it. "Thirty, forty years ago, there were so little written on American art, period. It effectively didn't exist in many people's minds as a topic worthy of discussion. Similarly disparaging things have been said about southern art. But again, it's just part of the evolution of how we look at objects and art and assign values to their relevance or importance or beauty."

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