

Sporting Success

The 2010 Copley Sporting Sale experiences strong results and sets world records.

By Tylee Abbott



This year's edition of the annual Copley Sporting Sale pointed to strength in the market for American sporting art, with solid overall results and a number of new world records. The sale was well attended by interested onlookers and participants, including dealers and collectors from across the country. These numbers were further swelled by a bevy of enthusiastic telephone bidders.

The Sporting Sale got off to a firm start, opening with, as is traditional to many auction houses, an impressive array of etchings by Frank Benson (1862-1951). Most notable of these offerings was the artist's "Big Four"—*The Gunner*, *Old Tom*, *March Gunner* and *Winter Wildfowling*—marking what I believe to be the first time that these works have all appeared in a single auction. *The Gunner* led the way with an impressive result of \$21,850, well out doing its estimate of \$10/15,000 and believed to be a new auction record for an etching by the artist.

The strong results for the "Big Four" were soon followed by the sound result of \$92,000 for Benson's *Two Duck Hunters*, just above the high end of its \$60/90,000 estimate. In a sign of the times perhaps, it is worth noting that this work was previously seen at auction at Sotheby's in 2000, where it managed \$110,000.

An impressive group of paintings by Roland Clark (1874-1957) also performed admirably, being led by *Dawn*, which well-exceeded its \$10/20,000 estimate and eventually sold for \$37,375.

Lots 41 through 60 represented an exquisite group of watercolors by turn-of-the-century European painter Archibald Thorburn (1860-1935). The works ranged in estimates from \$3,000 to \$20,000 and performed admirably with many selling within their estimates.

The largest group of star lots by a single artist in the Copley sale was undoubtedly that of Carl Rungius. Any concern about how these paintings might fair in New England was quickly silenced by a slew of bids from the packed telephone bank and a number from



Carl Rungius (1869-1959), *Bull Moose*, oil on canvas, 40 x 50"
Estimate: \$200/400,000
SOLD: \$373,750



Ogden M. Pleissner (1905-1983), *The Rapids*, oil on canvas, 30 x 40"
Estimate: \$60/90,000
SOLD: \$345,000
 NEW WORLD RECORD FOR THE ARTIST



Carl Rungius (1869-1959),
Humpback Grizzly,
 oil on canvas, 30 x 40"
Estimate: \$300/500,000
SOLD: \$460,000

dealers and collectors present at the sale. The Rungius results, mostly toward their high-end estimates, reaffirms the notion that both fresh paintings and quality sell well, but also that interested, dedicated buyers will find the best pieces wherever they may be. Each of the impressive paintings fell to a different telephone bidder, with the cover lot, *Humpback Grizzly*, selling for a commendable \$460,000, squarely in the middle of its \$300/500,000 estimate.

Perhaps the most impressive Ogden Pleissner (1905-1983) to come to the auction block in recent years was Lot #129, *The Rapids*. This painting performed extraordinarily well. With a presale estimate of \$60/90,000, it was eagerly pursued by a number of bidders in the room and on the phone, including one prominent dealer. The painting eventually fell to a private collector in the room for \$345,000, a new world record for the artist. This final tally is the result of a number of factors including the rarity of large important Pleissner oils to the market, the quality of this particular piece, and the dedication of the purchaser, who is believed to be a prominent collector looking to fill a hole in an already impressive collection.

Other works by Pleissner continued to

be popular throughout the auction with Lot #141, *Early Morning*, realizing \$71,875. The artist's *Summer Evening* was an excellent example of the artist's highly celebrated ability at rendering the water's surface and was significantly more impressive in person than its reproduction in the catalog. An anonymous telephone bidder stole the painting for just \$54,625, under its estimate of \$50/80,000, making it one of the best buys of the week.

Paintings by Aiden Lassell Ripley (1896-1969), one of the local favorites, performed especially well at this year's auction, with every original work being hammered down to a buyer. On average, these original oils, watercolors, or drawings outperformed their low estimates by 99 percent. *Grouse with Bearberries*, Lot #133, attracted heated bidding from both dealers and private collectors in the room, eventually selling for \$48,875, above its presale estimate of \$30/60,000. Perhaps more impressively, the unique and somewhat atypical, *Skating in the Woods*, blew past its \$10,000 low estimate and sold for \$43,125, a new world record for a non-sporting oriented Ripley.

Another of the big names in sporting art, A.B. Frost (1851-1928), was very well represented by *Taking Toll of the Covey-Prairie*

Chicken. The impressive gouache, with a strong dynamic linear design, attracted the attention of and was eagerly pursued by two dealers in the room and two separate private collectors, one on the phone and one in the room. It eventually fell to the collector present at the auction for \$63,250, estimated \$30/50,000, who was heard to exclaim that he just buys what he likes. Lucky for him, he has very good taste.

Much of the success of the 2010 edition of the Copley auction can be attributed to a consciousness of the current state of the art market and overall economy. Conservative estimates, which were both accurate and enticing, proved essential in generating enthusiasm in a wide and dedicated collecting base. The attractiveness of these estimates was further helped by reasonable and appropriate auction fees. Ultimately, while these factors are essential to realizing a productive and successful auction in today's shaky market, the sale was no doubt put over the top by the exceptional quality that was available in the form of artwork by Carl Rungius and Ogden Pleissner, and which is always appreciated by the dedicated and sustainable collecting base in this market segment. 🐾