

Skinner, Inc., Boston, Massachusetts

Agnes Martin's *Blue Flower* Makes a Cool \$1.5 Million

by Jeanne Schinto
Photos courtesy Skinner

The little, unassuming pale blue collage did not appear to be the most probable candidate for million-dollar baby at Skinner's paintings and sculpture sale on May 29 at its Boston gallery. Nonetheless, Agnes Martin's 1962 *Blue Flower* in oil, glue, nails, and canvas on canvas stretched over an 11 5/8" x 11 3/8" panel was the evening's unchallenged headliner. It sold to a dealer on the phone at just above its low estimate for \$1,539,000 (all prices include buyers' premiums).

Significantly, it was the first time that Skinner's art department had sold a million-dollar-plus work that was not a Fitz Henry Lane. Even though the buyer was from New York City, it still registered as a milestone for the auction house—in fact

opening. Nancy Princenthal's *Agnes Martin: Her Life and Art*, the first biography of the artist, had its publication launch.

On the morning after the Skinner sale, art-minded readers who opened the *Wall Street Journal* would likely have noticed yet another media report about Martin, this one making an easy prediction that the retrospective will help raise the artist's profile even higher. If history is a guide, it will also give her prices even more lift than they have had of late. On November 13, 2013, at Sotheby's in New York, a very large (75" x 75") Martin work from 1964, *The Beach*, sold for \$6,549,000—a new auction record for the artist.

Skinner itself, of course, created some of the Martin buzz as part of its marketing strategy. On May 1 in the arts section of the

New York Times the auction house ran an ad for *Blue Flower*. Potential bidders were encouraged to pre-

view it in the auction house's new regional office at 415 Madison Avenue in Midtown Manhattan. The eventual buyer had done exactly that.

announcing to the Virgin Mary her pregnancy with Jesus Christ. Estimated at \$70,000/90,000, the painting sold for \$315,000. Once again a fresh work from a private New England collection, the large (51 3/4" x 35 1/2") oil on canvas was signed and dated "P. Tchelitchev 31." Together these three images achieved \$2,577,000. The auction as a whole, including the afternoon's session of fine prints and photographs, brought a total of \$3,927,602. Notable buy-ins seemed to include a 1908 Cape Cod beach scene by William Glackens with expectations of \$250,000/350,000. "It was fresh to the market, but it was not a conservative estimate—to say the least," said Starr. As of early July it was listed as having sold for \$200,000 after the auction closed. Other lots that failed to sell (and haven't sold yet) were a Martin Johnson Heade floral (est. \$50,000/70,000), an

Aristide Maillol bronze (est. \$120,000/180,000), and a Jane Peterson seascape of an unidentified place on Boston's North Shore (est. \$70,000/90,000).

"As you know from covering these sales for so many years, we do better when we can be conservative," said Starr. "Sometimes a big heady estimate scares people off. Obviously, you want to protect your consignor, but it's a balancing act."

An example among many conservative estimates that paid off was the one set for a Navajo woman's portrait by Walter Ufer, who worked in New Mexico in the early part of the 20th century. On expectations of \$8000/12,000, the oil on canvas sold for \$25,830. According to the catalog, the painting had come from a private Florida collection. Asked if it happened to be consigned as a result of Skinner's establishment of another new regional office, in the Sunshine State, Starr said,

"That walked into an appraisal day at the Coral Gables Museum, which is about a block and a half from our Florida office."

All auction houses depend a little on pieces of luck like that, but having the appraisal day in the first place at a location nearly 1500 miles from Skinner's home base wasn't luck. It was market savvy from a once strictly regional auction house whose clientele of buyers and sellers increasingly isn't regional at all.

In sum, said Starr, "We were thrilled with the quality of what we put together for this sale. There were great pieces from all periods from so many different private sources. The market right now is sort of capricious. The good news is, if people want it, they go gangbusters. So we couldn't have been happier with the majority of the results."

For more information, phone Skinner at (617) 350-5400 or see the website (www.skinnerinc.com).

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for Boston itself, which has been notoriously reluctant to embrace the current, raging trend for 20th-century art.

"Not that I don't like Fitz Henry Lane," said department head Robin S.R. Starr. "I loved the run we had with Fitz, but we were so thrilled to get to present something modern. We and the market as a whole are moving to post-World War Two. Fifteen years ago, we couldn't give away modern works. Boston was a conservative city." Granted, Starr continued, many of Skinner's postwar offerings go to buyers farther afield than Boston. "But some stay right here, and the market is just champing at the bit for more. Modern and contemporary—that's what [buyers] want. So we were very, very happy to have something that was much more timely."

Titled, signed, and dated on the reverse, *Blue Flower* came fresh from a private New England collection at precisely the right moment. In the last couple of years, there has been buzz galore about Agnes Martin (Canadian/American, 1912-2004) in anticipation of the artist's retrospective that opened at London's Tate Modern on June 3, less than a week after the Skinner sale. On view at the Tate through October 11, the show includes, among some 100 items in all, dozens of small grid-like works in muted tones like the one sold by Skinner. It will then travel to the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Düsseldorf; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City. Coinciding with the retrospective, a literary event took place two weeks after the Tate Modern

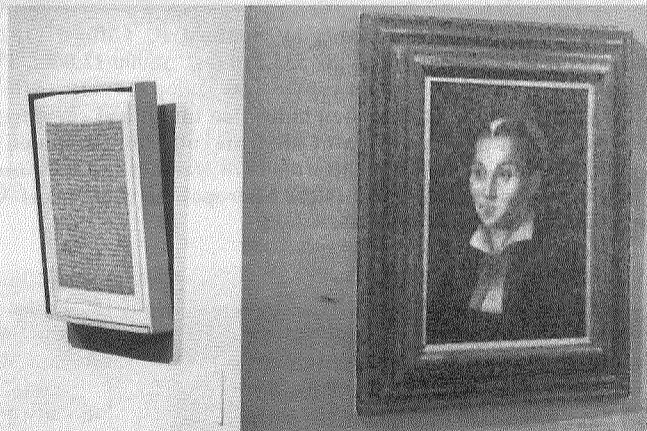
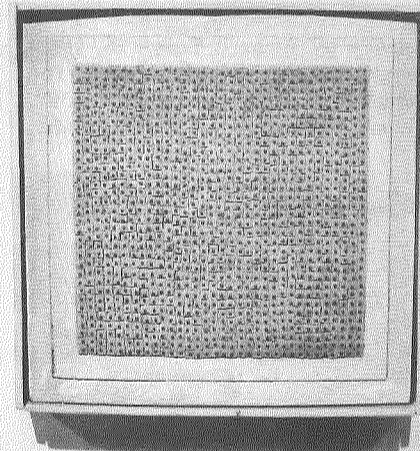
view it in the auction house's new regional office at 415 Madison Avenue in Midtown Manhattan. The eventual buyer had done exactly that.

Coast of Monterey, the given title for a 1912 California landscape by Thomas Moran, was another of the evening's high points. Like the Martin, the 25 1/8" x 30" oil on canvas came fresh from a New England collection. Owned by the same family for three generations and in excellent condition, the painting sold on the phone for \$723,000 (est. \$250,000/350,000). At least five other active phone bidders were on this one, but the underbidder was that rarest of the rare at auctions these days, someone bidding by paddle in the room.

Moran, who was born in England and grew up in Pennsylvania, loved the American West. Well known for having been part of Ferdinand V. Hayden's 1871 geological survey expedition to what is now Yellowstone, he was hired along with photographer William Henry Jackson to document the geysers, hot springs, canyons, and cliffs of the territory. The images would be instrumental in persuading Congress to set the land aside as a national park. Through the years, Moran also painted in the Yosemite Valley, Sierra Nevada, and Lake Tahoe areas, and in the Teton Mountains of Wyoming, where Mount Moran was named in his honor. He moved permanently to Santa Barbara in 1922, four years before his death.

The second and last six-figure lot of the night was 20th-century Russian artist Pavel Tchelitchev's religious picture *Annunciation*—a modern interpretation of the angel Gabriel

***Blue Flower* by Agnes Martin (1912-2004) sold to a New York dealer for \$1,539,000 (est. \$1,500,000/2,000,000). Dated 1962, the collage of oil, glue, nails, and canvas is on canvas stretched over an 11 5/8" x 11 3/8" panel. Many of the artist's works look minimalist, but she considered herself to be an Abstract Expressionist. Schinto photo.**



The Agnes Martin collage shared a column at the preview with one of the oldest pictures on offer at the sale, a portrait of Katharina von Bora. Cataloged as school of Lucas Cranach the Elder (circa 1472-1553), the 12 7/8" x 10" oil on panel sold on the phone for \$7380 (est. \$7000/9000). Schinto photos.

