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### **Purchasing the Past: Going, Going, Gone! New England Auctions: Palaces of Intrigue and Theaters of Commerce**

Martha Kelly

*Trinity College*, [martha.kelly@trincoll.edu](mailto:martha.kelly@trincoll.edu)

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# Purchasing the Past: Going, Going, Gone!

New England Auctions: Palaces of Intrigue and Theaters of Commerce

Martha Kelly

Anthropology Senior Thesis

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Thesis Co-Readers

Jane Nadel-Klein

Beth Notar

Department of Anthropology

Trinity College

Hartford, Connecticut

### Abstract

My thesis presents evidence that auctions are innately socially- constructed places where diverse actors and unique objects are brought together in a transformative theatre of commerce.

Commodities offered can carry with them elements of social turmoil and expose intimacies when exchanged. In this culturally-constructed, social-economic landscape, animate participants in the social arena of an auction parallel the inanimate commodities to be exchanged, as commodities are also “thoroughly socialized thing[s]” with biographies and social implications of their own (Appadurai 1986, 6). Patterns of on-again, off-again commoditization of certain goods are part and parcel of the social construction of their complex biographies, and details can symbolize “a successful social career” that might rival their owner’s (Kopytoff 1986, 66). Consider that if these objects could talk, their agency would alter.

For years I have subscribed to antiques-related trade publications and have attended auctions as an amateur. To learn more about this compelling exchange, I talked with an acquaintance who lives and breathes antique; he made me realize that these commodities also live and breathe, so to speak. From that point, I blended reading with attending previews and auctions in Connecticut, Massachusetts and New York, where salerooms and commodities ranged from classic to generic and where the ownership of goods is transferred and their histories are transmuted.

*Keywords:* auction, bid, commodity, exchange, lot, market, provenance, singularization

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## Introduction

“You upped your own bid!” It was my first purchase at my first auction, an on-site sale of household goods on a sunny Saturday in a rural town in southern New Jersey. Here, long-time neighbors, fellow church members and others just interested in attending an auction and nosing around, milled about and either sat on folding chairs they brought or stood around the perimeter, just close enough to engage in the action. Goods of a generic nature were arranged on tables and scattered throughout the side lawn adjacent to a sturdy, two-story basic clapboard farmhouse painted white, probably of early 1900s vintage; I recall it had a generous front porch. The presiding local auctioneer, a middle-aged man dressed in bibbed overalls, thought my error was pretty funny; I was embarrassed.

So, after a couple of bidding rounds, for \$12 I bought some old flatware and a 5” x 6” worn, embossed, leather-bound photo album with brass clasps. On its front and back covers is a shield with a pair of 36-star flags (after July 4, 1865), with flagpoles crossed in an “x” shape, so that one flag leans right and the other, left; a laurel wreath is centered in the “v” between the crossed flags. The album, displaying symbols of our national identity, contains a few tintypes and numerous brown-shaded photos of sundry well-dressed relations, some in mourning attire, in formal poses; the reverse side of a few carry labels from F. Gutekunst’s photography studio, 704 and 705 Arch Street, Philadelphia. Also included (inserted in the back pages) are generic *carte de visites* of Abraham Lincoln, Mrs. Lincoln, Tom Thumb’s wedding and photo cards of Civil War orphans, the latter produced and circulated to fund raise for their care. It was a mystery to me that the remaining kin did not want a photo record of their ancestors, especially since some names were penciled in on the margins beside respective photos. In retrospect, perhaps the matriarch of the family communicated scant family history to those who followed her. Possibly

she did not value it -- these people were just too far removed to be relevant, or the memories of her (or her husband's) past were blemished, especially since the face of one woman on a tintype is scratched out. She might have been the last of the family's ancestral line. I cannot remember why I was attracted to an album filled with Civil War-era photos of ancestors and descendants with whom I had no familial ties. I vaguely recall thinking they were cool and maybe had some value -- all very abstract. I still have the brass-clasped album.

These old photos sparked a smoldering interest about the *specific* back-stories -- the subjective over the objective -- of lots proffered at auctions. (At small auctions with goods from multiple sources, a lot number is assigned to each seller; therefore, a sale with many sellers will result in multiple lot numbers; however, at more upscale events, each item is identified by a lot number. All in all, this system maintains seller privacy and optimizes sale efficiency.)

Buyers may not be aware of extenuating circumstances of why goods are offered, and written provenances (the back story effects value) portray only part of the history. As a general rule, goods come to auction to be commoditized as a result the four Ds: death, divorce, debt and downsizing. (Throughout history, plundered goods, the result of war, are also auctioned.) For the most part, these are not pleasant circumstances, and some people involved in the process experience lament, grief, tragedy and melancholy. I recall being told about a fine collection of early pewter presented because the well-established dealer/collector had excessive gambling debts. The consignor of goods auctioned at a Massachusetts country club auction I attended had retired to Florida. Although to downsize, some collectors amass a grouping of specific items intending to sell them later as assets with gained value; of course, that depends on quality and rarity -- coupled with a sustained demand in the marketplace for, say, hand-carved decoys, cast-iron mechanical banks (1869-1930, some made in Cromwell, Connecticut), or hand-blown glass

paperweights. Goods can be auctioned because remaining family are carrying out the wish of the former collector to de-access their accumulation of fine books and manuscripts (for example, the Boston auction of early manuscripts and the New York sale of Alexander Hamilton's papers, both mentioned later), or amassers of folk art may want to reduce their collection to make room for more. It occurs, usually after a death, that if a family holds one piece (the Willing table described later, repatriated artwork comes to mind) with immense value and the heirs are too numerous, that selling and dividing the realized funds among members is an equitable resolution. Or, dispersals of a family's heritage may be offered because of a lack of family interest in sundry, extraneous items; conversely, estates become scattered because of covetous kin. Death can have its sting (I Cor. 15:55).

One of the most disturbing and poignant days of my life is when I purchased item by item of Lot 6, all of my parents' belongings. The events leading to this auction in a large general-purpose auction barn close to my former home remain far too searingly raw for explicit elaboration; the circumstances cut me to the core. It was heartbreaking to see all of the belongings my mother and father (and their parents before them) had cherished for decades placed on tables, separated from their rightful home, exposed to the auction market as mere commodities. They would never ever have condoned such an event. Moreover, I idealized these family objects; for me they always held a high level of embedded personal meaning and kinship significance, veneered with heirloom status. These material goods were truly a legacy that represented my family's culture.

Before the auction began, I introduced myself to the auctioneer to let him know what I would be doing. He was a tall, lean, 40-something guy, reeking of cigarette smoke; to me he

emanated “sleaze,”<sup>1</sup> accentuated by his odd behavior of repeatedly pulling on his belt and hiking up his loose pants which jangled the change in his pocket (while explaining to me that he had a twenty-something year-old child and a new wife about the same age – and they had just become parents). However, he did make sure I was able to bid on the multiple pieces involved in Lot 6. Because I bid on so many items, other attendees – I was clearly an outsider with an ambiguous position, no one recognized me -- asked me if I was a dealer. Deep down I had the desire and somewhat felt I had the responsibility to retain these goods that were filled with “irreplaceable mnemonic qualities” (Forlano 2015, 155). I view this as a triangular construction with inanimate objects rescued from the anonymity of a commodity collective and recapturing a social life that has meaning: (1) symbolic concrete goods as (2) visible signs that tell my back story and (3) hold emotional memories.

Auctions are capable of resituating commodities floundering in “dysfunctional” liminal states, caught up in the messiness of life, by retrieving them and placing them into an ordered functional system. To that point, oftentimes auctions arouse melancholy and sorrow. The following story illustrates the fragileness of class status, and how an auction preview allows people of a more common class -- with “clownish” feet -- to invade the private space of individuals who lived a “fairy tale” (Kirtley 2016, 95-6). In 1821 William and Mary Wilcocks Waln, (he, a prominent Philadelphia merchant) faced bankruptcy because of his overextension in the formerly lucrative China trade. They had to sell their splendid, gold-covered, classically-themed furnishings, custom-designed by Benjamin Henry Latrobe (who later worked on reconstructing the US Capital after the damage in the War of 1812) to pay creditors.

(Redemptively, twenty-one of Latrobe’s pieces from this 1808 commission are now preserved in

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<sup>1</sup> The descriptive word, “sleaze,” does not apply universally to auctioneers; the vast majority work hard to establish themselves as reliable, responsible business people. After my informants reviewed my paper, they were concerned that this might be misconstrued as a blanket description.

the Philadelphia Museum of Art.) Admirer Rebecca Gratz noted that “Mrs. Waln’s drawing-room was more like an apartment in an Eastern fairy tale than a Phila [sic] parlor” (Kirtley 2016, 95). She went to the November 7, 1821, preview and recorded:

Today Chestnut Street has been a scene of gaiety – on an occasion which would make a moralist, or an observer of human affairs quite sad – the splendid furniture of a ruined gentlemen, was exhibited for sale, and to-morrow will be distributed under the auctioneers [sic] hammer to the four corners of the city – the luxuries which wealth and ambition & taste had combined to render the most beautiful I ever saw... I cannot compare any furniture I had ever before seen with it – alas, alas! Her French carpets were this day trodden by many a clownish foot – and her mirrors reflected objects, which it would have shocked her nerves to witness in the retirement of her dressing room – but “fallen from her high estate,” she will I believe acknowledge that happiness does not always dwell with riches... (Kirtley 2016, 96)

Not all goods should be auctioned. Revered categories without commodity potential and restricted as sacred are humans, as well as relics and goods with ritual significance and those that hold culturally important national landmark status that maintain cultural patrimony: These should not circulate in the exchange market. However, people have been commoditized and auctioned. The institution of slavery treated people “in which marginality and ambiguity of status are at the core of [their] social identity” as property or objects (Kopytoff 1986, 65). Each time they were auctioned, their singular individuality was stripped, and slaves became “non-persons” with a monetarized exchange value – transformed and “resocialized and rehumanized with a...social identity” attached to their new owners after the sale (Kopytoff 1986, 65). While bar mitzvahs and weddings also change individual identities, these cultural-rites-as-markers do not involve commodifying a person.

*My thesis presents evidence that auctions are innately socially- constructed places where diverse actors and unique objects are brought together in a transformative theatre of commerce. Commodities offered often carry with them elements of social turmoil and expose intimacies when exchanged. In this culturally-constructed, social-economic landscape, animate*

*participants in the social arena of an auction parallel the inanimate commodities to be exchanged, as commodities are also “thoroughly socialized thing[s]” with biographies and social implications of their own (Appadurai 1986, 6). Patterns of on-again, off-again commoditization of certain goods are part and parcel of the social construction of complex biographies, and details can symbolize “a successful social career” that might rival their owner’s (Kopytoff 1986, 66). Consider that if these objects could talk, their agency would alter.*

Auctions are a form of “socially approved voyeurism” often with good deals and good entertainment as possible outcomes (Clark & Halford 1978, 305). It is a public “structured performance” directed by a promoter with a knack for staging a production that uses a social gathering to create a “channel of exchange” (Smith, C. 1989, 109; Appadurai 1986, 25). Merchandise here is diverted from becoming trash; goods “resurface” and are redistributed as commodities (Bleed 2000, 181). Although tradition, spectators and scripts may vary, human behavior within this context unites a social event with public encounter, staged in a venue -- either indoors or outdoors, packed with props and attended by actors (some knowledgeable, others not so much) who peruse the properties and make private decisions about what they want and how much they will spend to “transform commodities into valuables and...invest the circulation of these [goods] with personal, historical and geographic meanings” (Jarvenpa 2003, 556). These sales operate to move used goods (not services).

Because I subscribe to trade publications, *Antiques and the Arts Weekly* and *The Magazine Antiques*, I watch for auctions of interest. If something catches my eye – and if I have the time – I try to attend the preview to inspect the offerings and make self-appraisals. At these socially-infused auction previews, both goods and potential bidding rivals are contemplated. Those who have a storehouse of accumulated knowledge of the social life of things and consider

consumptive demand determine the likely value of potential acquisitions. “Determined by social and economic forces,” demand gives material objects “that satisfy human wants” value, and exchange is the source of the “mutual valuation of objects” (Appadurai 1986; 31, 7, 4).

Over the years I have attended numerous auctions, sometimes for the entertainment value, often to furnish apartments for my two daughters, and occasionally do find something for myself. For many summers, it was traditional for my daughters and me to spend a Saturday at a nearby on-site country auction, usually at a house in a small town or on a farm, where all of the personal effects – from the attic to the basement and including the garage -- not wanted by the family are displayed for others to inspect. When auctioneers advertise items to be offered at such sales, the last phrase is often to the effect of “...and still unpacking.” As opposed to an off-site auction at an auction-house, these on-site settings convey meaning to the home-based crowd and a kind of closure to attendees of the local community, supporters of not only the seller but also of the second-hand culture where the social histories of goods are anonymously (usually) transferred. Country auctions are alluring: they appear to be informal and festive; people mill around – many know one another, groups gather at the concession truck and chat. The voyeur in me is always amazed to see what people stash in their homes. It is never box-store same. (And I remind myself to clean out my own “Geez-Louise” detritus so that my family does not have to put my life on display!) We would register and get a number, preview the items, pick a small item to bid on, sit on our blanket and eat our picnic lunch, and wait for our “treasure” to be presented. Usually, we were successful; sometimes a high price excluded us.

My methodology both guided and directly responded to my research; flexibility helped me go in directions not originally planned. When I began the process of gathering information for this paper, I sat down with a friend who actively deals in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century

American furniture and decorative arts. As a third-generation antiques dealer, he has a matchless perspective, as well as -- I would venture -- close to total knowledge of all aspects of the antique goods' world. Fortunately for me, he and his business partner generously and openly supplied contextual information, which helped me build a foundation for my observations and to redirect my reading. During my conversations with them, I realized that goods truly have back stories a.k.a. social lives (whether it is who has owned them -- or how, by whom or where they were made, or how they have been repaired), and that these facts have immense value. Both spend a vast amount of time prudently curating antiques and decorative arts in their selective inventory. To this end, they have encyclopedic knowledge -- and maintain scrupulous records -- of most of the items that have crossed their three-generations'-old threshold. If a prospective client asks "what do you know about this piece?", a detailed and engaging story authenticating the piece will be forthcoming. I have been shown photos and have listened to the present owner, and his father before him, as they regaled me with enticing stories about great finds.

Nurturing these core thoughts was the vital anthropological research of Bronislaw Malinowski in the Trobriand Islands east of New Guinea, where he amassed information about the Kula exchange system, described in this paper. Additionally, the writings of Arjun Appadurai and Igor Koytsoff extended my thinking about what commodities are and how they circulate, as well as how commodities are culturally marked. The work of Clifford Geertz et al within the complex Moroccan *sūq* contributed to the all-important aspect of the effect information has within communal exchange settings.

In addition to reading relevant academic anthropological literature, I coupled the deep knowledge and experience of my informants with my auction "lite" background. In that vein, I attended local country-type sales, as well as auctions at fine houses in Boston and New York

City. I chose them from advertisements in the weekly trade journal; either convenience of locale or time available guided my choices. The contrast of two spheres of auction society and their respective cultural customs would present, I concluded, solid qualitative material for an interesting ethnography.

A common approach in fieldwork is for an ethnographer to function as both an active participant and an observer. Although I have participated as a bidder at low-key auctions, for this project my perspective is that of an observer. Handwritten field notes recorded overheard and, with permission, direct conversations, scenarios, auction-house events and behaviors. I also recalled years of prior experiences at auctions. If I had been active as a bidder while writing this paper, my view of the process might be compromised or filtered through the distraction of bidding. I wanted to acutely concentrate on the omnipresent surface and subsurface socialness that influences this process. Proposed questions (for auctioneers and their patrons) and methodology were submitted to Trinity's Institutional Review Board (IRB), and my research proposal was approved.

Commodities as things with social potential with biographies and value are described in Chapter 1. They are exchanged at auctions, socially-imbued theatrical markets that facilitate the culturally regulated recontextualization of goods. At this socially dependent exchange information is both valued and traded, whether it is during conversations at the preview or through detailed descriptions in elaborate catalogues.

Auctions have existed for thousands of years, and Chapter 2 reveals interesting history, as well as explaining common types of auctions. This is where I write about how humans were immorally treated as property, designated as commodities through the institution of slavery, a practice enabled by auctions. Chapter 3 illustrates that despite class distinctions, auction goes

across the board attend to participate in the exchange of goods. Described are differences and similarities between country auctions with diffuse offerings and city auctions with an intensely concentrated structure. Community, collaboration and competition are elements of auction life, and Chapter 4 reveals how supply and demand – and other factors, such as bidding rings and bidding specifics – affect competition and the outcome.

Chapter 5 addresses an important part of my thesis and maintains that goods have socially-relevant features and how reassigning ownership can be transformative. Compiled histories are culturally important and are factors that influence value. Even though some goods are symbolically important, that does not eliminate their commodification. Examples of bidding scenarios, the process that will redistribute goods, are described. The social side of fieldwork and the intrigue of exchange are considered in Chapter 6. As in Shakespeare's plays, one finds comedy, history, tragedy and romance within this theatre of commerce, which supports an extraordinary blend of people, process and product. Although *caveat emptor* speaks for itself, read Chapter 7 to learn how no one is exempted from educating themselves. Increased values do increase risk, and center-city houses, who promote the exchange of prestigious goods, try to prepare themselves for those eventualities.

## **Chapter One**

### **Ethnographic Observations of Symbolic and Culturally-Significant Exchanges within a Social Arena**

Social-cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1949- ) writes that “a commodity is *any thing intended for exchange*” (his italics) (1986, 9); they are “products of a particular sort” (9)... “with a particular type of social potential” (1986, 6). Appending this assessment is Igor Kopytoff’s argument that commodities can have “culturally regulated” and distinct “life histories” and that “individual taste” becomes a component to add meaning and value to commodities (Appadurai 1986, 17). Three-phase biographies of commodities (a singularized identity before the sale, a commodity during the sale and -- after the exchange -- removed from the commodity state, reinstated into a singular state with a new identity) are pivotal and reveal “what is significant about the adoption of alien objects...the way they are culturally redefined and put to use” (Kopytoff 1986; 65, 67).

Through my reading and fieldwork I have observed how these transactional procedures circulate material culture and create a material history through theoretically and socially constructed “channels of exchange” (Appadurai 1986, 24) where “men define their...value” (Appadurai 1986, 20) as in the Kula-type complicated ceremonial trade system that “moves commodities across spheres” (Appadurai 1986, 27). For generations, within the Trobriands, a ring of islands off New Guinea, the men who participate in the Kula exchange two types of objects in a highly-regulated, “closely standardized” and complex manner (Douglas & Isherwood 1979, 145). Decorated red-shelled necklaces circulate in one direction, and white-shelled armbands travel in the opposite direction, and they, and the men who trade them, acquire specific histories and reputations, thereby defining the value of these objects. Ritually moving from hand to hand in “an organized and systemized effort,” these socially valuable material goods link

islanders and acquire specific biographies (Malinowski 1922, 154). Traders build reputations, in effect licensing them to trade goods among other islanders; these “permanent and lifelong” trading partnerships throughout the islands maintain a balance of trade and involve aspects of marriage and inheritance (Malinowski 1984, 395). Enmeshed within the social construct of this ceremonial clockwise/counter-clockwise trade of long necklaces and bracelets are elements of building wealth, which broadens the construct to include economics (Malinowski 1922, 157). Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1986) refers to the model of trade developed by the Kula as a “tournament of value” where participation is “an instrument of status” and the “disposition of tokens...of value” “occur[s] in special times and places...with consequential forms and outcomes” (21).

In auction settings an array of human behaviors and emotions is on display, evoked from the dramatic dominance of a skilled auctioneer to the subordination of the expectant, anxious audience who experience a different kind of marketing system and may feel they are in a liminal space. The “unfolding process” of auctions is an alternative way, through a socially dependent ceremony with “an undercurrent of uncertainties,” to establish price and value and to re-allocate ownership among a body of potential buyers (Smith 1989, 52). These are not fixed-price exchanges (i.e., department and grocery stores) with conventional structures.

My experiences, usually as a casual buyer and *unusually* as an introspective buyer, at auctions aroused my ethnographic curiosity about the connection between material culture and people and how – within the social setting of auctions -- identities of people and the goods they acquire can be transformed. “Consumption [of material culture] is not compelled... consumers exert their own choices” within their own specific contexts; taste, judgments and preferences

may not always appear to be rational, but are often culturally based (Douglas & Isherwood 1979, 56-57). “Goods” do “emanate messages about rank” (Douglas & Isherwood 1979, 188).

Sociologist/anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) introduces the concept that consumers have a social hierarchy, “which predisposes tastes to function as markers of ‘class’ ” (1984, 1-2). He proposes that “consumption is...a stage in the process of communication” and that “meaning and interest [for a commodity] is for someone who possesses cultural competence” to read the communicated code (1984, 2). Consider that unique, early furniture sets an owner apart and might indicate taste and old money. Being the top bidder of an important lot can promote – or repress -- one’s stature within the corps of fellow travelers. Both ways, the bidder is critiqued, either gaining or losing prestige, and his reputation may be recast. At a January 2017 Sotheby’s auction of a “highly important Americana collection,” Lot 2067, a “very fine and rare Queen Anne turret-corner walnut games table...circa 1760” held a pre-sale estimate of \$40,000 to \$80,000, apparently without a low-price reserve (i.e., it cannot be sold for less) because it sold to the “gentleman in the room, Paddle 602” for \$20,000. The bidder seated in back of me whispered to his friend, “Boy, that was a steal” (Sotheby’s 9605, 50). Occasionally, Lady Luck intervenes.

These perceptions have led me to the topic of interactive auctions, an “organized social construction” where goods -- and they all have a history (revealed or unrevealed) -- and people circulate in an arena comprised of complex public relationships and become a community, sharing a social event (Malinowski 1922, 83). This social event with its practices and meanings fulfills the human “propensity ‘to truck, barter and exchange’... [because] individuals seek market interactions,” a model of the division of labor developed by Adam Smith in 1776 in the *Wealth of Nations* (Gudeman 2001, 82). However, to fulfill the human expression of desire

depends on wealth: I really want this, but can I afford it? While material wants and needs are subjective and abundant, they vary and are culturally constructed, often reinforced by social status and its attendant pressure. Exchanging goods in this manner creates a cohesive society, and “markets are a human social construction” to ensure that a proper mechanism (an institution with rules and trust) exists to organize and legitimize buying and selling (McMillan 2002; 9, 14).

As the circulation of Kula articles in Papua, New Guinea, is governed “by a set of traditional rules and convention” within the context of their cultural context, so is the “public ceremony” of each auction (Malinowski 1922, 81). The “public, ‘collective witnessing’ of this circulation” is an important dynamic that characterizes auctions (Jarvenpa 2003, 557). During my fieldwork, I have observed that, universally, overarching ceremonial and social similarities exist among auctions: bidders greet one another as they preview the lots, register and are given a number. Regular attenders often use the same bid number each week, which ensures they will be recognized in a special category of customers. Goods are identified by lot number; event rules – which intensify as the value of the goods does – govern the process. Participants depend on “basic adherence to practices and courtesies which are collectively upheld” (Smith 1989, 67).

The auctioneer controls the process from his podium; familiar faces gather – dressed in a range of denim to designer, and within the clique is a resultant camaraderie. Another factor is that staff is courteous, attentive and knowledgeable. Basically, across class lines auction people, dealers and house personnel speak auction-ese within a similar dialect: Bid, bid is with you, bid is against the house, bid is on the floor, absentee or left bid, as is, reserve, lot number, auctioneer, bidder number, presale estimate, provenance, registration, hammer price, buyer’s premium and so forth. These are part of what postmodern anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu referred to as producing “the *habitus*...which produces individual and collective practices – more history”

(Bourdieu 1980, 495). In this time-honored, structured system, attendees hungry for information will watch for a high-profile name like Sotheby's or Christie's appended to a property's vetted history because most likely that attribution will boost its standing among a core of dealers and collectors. Clifford Geertz summed up the basic organization of Moroccan bazaars by noting that "their basic organization and mode of function vary very little. A *sūq* is a *sūq*... The players differ (and the stakes), but not the shape of the game" (Geertz et al 1979, 175).

However, as I will show in Chapter 3, there are differences between what I call "no-collar" and "white-collar" auctions in terms of the place, objects, patrons and economics.

Throughout an auction's theater cum market, goods are dispersed to new owners, who exchange capital for commodities whose symbolic meanings and social uses change in this process. Christie's recently auctioned property of Old South Church in Boston (staging ground for the Tea Party, 1773). Their Boston Brahmin history gives them a special status. Silver religious ceremonial objects made for ritual use – beakers and wine cups crafted in the early 1700s by Jeremiah Dummer (first native-born American silversmith) and John Coney (his protégé and friend) – traveled from a hallowed state, representing the core of their religious community, entered the commodification stage and were repositioned into a profane commercial world after they were sold (Christie's 13791, 781-784). For centuries they had played a sacred role in this historically-significant congregation's celebration of the sacrament of Holy Communion.

As soon as these heirloom, silver, religious objects from Boston moved to the auction-house environment, they became commodities "divorced from their social context" (Spooner 1986, 199), now in a new setting, exhibited in display cases and catalogued as lot numbers with dimensions, histories and estimates, on exhibit waiting to be sold to the highest bidder, who may

present them as aesthetically pleasing decorative art objects. Circulating within a different network, their future will probably minimize their past religious context, instead maximizing their history as icons of Boston's silver-makers' craftsmanship.<sup>2</sup> Because these fall into a culturally important category with quasi-landmark status, it could be argued that they should not be circulating in the common exchange market, but they were privately owned, not state owned.

In a similar construction, anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942) considered the significance of trading arm-shells and shell-strings, correspondingly valuable and impractical to use daily, both prized objects of the Kula exchange. He conceptualized that the revered role of the Trobriand valuables in the South Seas was comparable to that of The Crown Jewels displayed at Edinburgh Castle: "heirlooms too valuable and too cumbersome to be worn... possessed for the sake of possession itself... ownership...is the main source of their value... cherished because of the historical sentiment which surrounds them" (Malinowski 1922, 159-160). Theorist Igor Kopytoff (1930-2013) wrote that commoditization (transactions involving exchange of things of value) is a structured process (1986, 68). After a transaction, goods become decommoditized and lose their identity as exchangeable goods, acquiring a new identity and an amended cultural biography, thereby recovering their "singularized" status; this applies to individually appropriated things as well as cultural collections, "symbolic inventor[ies] of society:...public lands, monuments, state art collections, ritual regalia and objects" et al (Kopytoff 1986, 73-4). Of course, if an object leaves this closed or singularized network, it can become recommoditized.

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<sup>2</sup> In December, 2012, the congregation voted to sell "several pieces of extremely valuable church property and pieces of their past." Despite the fact that the church has a \$23 million endowment, the senior minister, Reverend Nancy Taylor, said the "dollars the sale could raise could be better used to ensure the future of the church's work, and could keep the old building preserved." Jeff Makhholm, the church historian disagreed: "These are elements of our Puritan and Colonial past that help define what we are as a Congregational Church. The idea that you would sell those items of our heritage and break faith with those who gave them to us is disturbing to many members of the congregation" (Tucci, 2012).

In 1988, to satisfy debt of nearly \$50 million, iconic Texas politician John Connally was forced to auction his belongings. His wife commented, ‘There’s a story behind almost every one of the 1,100 items... It’s more than giving away physical items. It’s giving away a part of what we are’ (Smith 1989, 182-83). Purchasers will recall the context of John Connally’s political career as governor, Secretary of the Treasury, or as a passenger in President Kennedy’s car when he was assassinated. While these remembrances will be attached to each item, they will be outside their original context.<sup>3</sup>

As I leaf through papers in a box at a country auction in Coventry, Connecticut, I find handwritten accounts from the Burke family in the Fairfield/Middletown area, Connecticut. An 1873 invoice (in beautiful scrolling calligraphy) – “invariably payable in advance” to J. D. Atherton, steward -- bore the letterhead of “The General Hospital for the Insane, Board of Private and Indigent Patients,” and was billed to Mrs. Eliza Ann Burke. She stayed for “29 and ½ weeks of board, at \$2.50 a week for a total of \$72.86.” Additionally, the invoice lists that on July 4 one single blanket was destroyed, costing \$2.75; on the same day, a sheet was destroyed, \$1.50. Two other sheets, \$1.50 each, bring the total charge to \$75.86. The family made a cash advance of \$5; adjusting the charges, the superintendent accepted a payment of the full amount of \$37.73. I doubt the Burke family would have wanted this “dirty laundry” displayed for the public to witness; but after 144 years, the sacredness vaporized as the Burke family core diluted. Although I did not purchase the lot, as I review my notes, it strikes me as a touching remembrance of a personal struggle eight years after the end of the Civil War.

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<sup>3</sup> *The New York Times* reported that Secretary Connally filed for personal bankruptcy because his overleveraged real estate investment firm, formed during the 1981 market boom, was affected by a drop in oil prices, which led to the “collapse of the Texas real estate market” and economic depression was felt throughout the state. At one time his debt – which could not be restructured -- was estimated at \$170 million, eventually reduced to just over \$25 million (“Real estate woes,” 1987).

Determining the value of heirlooms is a cultural construct, and “psychological and sociological forces [are] at work” (Malinowski 1984, 90)<sup>4</sup>. As the owner-sellers have subjective agency, driven by underlying personal feelings and emotive aesthetics, these material objects most probably will acquire an objective agency as their biography becomes unemotionally fact based; thereby, they are converted and recontextualized. The conceptual and mental attitudes within an upscale auction in New York City are fundamentally the same as in the Kula arm shell-necklace trade in New Guinea’s Trobriand Islands. Trading goods with a life history is a “ritual cycle” that “plays an important part in regulating the relationships of [trading] groups” with the human and nonhuman components of their environment (Rappaport 1967, 293). Object transfers at auctions – by human actors – are socialized and consider usefulness, condition and scarcity, as well as the biography of the item, to afford aesthetic and commercial value. In addition to the fundamental multi-faceted significance of the goods, the “difficulty of acquisition...and sacrifice offered” are also important (Appadurai 1986, 4).

Even the taste of a collector has value (Freund 1993, 62). And “taste” can be an idea elevated to “index character and national virtue” (Pochoda 2016, 52-3). Bourdieu summarizes that “taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier” (1984, 6). Considering taste, he refers to Kant’s ‘taste of sense’ and ‘taste of reflection’ (1984, 6). While the former pleases “vulgar” natural senses, the latter legitimately “affirms superiority” and is “predisposed to become a symbol of moral excellence...” (1984, 6). He holds that “taste is...acquired (and again he borrows from Kant) to ‘differentiate’ and ‘appreciate,’ and it “functions as a sort of social orientation...guiding the occupants...towards the social positions...and goods which befit the

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<sup>4</sup> When Israel Sack, Inc., the nationally respected and premier antiques’ establishment, closed its doors in 2002 and liquidated its assets, Sotheby’s auctioned the remaining lots of furniture and accessories. Industry insiders mentioned to me that this “forced sale” liquidation depressed the market because bidders were afraid that the goods were leftovers and wondered what was wrong with each piece. The reasoning was that the Sack family members would have kept or sold the best pieces themselves.

occupants of that position” (1984, 466). Furthermore, perhaps unconsciously, “taste is what brings together things and people that go together” (Bourdieu 1984, 241). An impressive home fitted with opulent or singular pieces of furniture, unique decorative arts, rare books and hand-knotted Persian carpets is a classifier and promotes a certain imagery and aesthetic of taste. This is “culture...acting out in public symbols...and is the mechanism by which members of a society communicate their worldview” within their social meme (Geertz 1973, 467).

Information is a game changer in the pursuit of commodities. Sociologist Clifford Geertz surveyed the bazaar economy (the *sūq*) in Sefrou, Morocco. While the bazaar is characterized by sellers who want to profit and buyers who desire maximum value in a system governed by supply and demand, missing is reliable information. It is “generally poor, scarce, maldistributed, inefficiently communicated, and intensely valued” (Geertz et al 1979, 124). Within this arabesque of marketing, there is no advertising, no concrete or reliable knowledge, and products are not standardized (Geertz et al 1979, 124). Inevitably, searching for information, and protecting it when you get it, is part of the game plan and is supplemented by a buyer’s reputation for intensive and skillful bargaining paired with “capital, industriousness, luck and privilege” (Geertz et al 1979, 125). It takes a well-honed sixth sense to “decid[e] whom, what and how much to believe and, believing (or half-believing), what and how much – and in whom – to confide” (Geertz et al 1979, 203). Therefore, buying skills become more important than selling in the *sūq* as buyers within this “crowd of rivals” work to find what their options are within this complex “noisy communication network” that features all of the elements of organized confusion (Geertz et al 1979, 203, 125).

Similarly, aficionados of early American furniture pack into New York City to buy history while rubbing shoulders with kindred spirits. For two weeks in late January, the city is

“awhirl with shows and sales, offering much of a historical nature to admire and buy” (Beach 2017, 20). Concomitantly, the weeks are saturated in a social swirl. Peter Wunsch, son of an eminent collector, discussed his father’s interest and involvement with an interviewer from *The Magazine Antiques*: ‘The history behind everything he...acquired was...paramount. There was...a great social interest. He liked to bring people together; the dinners he would organize after auctions at Christie’s and Sotheby’s...were legendary. Collectors came, curators came, dealers came, and they were all there for the same reason – they were sharing; they were discussing’ (Adamson 2016, 42).

As I shadow two well-respected dealers (informants who prefer anonymity) through Sotheby’s preview during Americana Week in January 2017, they carefully inspect items carefully arranged in galleries that resemble museums, as one tells me: “concentrating on things we are attracted to.” One observed that he could not “recall seeing so much furniture; a lot for now.” I asked why. “Cycle of life” was the matter-of-fact reply. This was not their first time vetting Sotheby’s collection that week. Nor is it their first time at Sotheby’s; in fact, both have cultivated and maintained social capital accumulated over decades with staff – and other dealers. It was not unusual for fellow travelers to cordially greet them with “hi, how are you?” accompanied by a handshake or a slap on the back. A staff member tries to entice my expert guides to attend some evening promotional-social events, which they politely turn down. It is important to appreciate that, on one hand, independent dealers are the key customers of auction houses; on the other hand, they also are prime competitors (Lacey 1998, 105).

Preparations for the Kula’s big trade (*uvaluku*) expeditions take at least six months. They build new canoes and overhaul old ones, make sago cakes, prepare sleeping mats, collect food and yams and other gifts for distribution – in addition to ensuring their inventory of arm bands

and beads is sufficient for ritual circulation (Malinowski 1984, 379-90). To prepare to trade in New York City, my informants spend nearly two weeks of intense work in New York City – reinforced by months of time-consuming prep work – advance advertising, choosing items, arranging for shipping and unloading, ensuring the descriptive labels are accurate and designing the booth. A load of carefully culled pieces from their shop is on a truck, soon to be delivered and then suitably arranged (staged) at an assigned spot on the floor of the Winter Antiques Show, a site layered with social-ness. (Apparently, political leverage gets dealers a better booth space. Also important is the dealer’s relationship with the promoter or show manager. It is worth nothing that show organizers do adjudicate displays.) This is “deep play”; the stakes are high: social constructs such as “esteem, honor, dignity, respect and status” are all elements in this prestigious exhibition of material culture (Geertz 1973, 476). And the financial commitment is significant: “ka-ching, ka-ching” one dealer comments.

The community of more professional bidders peer-to-peer collaborate and mentor one another. In midmorning an acquaintance joins them as they make the rounds with me in tow. “Hey, would you look at a couple of pieces with me?” Then, he hesitates, hand-gestures to me, the intruder: “Is this all right?” The pursuit of good pieces is competitive. Ideals of condition – an indicator of value -- are closely guarded, shielded from auction-house management, as well as from this “focused gathering” of others, a “sociological entity” of individuals “engrossed in a common flow of activity...who relate “to one another in terms of that flow” – as were the Balinese who participated in the cockfight culture (Geertz 1973, 474). This process has the elements of an intimate contest with ceremonial preparation and close association between a dealer and his merchandise, also somewhat similar to the Balinese who carefully groom cocks, inspect them for flaws and discuss them with “rapt admiration” (Geertz 1973, 471). The tutorial

excursion around the exhibit floor extended to about a half-dozen friendly consultations – plus lunch.

My informants may be buying for a client or stocking their inventory. Using flashlights and flood lamps brought from their shop, they carefully position items of interest on a furniture blanket (provided by the auction house on request) and diligently inspect the interior, taking out drawers and turning furniture pieces upside down to determine authenticity, while also absorbing clean lines, proportions and faithfulness to the design of a certain era. So that their comments remain confidential, both quietly confer as they carefully check inside and outside surfaces and finishes, including hardware, wood type and color, repairs, glue marks, intact glue blocks, secondary-wood oxidation, appropriate staining, inside labels, interior chalk marks, base-to-top adjustment markings, wood shrinkage, wear marks, the tactile feel of workmanship including wood plane marks, crackling on veneered surfaces – as well as book-end matching of veneers, feet restoration, chair splats, carving anomalies and other tool marks.

Drawn to a pair of late eighteenth-century portraits with a Connecticut connection, they ask a specialist to be able to black-light the paintings, which will show repairs not visible to the naked eye. Accommodating staffers remove the paintings from the display and take them to a small dark room, where a Sotheby's specialist is also in attendance. Staff specialists are experts in their fields and help curate exhibits, and may publish or teach. Back-and-forth remarks between the house and the dealers include: “no conservation report from conservator;” “Civil War frames, maybe a little earlier;” “small defects have been repaired;” “who they are and the artist – a rare combination;” “well-done hands, nice pearls;” “artist paid attention to women;” “new stretchers and tension screws.” In conclusion, Sotheby's rep mentions that we “have had some interest.” One of the prospective buyers notes the paintings are “great on a lot of levels,”

obviously a “charismatic” lot. They let me know that not too long ago they had sold two portraits by the same artist – so they are familiar with the painter – a “self-taught portraitist who was given the use of a room at the newly constructed Connecticut State House as a studio and gallery” (Sotheby’s 9607, Lot 4290). If the piece has a “bad odor,” is not “pure enough,” is a “readjusted concoction” with too many replacements, or is too much a “marriage of old pieces” and repairs, they will probably pass on the lot. Issues of condition are weighted: At what point does condition become so dominant that it damages the piece to a level it cannot be appreciated? The degree of restoration affects value proportionately and is increasingly important in a difficult market. However, with rarity, condition issues can be accepted. Consider that the ancient Greek statue Venus de Milo does not have arms, but it stands as an icon in the Louvre.

Their reputation is at stake. These “tokens of value” hold distinct provenances with important defining characteristics, become “instruments of status” to the procurer and are “cherished because of the historical sentiment that surrounds them,” similar to the Kula necklace beads and armbands made of “spondylus discs” and cowrie shells, both of which are primarily ornamental and worn on festive occasions (Appadurai 1986, 21; Malinowski 1984, 87, 89). Similar to goods auctioned worldwide, the Kula’s goods and tokens are traded within a rational system, an exchange that combines commercial and social aspects of trade (Malinowski 1984, xi). “Not isolated,” the items to be auctioned are “embedded in a complex social reality of history of ownership, origin...and relationships between people with an interest in the items” (Smith 1989, 40). To facilitate this “exchange of wealth and utilities,” an expert dealer is an important link in the chain of custody (Malinowski 1984, 84).

Another social aspect of the preview was extended to a porter, a young member of the floor staff. He stood beside my mentors as they examined a knee-hole desk. As they described

the outside trim, the term “ogee” was mentioned. He asked about the technical expression. My dealer friend took him on a short exhibit floor “tour” looking for other examples and fully explained the term, ensuring a connection between this material good and an interested person. (An ogee turn is a double, continuous, S-shaped curve with two arcs that curve in opposite directions with ends being parallel, probably borrowed from thirteenth-century English Gothic architecture.) Exchanging information is a long-standing tradition. Educating new collectors and encouraging their interest in antiques is vital to maintain market momentum. To that end, dealers at shows and at their shops sponsor forums to boost appreciation of these goods. Such discourse that continues knowledge has supported the exchange of commodities throughout the history of auction practice.

## **Chapter Two**

### **History of and Types of Auctions: For Better or for Worse**

For centuries auctions have been a common venue where diffuse categories of goods have changed hands in what I call a theater of commerce. To appreciate the auction phenomenon, it is necessary to understand the structure and scale of auctions, a system of placing property in the open market by inviting buyers to competitively outbid one another, forcing the selling price higher, for the right to acquire title to the property (Cassady 1980; 8, 12). Like a tug of war, buyers try to limit competitive pressure, and sellers want to boost pressure. Those who conduct auctions usually do not own the goods; they act as an agent for the owner. However, auction houses can purchase goods to resell them – foregoing their status as an agent. Hayloft, a division of auction-house William Doyle Galleries, Inc., is an on-line-only auction house -- found on Facebook and Instagram -- that “does not accept items on consignment”...they “purchase property outright from [their] clients,” and buyers pay a 23% premium plus New York state sales tax – unless the item is shipped out of state (Demers 2016, 1).

Hence, purchases at auctions involve an organized trio of participants, each has a different function but holds one end-game: a consigner who wants to off-load goods works with an auctioneer who supplies a place and a staff to accommodate a sale, and presents items to potential buyers who bid on each item until the competitive increase of bids stops. This ancient procedure of a triangularly-structured exchange, administered by an auctioneer, converts goods from a sacred status laden with special, sentimental meanings (singularized, with ancestral history “inside”) and moves them to profane commodified trade markets, where the user – and perhaps the use -- changes.

When Herodotus discussed the customs of the Babylonians, he described annual sales of women of marrying age (1928, 73). As early as the fifth-century B.C., annual wedding auctions were held, which transformed social identities and altered communal ties. In each village women of marrying age were gathered “while men stood round them in a circle” (Herodotus 1928, 72). The most beautiful were the first to be offered as wives “for no small sum of money,” but by the time the last bride – “the ugliest...or a cripple” was auctioned, buyers would be paid from funds previously paid for the most desirable brides. Herodotus believed this to “be the best of their customs” because it “saved the maidens from violence... [preventing them from being] torn from them and carried to distant cities” (1928, 74).

Since these were “collectively witnessed” auctions, the public participated in vetting the “goods” (Jarvenpa 2003, 557). The familiar phrase, “...if anyone knows reasons why this marriage should not proceed, let them speak now or forever hold their peace,” is probably a holdover from this ancient activity (Smith 1989, 49). While Herodotus’s account is usually attributed as the first account to be published, some scholars contend that the sale into slavery of Abraham’s great-grandson Joseph – by his brothers -- was an auction (Milgrom 1989, 3).

Formalized during the Roman Empire, they were used a means to profit from plundered spoils of war and to sell captured prisoners. Business agents accompanied armies so they could immediately auction war materiel. To liquidate booty, soldiers returning from war would auction objects either plundered or no longer needed. Because of the way they acquired goods, Roman soldiers were uncertain of their value or even their right to own them, so an auction provided a public forum that set a price and designated a lawful owner (Smith 1989, 40). The key participants were the organizer of the sale, the promoter (auctioneer), and the seller and buyer, with the sales held in an *atrium auctionarium* (“auction” -- from the Latin *auctio*,

meaning “increase”) (Partridge 1958, 23). Auctioneers announced successively higher bids until none were forthcoming. Both Caligula and Marcus Aurelius auctioned furniture and property to help meet debts. At one point, the entire Roman Empire was placed on the block by the Praetorian Guard. The winner was declared emperor; however, he was beheaded after two months (Cassady 1980; 28, 29). It is known that Greeks auctioned mine concessions for crystals, malachite, quartz, etc. and also sold slaves.

The English held bankruptcy auctions as early as the late 1600s, and by the mid-1700s auctions were held by court order. By the seventeenth century onward, estates of dead people provided considerable goods to be offered at auction, including, later, those adversely affected by the French Revolution (1789) and the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815). The 1848 bankruptcy of the Second Duke of Buckingham and Chandos resulted in a significant forty-day auction, supervised by Christie’s, held at his home in Stowe. His manor home-as-showroom promoted voyeuristic interest, just as at the Waln preview of 1821 in Philadelphia. The expense of decorating and refurbishing to prepare for a visit by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert added irreparable damages to his own poor financial management, underscored by debts accumulated by his profligate father (Learmount 1985, 118). In England, after about 1870, competition from imported foreign agricultural products resulted in an agricultural depression (Faith 1985, 22). Land values and rents collapsed, and the gentry needed cash. The Settled Lands Acts of 1882 and 1884 allowed estates that had been “entailed” (not allowing family-owned property to be sold) with a life settlement to sell property, including heirlooms (earlier, moveable contents had been permitted to be sold) (Lacey 1998, 41). This huge diaspora of centuries’-old treasures boosted auction sales to the extent that Sotheby’s and Christie’s joined forces to accomplish an amazing dispersal of books, paintings and furniture. The requirement to pay death duties to

cover the country's First World War (1914-1918) debt prompted more auctions. If the landed gentry had not invested in business ventures to cover the expenses of their estates, property had to be divested.

Throughout there have been scant attempts to regulate auctions; however, public sentiment provoked an auction challenge in the mid-1800s. So many goods were produced during The Industrial Revolution (1760-1830) that British manufacturers dumped surplus products accumulated after Napoleon forbade trade with Britain (1806) and consigned their goods to agents in American ports (Cassady 1980, 33). Before 1812, importing and retailing efforts had been controlled by local merchants, and even small ports in Alexandria, Charleston, Savannah, Augusta, etc., were prosperous (Secrist 1914, 149; New York & Leggett 1828, 4). However, by 1828 American custom houses were handling a glut of imported "deceptive and worthless goods" destructive to domestic manufacturers (prices were lower in Britain) to the extent that citizens met to consider "the ruinous effects of the present Auction system"...that was "affording foreign consigners... great advantages over regular American merchants...facilitating frauds...inducing speculation... and destroying confidence in...mercantile transactions" (New York & Leggett 1828, 1).

While auctions were a quick way for British merchants to raise cash, oversupply glutted the markets, prices began to fall and resentment began to build. "Merchants and good citizens" formed the Anti-Auction Movement of 1828, the precursor to the Workingmen's Party of New York City (Secrist 1914; 152, 149). Petitioning Congress, they lobbied for a 10% buyer's tax (duty) on auction sales to "correct the evils resulting from the system" and put up candidates for Congress who lobbied to abolish the present system of auctions because they oppressed the "producing classes by introducing... products of labor of foreign countries...otherwise...

furnished by our own mechanics” (Secrist 1914; 153, 152, 161). Eventually, the issues surrounding this “complicated evil” were displaced by other struggles – schools, abolishing imprisonment for debt, etc. (New York & Leggett 1828, 16; Secrist 1914, 163).

Many of the world’s most important wholesale markets are auction markets (Klemperer 2004, 9; Bestor 2004). Commodities throughout the world are affected by the underlying price-setting function of auctions. This format is popular because it efficiently “maximizes returns in relation to the effort expended by buyers and sellers” (Cassady 1980, 16). Competitive buyers with a will to possess, in a general sense, control the price. The broad arrays of property routinely exchanged are either used or raw materials; it is unusual for newly manufactured goods to be auctioned, except for stock liquidations. Types of goods include bonds and stocks, U. S. Treasury bills, futures’ commodities markets (from pork bellies to corn), automobiles, livestock, precious metals, gems, rare books and maps, classical masterpieces (paintings, sculptures, decorative elements), focused collections, furniture and fixtures, firearms, ephemera, coins, real estate, oil, yachts, high-frequency radio/wireless wave spectrums, meat, fish and, heart-wrenchingly, human beings.

Kopytoff writes that “people who represent the natural universe of individuation and singularization...can be and have been commoditized...by way of slavery” (1986, 64). Treated as property, their status is marginal and ambiguous. Each time they are sold and “reinserted into the host group,” each is “resocialized and rehumanized...and given a “new social identity” (Kopytoff 1986, 65). When slaves are pushed into the commodity market by one faction and then pulled away by another, they regain their singularity; status-wise, they are “potential commodities with a potential exchange value that may be realized by resale” (Kopytoff 1986,

65). As both immigrants and emigrants in a strange land, they are socially and culturally recast each time they are sold.

Our country's history has been marred by the sin of slavery. In 1619 twenty Africans arrived "in a Dutch man-of warre" in Jamestown, Virginia, and the American slave trade began (Mellon 1988, xi). Abducted from their families and villages on Africa's west coast, they crossed the Atlantic packed like pieces of lumber into the holds of ships. Filled with British manufactured goods to export to Africa to exchange for slaves, the first ship to embark from Liverpool to participate in trading merchandise for human cargo was in 1709. Seventy-five years later, eighty-eight vessels from Liverpool were trading in slaves (Learmount 1985, 30). Despite official acts abolishing slavery in Britain and France in the early 1800s, a large and profitable trade in slaves developed in that era. These humans, now commodities, were crucial to one leg of the Triangular Trade, as sugar, rum, tobacco, textiles and lumber completed the other two complementary routes to Britain and Africa. In the early 1700s shiploads of manufactured goods from two legs of the trade route were auctioned at the dock, and auctions became the "quick and efficient" method to disperse the inflow of Africans arriving in America and the Caribbean, used as cheap labor on tobacco and cotton plantations (Learmount 1985, 30).

One could propose that without the institution of auctions – often Court-ordered to settle death benefits among heirs and to meet debts of slave owners, the cruel and oppressive slave trade embedded in our country, and underpinning much of our national economy until the late 1800s, would not have succeeded. These demeaning, transactional, highly-regulated ceremonies – slaves were property and traded in that manner -- made slaves more accessible. Slaves were "deprived of rights and liberties" and were as powerless as a chest of drawers; their sense of selves and their domestic units were irreparably degraded in the auction process (Finkelman

1997, 15). Not only were their God-given sacredness and equality thrown into a profane cesspool, but also their family and social bonds were torn asunder. The “self-evident” truths “that all men are created equal,” stated in our *Declaration of Independence* (1776), were cast aside, and destructive reasoning for the sake of financial gain set forth a “train of abuses and usurpations” (*Declaration of Independence*).

Throughout the south, the value of the slave population was second only to real estate; by 1860, their population was almost four million (Finkelman 1997, 18). Considered by law to be privately-held property and a “farmer’s most liquid and value capital asset,” auction sales enabled the uprooting of these men, women and children for the owner’s benefit (Finkelman 1997, 330). Slaves were stripped of their human rights, “sold away from one’s wife and children in a public auction... rented out, borrowed, traded for a mule or cow...willed to the master’s relatives, seized as payment for debts, put up as collateral for loans, or lost by one’s owner in a card game” (Mellon 1988, xiv).

Subsidized by the Federal Writers’ Project, part of the Works Progress Administration, canvassers searched for and interviewed over two thousand former slaves in the midst of the Great Depression, when – out of the four million men and women born into slavery – only a few thousand black Americans who had endured “the arrogance of statutory slavery” survived (Mellon 1988, xii). Edited by James Mellon, this record of poignant, first-hand, candid testimonies -- memoirs of slavery -- is sobering. Auctions played a pivotal part in this human trafficking, commoditizing humanity and establishing “publicly their new social identity as slaves” (Smith 1989, 49), an ambiguous status that permitted humans to move from the “status of exchangeable commodity and toward that of a singular individual” with a social identity (Kopytoff 1986, 65). However, they could be retro-transformed and, therefore, recommoditized.

Former slave George Fleming's (b. 1854) narrative includes an account of his friend Bill, stolen from Virginia: "I don't know how Marse got him. Sometimes dey would buy 'em and agin dey would steal-em – sort of like stealing a dog" (Mellon 1988, 253). He further relates that whippings were done by the master, but he did not have to do much because "he would say, if dat nigger didn't walk de chalk, he would put him on de block and sell him. Dat was usually enough, 'cause Marse meant dat..." His first-person account continues: "old Joe Crews...a reg'lar nigger trader" who "bought niggers, stole 'em frum Virginia and places, and drove 'em through de country like a bunch of hogs...In town dey have big nigger sellings, and all de marsters frum all over de countryside be dar to bid on 'em. Dey put 'em up on de block and holler 'bout dis and dat dey could do and how strong dey was. 'Six hundred – yip, yip, make it six fifty,' I heard 'em call many times...Some of dem throw a thousand dollars quick as day would ten at a purty gal" (Mellon 1988, 258-259).

Willis Cofer recalls that "at dem sales, dey would put a nigger on de scales and weigh him and den de biddin' would start. If he wuz young and strong, de biddin' would start round a hundred and fifty dollars, and de highest bidder got de nigger. A good young breedin' 'oman brung two thousand dollars easy, 'cause all de marsters wanted to see plenty of strong healthy chillum comin' on...Carpenters and bricklayers and blacksmiths brung fancy prices, from three thousands to five thousand dollars, sometimes. A nigger what warn't no more'n jes' a good field hand brung 'bout two hundred dollars" (Mellon 1988, 288). The men were called "bucks"; the women, "wenches."

It is believed that the greatest number of slave markets in any city in America was in New Orleans where confinement areas (*barracoons*) with slaves chained in groups lined the docks and waterfront districts, and auction blocks were ubiquitous (Partridge 1958, 43). A

broadside gives notice that at Banks' Arcade on Magazine Street in New Orleans (now the St. James Hotel) on Tuesday, February 5, 1856, at 12 o'clock J. J. Beard & May, "auct'r," will hold a "Credit Sale of a Choice Gang of 41 SLAVES!" (Mellon 1988, 289). The list includes "good blacksmiths, one superior bricklayer, field hands, laborers, one tanner, one cooper and a first rate woman cook"; twenty-eight-year-old Rueben is listed as "unsound" (Mellon 1988, 287). As a six- or seven year-old, informant Stephen Williams poignantly recalls, while in New Orleans, his master Mr. Abram "took sick and die, and we [his family] is taken to the trader yard to be sold" (Mellon 1988, 288). "I reckon there musta been a hundred colored folks in that trader yard, and the dirt and smell was terrible, terrible. I was jes' a little chap...but I can remember that place...husbands sold away from wives and children taken away from mothers. A trader...didn't think no more of selling a baby or little child away from its mother than taking a little calf away from a cow" (Mellon 1988, 290). Major Long, carrying a bullwhip, orchestrated the sale of Williams's sister Mary: "Twain't till after Freedom that we ever saw her again" (Mellon 1988, 290). By a set of unusual circumstances, Major Long allowed the rest of the family to remain intact, and they were removed to Alexandria "in a wagon" (Mellon 1988, 291).

The slaves were held in cattle pens or horse stalls. A curtain hid the "stock" from the bidders. Slave auction overseers would yell to the slaves on the block and make them hop, trot, jump, show their teeth. Lu Perkins recalls that when she was on the auction block, "they pulled my dress down over my back to my waist"; no gashes or slashes meant you "ain't a mean nigger" (Mellon 1988, 292). An observer at an auction in New Orleans: "When a woman is sold, the auctioneer [tells] a few indecent jokes...Show your neck, Betsy! There's a breast for you; good for a round dozen before she's done child-bearing" (Learmount 1985, 39). A

Frenchman who witnessed a public sale described them as “*une scene hideuse*” and found it difficult to believe that auctioneers “moved in polite society” (Learmount 1985, 39).

As they do today, “vendue masters,” powerful as agents of the court, “took a percentage of sales as commission...from 1.25 to 2.25 percent,” a motivating factor to conduct sales to liquidate assets, and slaves were the “most liquid and valuable” of a farmer’s assets (Finkelman 1997; 350-1, 330). Slave auctions operated under court-supported laws to settle debt and probate death benefits, and slaves were capital assets with such value that they were sold first; other property was reserved until receipts for slaves were tallied because that portion of the sale might cover the debt. Sample figures from 1850s antebellum South Carolina estimate that through 67,500 judicially-sanctioned probate, equity court and sheriffs’ sales, 14,600 slaves were sold, at “an annual sales rate of 2.9 percent of the South Carolina slave population per year” (Finkelman 1997, 348).

Slavery occurred in Connecticut. An October 6, 1766, advertisement in the *Connecticut Courant* placed by Timothy Miller of Middletown offered: “To be sold for cash or 6 months [sic] credit, with security, one Negro boy, about 17 years old; two girls ditto, about 10 or 11 years old, have been in the country about 3 months.” He continued that “beef, pork or grain will be taken as cash” (Keyes, 2016). The January 1774 account of inhabitants revealed that 1,093 Negro males and females resided in the county of Hartford (Census for the colony, 1774). By 1791 New Haven pastor Jonathan Edwards, D.D., published his sermon, “The Injustice and Impolicy of the Slave Trade, and of the Slavery of the Africans” (Connecticut History). A New Haven sheriff ran the next-cited sale because of a judgment placed against their owner. For \$10, on March 8, 1825, Anthony B. Sanford, a shareholder of Trinity Church in New Haven, purchased the last two slaves sold there, a forty-year-old woman and her sixteen-year-old

daughter. They were immediately set free. The price would indicate that other bidders were warned off, and the sheriff appears to have cooperated (Olsen 2012).

Within that culture of oppressive ownership, the legal system's operative role as "market actors" collectively institutionalized brutality and underwrote a destructive structural system of inhumane violence within the social arena of an auction (Finkleman 1997, 353). This repugnant behavior of conducting sales by operation of law disregarded the social structure of "black families and slave humanity" (Finkleman 1997, 355). This contaminated culture of convenience enforced bondage, stripped individual social identities and exposed the crass social condition of brutal racism, a culturally-constructed perception of differences, which cast a pall on our nation's integrity and morality.

### Types of Auctions

Because of the diversity of commodities and participants, "different auctions are governed by different types of rules and practices" (Smith 1989, 5). Each milieu has its own social process and "deals with diverse social relations, beliefs and behaviors" (Smith 1989, 5). Nevertheless, throughout the industry, standard auction formats with a communal character are evident: a supply of goods, demand and competition determine value in a dependable structure. Auctions are "tailored to the specific details and the situation" and are not "one size fits all" (Klemperer 2004, 13). Detailed here are the most common systems.

The English "outcry" ascending-price auction -- where value is "socially determined" by sequential competitive counter offers on a single good -- is the most popular, because it "raises the most revenue"; it is the most efficient, maximizes revenue gains, and is private (Milgrom 1989, 7). Beginning with the lowest price (or starting price), the reserve, the auctioneer establishes competition and solicits higher bids that rapidly escalate in sequential increments.

“On to Lot 16, the little maple one-drawer stand; bid \$500 to open it. \$500? \$400? It’s a nice size, good color; 350 to start me off? Yes, 350 all over the house and up front here; I’ll take 400; 400 I see already in the back; at 450 on the phones. 500, where are you?” gets the bidding started. The item is “knocked down” after the auctioneer states “Any advance? Last chance, anywhere? Are we all through? Fair warning then, OK? Against the phones (the phone bidder was the under bidder), selling to the lady up front for \$900. Well done, thank you.” and the house stops bidding when the hammer falls. The object is awarded to the bidder with the highest bid who, therefore, values the object most highly (Milgrom 1989, 8; Engelbrecht-Wiggans 1987, 5). A buyer can bid in person for an item, can submit a written offer (a left bid) – which the “desk” holds, and can bid, with the aid of an on-site sales assistant, over the phone or through the internet. Thereafter, the highest bid price affects the value because production costs are unknown, lost to history. (For bidders who want to be anonymous and not boost prices by their attendance, phone or internet bidding are good strategies.)

Here, bidders can learn from each other’s bids, and each knows others are willing to pay nearly as much, although this can lead to risky overbidding and cause the winner to pay too much for an item: “the winner’s curse” (Cramton 1998, 3). Remember, the loser’s effort was just one bid increment behind the winner’s, and the opportunity not to be the top bidder was a judgment call.

Simultaneously-made sealed-bid first-price auctions are independent, private and are structured to avoid collusion – competitors are independent, and the seller can compare bids and award the sale to the highest bidder. Normally, all bids are opened at the same time. These are effective for those who drill in offshore oil tracts. However, for construction contracts or government public works projects, the lowest sealed bid wins. In these cases, it is important that

each bidder studies past bids of competitors to learn their bidding patterns because each bid is simply a cost estimate, subject to error if costs are under- or overestimated (Milgrom 1989; 4, 5). If bids are too low, underestimating costs, and if the job is awarded on that basis, money will be lost, another version of the winner's curse.

The third standard auction type is the sealed-bid second-price auction, similar to the first-price auction except that the highest bidder pays the second-highest bid rather than his/her own first bid. Among others, stamp collectors believe this method incentivizes bids to be of truer value because the value is based on two bid amounts.

The Dutch instituted an upside-down model, with the outcome depending on bidder's knowledge of both valuations and other bidders' behaviors. It is also time consuming. The auctioneer begins with an asking price beyond what he hoped, which he gradually lowers until someone secures the lot by shouting "mine." The descending "mineing" method "discourages planning" by those involved and is still used in Dutch tulip and other flower auctions, as well as setting rates for U. S. government Treasury notes and when there are multiples of items being offered (Cassady 1980, 32; Milgrom 1989, 7; Sarna 2010, 288). In this instance, the first bid is most often the last bid.

Secondary types include mystery auctions where bids are placed on sealed boxes of goods, with the bidder hoping for the best. Abandoned storage units are disposed of in this auction structure and have been popularized by the reality television show, *Storage Wars* (Rademacher 2015, 677). These can attract a large number of bidders who are attracted by the possibility of a bargain. "Without reserve" or "absolute" auctions sell items regardless of price. Bidders in a reserve auction win the goods if the final bid hits the reserve price, the lowest price acceptable by the consignor, who effectively transfers property to the auction entity, the agent for

the sale. At charity events a sense of community is important to maintain as bids push higher. The social goal of defining one's status is often at stake. The participants legitimize the event. Many of us have participated in silent auctions where bids are written on a piece of paper beside donated items, and the starting amount and predetermined increments are posted there. The highest bidder wins the item.

The success of an auction house does depend on its ability to convince consigners to dispose of their goods through their auction house instead of another way. By the sixteenth century, consignors began to pay a commission on sales to the auction house to encourage the sale of goods. This process encouraged collusion because they placed bids on their own goods to inflate prices above their competitive value, and buyers' rings (bidding pools) developed (more detail in Chapter 4). There is evidence that Rembrandt participated in a ring, working to increase the bid of paintings offered by a friend; for that, he is reported to have been paid for his trouble (Heath 2014, 5).

By the end of the seventeenth century, auctions broadened their market and offered all manner of goods. It is at this time that impressive catalogues are introduced by auction houses to hype sales and, simultaneously, have the added benefit of indexing objects and sharing knowledge for the good of the community. They describe lots, their histories and their conditions (complete with qualifying phrases that lessen the auctioneer's and the seller's responsibility), as well as rules to prohibit vendors from bidding on their own goods and to prevent manipulation (Cassady 1980, 219). By the middle of the 1700s Sotheby's and Christie's were founded. While Sotheby's specialized in books, Christie's range of goods was broader, which aids an early ascendancy. Both have a "large store of legends," are highly ceremonial and

“rest on a firm, traditional foundation” –paralleling the system of ceremonial trading rites practiced by the Kula (Malinowski 1984, 102).

Historically, skillful auctioneers have been considered celebrities, who play to their audience with persuasive mannerisms that enable them to secure high prices (Heath 2014, 7). This occurs despite a conflicting need to convince sellers they have secured a high price and assure buyers that they are getting a good deal. To this day, many maintain a well-mannered, measured, polished presence. In January, 2017 at Sotheby’s: “No paddle? We’ll get you one.” “Are we going on? \$8,000 on-line; just in time; \$8,500 to the gentleman in the room, No. 602.” “Next bid is \$112,000 on the phone, and not yours on-line; I have to hurry you, just in time; sold to No. 602.” Each bid – the current price -- is announced by the auctioneer, often describing the source of the bid. Open-hand gestures toward the bidder acknowledge bids. For items that do not meet reserve – which creates the illusion of a second bidder -- the bidding starts with the house (i.e., their reserve): “\$14,000, 15, 16 showing on the screens here, 17? Anymore on this one? Seventeen, last chance.” Without interest on the phone lines, via the internet or on the floor, the auctioneer moves along: “Any advance? Fair warning; no regrets? A pass.” In this case, announcing increments invites bids and gives the impression of active bidding by a prospective buyer. (Sotheby’s 9605, MK observer). Without bids that reach the reserve price, the lot is bought in. Unsold, it returns to the owner. “Fair warning” is the standard term offering once last chance to bid; if none are forthcoming, the hammer “falls” and the sale is completed.

Bidding usually opens at the low estimate and advances in increments determined by the value of the item and by the auctioneer, typically scaled in standard units of tens or hundreds or thousands, etc. S/he has a reference sheet on the podium, an auction sale sheet, which lists lots by number, describes each and includes estimates, commission/absentee bids (“on the books”)

and reserve amounts; buyer number and price sold are noted by the auctioneer's staff (Heath 2014, 37). Better auction houses keep an electronic record of all bidding activity. Christie's and Sotheby's auction galleries continue to dominate sales of the most important art, antiques, wine, jewelry, and other properties. Sotheby's, founded in 1744, is the oldest company listed on the New York Stock Exchange.

In 1961 Columbia University political economist William Vickrey (1914-1996) used game theory to explain the dynamics of auctions and how to derive revenue by comparing several types of auctions. Studying both "open auctions" and "sealed tenders," he introduced theories that dealt with the "bidders' uncertainty about one another's likely bids"; his work garnered him the 1996 Nobel Prize in economics (Milgrom 1996, 382-3). Game theory is important because it defines how a person's gains result in losses for other participants, affecting decision-making behavior and revenue generation (Heath 2014, 15). How citizens react to taxation schemes is analyzed by game theory. However, economists are not likely to be influenced by the interwoven social dynamics that define and are embodied through the expressive intentions of participants, the procedures and customs inherent within the auction paradigm.

Auctions replace conventional merchandising methods to establish and manage the "ambiguity of value;" rooted in diverse contexts, they are "explicitly concerned with generating and maintaining ...social contexts as a means of determining value" (Smith 1989, 163). Thickly layered, omnipresent social spheres – from the scruffy to the sophisticated -- circulate within this marketplace.

### **Chapter Three**

#### **No-Collar vs. White-Collar Auctions**

To a casual observer, it might appear that the differences between small, local auctions and large productions in metropolitan areas would be difficult to breach. Although each cohort has its own cultural practices and attendees typically hold significant class differences, most attend to participate in the exchange of “products of a particular sort” (Appadurai 1986, 9) and to re-allocate ownership of the commodities offered for sale. I use the terms “no-collar” and “white-collar” to distinguish the class variances of attendees at different levels of auctions. Attendees of the country-auction cohort generally wear tee shirts; whereas, their sophisticated city counterparts are more inclined to wear a collared shirt.

Although no food is sold at Skinner’s or Sotheby’s, the canteen at local auctions generates an ambience of comfort, trust and community. At the local Coventry, Connecticut, weekly auction, the front section of the hall is dedicated to the “Country Cove Snack Shoppe,” and the aroma of pizza wafts throughout the hall. The message atop the lid of a box of donuts, each \$1, notes that “with God all things are possible.” Coffee and soft drinks are \$1; a slice of pizza, \$2; popcorn, candy and chips are also available. A chalkboard behind the counter advertises “fresh eggs, \$2/dozen, ‘from chicks with names’.” Minding the business in this cozy room with about six Formica-topped tables, walled off from the noise of the auction, is a 30-something woman with her young daughter, who cheerfully helps with orders. The aura of family and small-town-ness simply oozes from this venue.

At the collectables auction held at the down-at-the-heels country club in Massachusetts, a separate table in the back of the room holds two boxes of Joe, cups, stirrers, creamer and sugar, four boxes of Dunkin Donuts and two boxes of DD muffins. A handwritten note is above a

small basket: "\$1 for coffee, \$1 for donuts, \$1.50 for muffins." By the end of the auction, the money cups (extra coffee cups) were spilling over.

At small local auctions I have attended, the physical space is often a no-frills, barely heated, cold and drafty warehouse with a cement floor. At the entrance (usually) two women sit at a registration table in metal folding chairs and copy identification from driver's licenses, ask each bidder if they are a dealer (for tax purposes), and distribute "numbers" (numbered flimsy paper plates) linked to identification. They keep track of final bid amounts as well as phone or left bids – and collect payment. Their worktable is cluttered with paperwork, an adding machine, a candy dish, a stack of business cards, and a box of blank 3 x 5 cards so you can "save your seat." While one area is dedicated to the sale of snacks, a partitioned "private" portion of the auction salesroom is the staff office space. A roped-off corner may promote items in forthcoming auctions. Rows of folding chairs -- often mismatched -- are marked "reserved" by attendees who tape cards or scraps of paper with their names to the chair backs as they want to reclaim their preferred seating after they walk about looking. Goods are marked with lot numbers and are placed around the outer edges of the room. A raised podium is centered at the front next to a locked glass case or two where "smalls" – especially expensive ones – are displayed.

To promote sales and attract patrons, the timing of sales, specialization and the location – with comfortable facilities with helpful staff -- are both important. Sotheby's Americana Week is an annual January ritual, which allows important clients and dealers to strategize a year in advance. Themed sale weeks are their business model: magnificent jewels, important watches, Asian art, Impressionist, contemporary and modern art, and so forth organize their auction calendar. Some auctions houses are known specifically for selling dolls, firearms, coins, early

toys, or marine-themed goods. Local auction venues may pick the same day and time each week to hold a sale so their clients can attend like clockwork. In eastern Connecticut, one house holds sales every Sunday morning in the winter and Wednesday evening when the sun sets later; another has chosen Monday night.

Ubiquitous in auction house galleries are rows of chairs (nicely upholstered and matching in nicer locales), parted in the center with an aisle, that face the auctioneer, who stands on a raised platform behind a podium. In more formal settings, photos of each item are electronically flashed onto large screens arranged throughout the site with description and lot number printed on the same screen. Items are presented in the order they appear in the catalogue. In country auctions, absent a catalogue and large-screen displays, runners (sometimes called spotters) help with the pulse of the sale and know – or are told -- the order items are to be brought to the podium so the audience can view the item to be bid. They spot bids in the midst of the crowd, and with an “over here” shout, relay those to the auctioneer, who may not be able to keep an eye on all bidding paddles. If an audience member holds interest in an item that has not been offered, it is standard procedure at about mid-point in the auction to ask a runner to carry that item forward, thereby avoiding the wait through a long sale if only one item is of interest.

Most auctions communicate through websites and published advertisements in the same trade journal, which informs the public of the date, place and time of previews and the auction, and includes descriptions of the goods and, thereby, influences attendance. Superlative adjectives in press releases and announcements “glow with warmth”: Words like “important,” “magnificent,” “fine,” “select,” “exquisite,” “intriguing,” “exceedingly rare,” “hard-to-find,” “significant” and “exceptional” can be appended to descriptions (Learmount 1985, 57; *Antiques* 2017).

Bound catalogues – absent at small auctions (although occasionally a list of lots is available) -- at prestigious houses are academic and professional. These thorough biographies carefully detail the importance of each lot. Each item is well researched by in-house specialists and includes date made/created, creator, ownership and exhibition history, condition, dimensions and other relevant features. The resultant comprehensive provenances also include all references to the piece in literature (as well as price estimates); color photographs highlight special details. To become successful purchasers, experienced bidders are influenced by information in the auction catalogue, which augments their own experience and knowledge. These publications reflect shared community knowledge and help “give a member a strong feeling of belonging to a distinct community” (Smith 1989, 67). Price at the Boston auction: \$34, making knowledge about commodities a commodity. These are used throughout the industry as primary resource materials. Not only do they vigilantly document all aspects of each offering but also affirm the estimated value of each lot and can transform the object to nearly fetish status (Appadurai 1986, 56). (Post-auction, price-realized lists are available on-line or from the house.)

While at higher-stakes’ houses catalogues contain important factual information about objects, the back few pages list rules and regulations , as well as a glossary of terms -- in small print. Throughout the trade, basic buying rules are announced by the auctioneer at the beginning of each auction; however, at smaller places, absent glossy books and risk that is not measured in tens of thousands, minimal procedural instructions may appear to be the extent of governance. Filling the information void at smaller auctions is AuctionZip (their website: “your auction community”), a nationwide database of thousands of auctions where member auctioneers post listings. Here potential bidders can scroll through photographs of to-be-auctioned goods.

As commodities travel, the distinction between knowledge about them and ignorance of them can become hazy; therefore, intense documentation can contradict this dysfunction and prevent “social depletion” (Errington 1987, 306). To enhance its value, some astute owners self-publish a registry of their collection years before it is offered for sale. Another tactic to boost importance and, optimistically, value is to ensure that pieces of distinction are included in prestigious gallery or museum exhibitions “on loan.”

Auction houses do want goods to leave the premises at the end of the sale. To that end, near the front door of the low-yield auction offering would-be collectables, opposite the desk staff, is a stack of cardboard boxes and already-crunched newspaper pages, as well as a supply of plastic bags – all for clients to use to pack their purchases. For patrons’ convenience at Skinner’s Boston auction, on a table in an adjacent section of the room, are large paper bags and wrapping paper. For “smalls” purchased at Sotheby’s, the staff wraps the item and places it in a well-designed take-away bag. For large items, they can arrange that a proper moving van will carefully deliver the piece, at the new owner’s cost.

At Ingraham & Co.’s local country auction in Coventry, Connecticut, a sign posted next to the registrar notifies all that the “buyer’s premium is 15%; 2% discount for cash or check” (2017, January 22). Contrastingly, the last few pages of all Christie’s catalogues include a “Conditions of Sale” section. Section D1 states a premium charge of “25% of the hammer price up to and including \$150,000; 20% on the part of the hammer price over that amount and up to and including \$3 million and 12% of that part of the hammer price that is above \$3 million.” Sotheby’s instructions to bidders are similar, ensuring they know that “a buyer’s premium will be added to the hammer price and is payable by the purchaser as part of the total purchase price;”

however, their scale is 25% of \$250,000, 20% of amount over \$250,000 and up to \$3 million; 12.5% is applied to amounts over \$3 million (Appendix, Item 3).

Universally, the auctioneer stands behind a podium, announces bidding progress in increments, has spotters to ensure no bid is ignored, and the hammer's fall punctuates the notice of the final price, thereby immediately releasing the seller from ownership. Bidders use a variety of signals, but to keep their identity private, they are known by their number, which appears on formal paddles (similar to ping-pong paddles) in New York; flimsy, ribbed paper plates with hand-written numbers are the usual "paddle" at small auctions. Bidders often use the back of these plates to keep track of their successful bids.

Sotheby's auctions are announced in a British accent by an impeccably bespoke-suited auctioneer wearing a yellow silk tie, standing seriously and resolutely behind a distinctive podium. Despondent Frank in Massachusetts is dressed in sneakers, jeans and a long-sleeved maroon tee shirt, topped with a green neon shirt with its sleeves rolled up. His podium is more pedestrian, supplied by the facility.

As I exit Frank's auction, I chat with a bidder standing next to a large blanket box. I comment that "you can store all of your lots in that." He admits that there was not much interest today: "The market is off. There were good buys here." I asked if he sells on eBay. "No, that's too complicated. Got to box it, mail it, people complain. Not worth it." As another man leaves, heading to his car, I mention the rain is letting up. "Yes, it is supposed to be nice tomorrow. I'm going to Mansfield." "The flea market?" "Yup."

At country auctions, where selling point prices are expected to be lower than at more sophisticated venues, generalized buying-selling patterns are likely. Goods sold reach perhaps half of the amount they will cost in a shop. A notable difference is that after white-collar

auctions, prices for high-end fare are published. Because of the uniqueness of each piece, it is possible to research the price history, a negotiating tool for potential buyers. Therefore, dealers purchasing an item for a price that will be revealed will be less apt to negotiate. However, negotiating depends on the market: Price paid becomes more important in a soft market, and it is import to offer good pieces at modest and tempting values. I learned that in today's business climate, "all dealers negotiate" spurred by the aesthetic that there is a psychological need for buyers to feel good and have reassurance of best value. To have more price-setting leverage, such dealers probably prefer to source goods from the private market or re-purchase from former customers, who tend to hold onto their collections for a number of years. After decades in the business, London antique arms and armour [sic] dealer Peter Finer estimates that "as much as 35 percent of his current stock are things that he has previously sold" (Young 2016, 76).

Individual buyers may believe they will pay less for an item at a local auction than if bought from a dealer; however, some may get caught in an emotional price-spiking spiral, erasing potential benefits. The catch is that in many cases, prices realized at small auctions will be higher simply because buyers fell that these auctions are sources of bargains or sleepers; therefore, bidders may overpay. For the seller, in most cases, hammer prices are still higher than could be achieved outside of the auction venue because it is difficult to reach such a diverse audience on one's own; consigning an entire lot of goods to an auction where sellers, bidders and auctioneers respond to each other is an efficient way to divest and redistribute (Smith 1989, 145). John F. Kennedy's 1945 diary was consigned to be auctioned because the owner believed "...that through the auction catalog the diary would come to the attention of a wider audience and find a home worthy of its merit" (JFK's 'Only True' 2017, 38).

Often low-brow dealers, in their shops and at shows, will drop the asking price when requested “can you do better on this?” or “is this your best price?”...and negotiate a bit with the prospective buyer. One wonders if the asking price was inflated to begin with, but by garnering a small discount, buyers may feel they struck a deal. A good time to ask for a better price is at the end of a show because the dealer might prefer not to pack the item...again.

On the Connecticut-Massachusetts line, attendance is low for the collectible auction, about forty people at the 9 am start time. Five runners bring goods and tray lots forward and hold them up for the audience’s benefit, following the list of lots prepared in advance. The auction begins with a few left bids: “Have 80, looking for 90, sold at 80, Number 331.” Throughout, this is a group of reluctant bidders, and many items are passed. Some are put aside for the next auction which will feature more “Americana.” Lot 10 is described as a “clean end table.” “Any interest at \$20? None? Next item.” He offered an “early signed Windsor tall back rocker” for \$10 (a runner turned the piece upside down so the chalk maker’s signature was evident). Two attendees later comment, “I should have bought it and doubled my money at 20.” “Yea, but nobody’s buying rockers.” Lot 12 is a pre-1964 sports car in its original box: “\$20? No competition. Sold.” Bidder 301 left a \$300 bid for a Flying Fox, a toy jet-propelled airline, in its original box.

Occasionally, Frank claims some items for himself. “I want to help this lady. Do you know what these [an assortment of six presidential first-lady dolls] will go for on eBay? They’re just a good investment. I’m not stupid.” After no one bid, he buys the lot for \$15. Absent any interest in a vintage Olsen 1930s “rare tricycle,” the auctioneer sells it for \$25 “to me.” Lot 31 is a stock of “vintage classic comic books.” He starts at \$25; no interest, passed. Lot after lot, the entire auction sputters. He adds, “I don’t know what I am going to do with these things. This

lady is in Florida and she doesn't want it back." However, throughout he tries to maintain a sense of humor. When offering two Mexican dolls, he says, "We may have to build a wall around them." Commenting on a doll sitting on a goose, he observes that "it's cute. Who will give me \$20? It's better than a goosed girl." Nevertheless, no interest, and the lot passed.

By 12:30 pm only a dozen bidders remain. As one man gets up to leave, he asks the person in back of him: "Do you ever watch *The Pickers*? They would have made out like bandits!" The auctioneer was dejected: "Why do I do this?" He next offers a box of McDonald's "premiums" -- advertising gimmicks -- that were knocked down at \$10. Finally, he moves to the passed items, now piled on at least three tables: "If anyone wants to bid on items on the tables -- it's anything you want for 10 bucks folks...\$5 -- I want to sell it. Is there anything anyone is interested in before we leave?"

Before he moves to the tables, I thank him and say goodbye. He shrugs his shoulders: "Tough day," he admits. At this auction, the decrease in the number of bidders hurt the auctioneer's expected revenue; he set reserves at \$10, but that did not benefit the result (Engelbrecht-Wiggans 1987, 11).

Everyone I overhear or speak to recognizes the grim market climate, from understanding that New England's economy is dying compared to North Carolina's, to "no one wants rocking chairs," to downsized living accommodations that do not permit room to store collections. Even the consignor had left New England.

This is not the case among the carriage trade, whose well-researched collections are meant to be sold as estate assets that accumulate value to be dispersed to heirs. Late in October 2016, I sat in Skinner's well-furnished Boston gallery to witness Auction 2950B, *Fine Books & Manuscripts*. Parts of the offerings are from the estate of David Spinney (d. 2015). He was "a

collector of...historically significant manuscripts and letters” which he was able to purchase because of a well-honed interest in important early American documents and which was, in turn, funded by his work at “his family business at the Chicago Board of Trade” (Spinney 2015, obit). The core of his collection is primary-source George Washington documents; therefore, to buy at this auction one should be an expert or seek the advice of a professional curator.

Because of the high value of the lots, security is tight. A guard at the entrance politely collects bags, briefcases, et al. Upstairs (no food canteen here), guards in jackets and ties patrol the well-lighted carpeted gallery which is flanked by large windows on one side. Unless one asks a question, it is as though no one notices you. Guests walk around the collection, physically handle the goods; no one’s privacy is invaded. Displayed throughout, lots hang on walls, lay on tables in protective plastic sleeves, stand in bookcases or rest in large acrylic artists’ binders. Sunday’s two-hour preview (one of four) is attended by a studious crowd – few in number but diligent with magnifying glasses and notebooks in hand, keeping knowledgeable attendants busy answering sundry questions. Each item is stickered with a lot number and the word “photographed.” As a time traveler, it is hauntingly amazing to be able to pick up a letter written by George Washington – as though I were the aide he had handed it to for dispatch. Consider that each item Mr. Spinney carefully pursued and curated and loved – he may have treated them like people -- is now out of context, objectified and reduced to a lot number with potential value an important quality.

The same aura was present at Sotheby’s as I pore over an important family archive of letters and manuscripts from Alexander Hamilton, “bequeathed by his widow to the couple’s fourth child and third son,” and descending in the family since then (Sotheby’s 2017, 9612). Walking through the exhibit, one can ask staff to remove an article from its protective exhibit

space so that it can be held, read, admired. This deep trove consists of seventy-six lots, some with multiple letters. Documents include his career-launching appointment as aid-de-camp to General Washington; love letters to his future wife [“You give me too many proofs of your love to allow me to doubt it and in the conviction that I possess that, I possess everything the world can give” (Lot 1007)]; pleas that she write him more often [“For God’s sake, my dear Betsey, try to write me oftener and give me the picture of your heart in all its varieties of light and shade...” (Sotheby’s 9612, Lot 1011)]. Other topics are the treason of Benedict Arnold, notes prepared for President Washington’s message to Congress, preparations to put down the Whiskey Rebellion, and comments regarding the contentious presidential election of 1796, a text not seen for well over a century: “It is far less important, who of many men that may be named shall be the person [AH favored John Adams, a Federalist, who supported a strong central government], than that it shall *not be Jefferson*” (AH emphasis; Sotheby’s 9612, Lot 1049). This heralded collection moved from the sanctity of the family and was dispersed to the highest bidders; the entire collection sold for just over \$2.6 million (including buyer’s premium). One wistfully muses that if this grouping had been purchased by a single entity, it could be protected as a whole in another sacred “temple” and given landmark status -- instead of being dispersed. As a unit, this group of documents tells a more powerful story than a single piece will.

Sometimes efforts to keep powerfully partisan pieces within their country of origin are successful. In 2012 Sotheby’s auctioned Jane Austen’s modest gold ring with a cabochon-cut, oval, turquoise-colored stone for \$236,000. However, before the ring was sent to the buyer, American singer Kelly Clarkson, the British government declared the ring a “national treasure,” and the export of the ring was temporarily banned. Now given a second chance to become the

owner, the Jane Austen Museum began a “Bring the Ring Home” fundraising drive and successfully raised enough money to keep this artifact in England (Demers 2017, 1).

As I read a review of an auction in Boston where a seventeenth-century Spanish painting sold for 80 times over its presale estimate, I am reminded of how difficult the auction business can be. After the sale, the auctioneer stated to a reporter, “We did our job. We got the painting in front of the right people, and we got the buyers through the door” (“Spanish Still Life” 2016, 36). The phrase “the right people” is a real distinct class signifier. From the community of knowledgeable people who came together as a collaborative group attracted to the commodities present at this auction, a specific cohort competitively – and aggressively -- bid on at least one specific painting.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Structure of Auctions: Community, Collaboration and Competition**

Social relationships and cultural expectations are embedded in this interplay of markets and local private enterprise. Whether high-end or low-end, an auction's competitive-but-cooperative structure and economic mechanism facilitate commodity exchanges and establish identity and ownership, as well as benchmarks for market prices – which are recorded -- throughout each community. At the same time, the outcome is (usually) a profitable exchange of goods-for-money for the seller – who plays a passive role -- and the auctioneer and (hopefully) a satisfied buyer; the latter two play an active role. The knotted relationship among the forces of supply, demand and competition are fundamental determinants of prices of goods in the free market economy (Cassady 1980, 41). Works measured by quantity or design (limited editions), quality (condition) and variety (rarity) differentiate the nature of auctioned properties, and their value is contrasted with standardized manufactured products. The price will be determined “by the prevailing consensus among expert and interested parties” (DeMarchi & Goodwin 1999, 2). Similar to the situation in a jury, the judgment of the parties concerning unique pieces – akin to individuals with biographies of their own -- determines acceptable “communal guidelines” which affect the final outcome (Smith 1989; 86, 143).

Consider this scenario: If five hundred lots are offered to an audience of one hundred bidders, only a very few will be interested in bidding on each particular item. A larger number of people in the audience (physically or on the phones or on-line) increases the chance that two or more parties will be active and motivated bidders on a particular item and will outnumber those who have no interest, casual interest or are speculators interested in good buys – for a song (Cassady 1980, 48-49). Numerous bids push the selling price upward, an important factor in price making. Individual bidders' attitudes and interests change as lots rotate throughout a sale.

If an auctioned commodity is desirable and multiple demands exist for the item, then active bidding will increase the price; eventually, one bidder will be successful. Competitive bidding gives information to the seller and a wider audience, who – if the lot is not passed because of a lack of interest – will be better able to estimate its value (McMillan 2002, 69).

Individuals form either private valuations of lots (based on desire or experience), or they are influenced by other factors, often the auction house presale estimate, a service not provided until the early 1970s (Lacey 1998, 169). The advantage is that more information is now available to the retail trade; however, while at Sotheby's, my guide explains, "estimates...it's a game... there's a whole philosophy to those," and numerous strategies and various reasons exist for setting high and low estimates. Also, one does not know who set the estimates: The panoply of suspects include the consignor or a well-intentioned but not accredited house staffer. Award-winning accountant Yuji Ijiri (1935-2017) "believed that historic costs were more reliable...than estimates of current values" because they are "based on real transactions rather than hypothetical ones...which left room for manipulation" (Obituary 2017, A5). Without competitive bids, the item may be withdrawn, or the auctioneer may switch to a take-it-or-leave-it price sale, limiting the auction's success.

After supply and demand, competition is the third vital element in setting prices for goods. As well as buyers who bid as rivals so the seller's returns are maximized, auction houses compete for consignments, and may increase their advertising efforts to attract customers or adjust storage and insurance charges to lure clients. All venues need an ample quantity of goods to attract potential purchasers; additionally, important houses need notable properties to auction. When Christie's was trying to lure the Stralem collection of Impressionist and Modernist paintings, they left no stone unturned. The widowed Mrs. Stralem "became the object of a five-

star, total-care campaign which both auction galleries lavish on wealthy widows...” (Lacey 1998, 283). After she became infirm, they stored her paintings – rent free – on their premises. Nevertheless, after she died, it was the fiduciary duty of her attorneys and executors – who represent the heirs -- to obtain competitive valuations. To settle estates, courts expect auctioneers to obtain the highest prices possible. To evaluate these paintings, Sotheby’s experts had to make appointments with Christie’s (Lacey 1998, 284). Despite years of Christie’s cultivating this client, Sotheby’s valuation estimates won them the right to auction the collection.

Attendees enjoy an auctioneer whose voice radiates gusto and whose knowledge of items offered – while not misrepresenting goods -- is linked with an innate psychology to sell. A brisk accelerating pace rhythmically increasing adrenaline-motivated bids, running prices up legitimately, working the house’s reserve against the audience, knowing when to fold, pandering to a community of regulars – dealers -- and individual (nonprofessional) buyers, a flexible mind with a quick sense of humor, switching from a distinctive, rhythmic chant to stories and jokes: All minimize tensions and keep bidders engaged, enthused and pitted against one another. A recent obituary of country auctioneer Arthur Julia described his “tremendous personable attitude--always joking and quick to entertain when a pause came in the auction...bidders loved this charismatic fellow, who said what he meant and meant what he said” (Julia Family 2017, 38). Such public engagement brings about a sense of communal unity, especially among the temporary audience of casual buyers, and can decrease the social distance among the heterogeneity of participants whose homogeneity can be attested to their participation in this “channel of exchange” (Smith 1989, 5;, Appadurai 1986, 25). eBay bidding has none of these warm fuzzies and is not this interesting.

After the 1973 oil boycott, auction sales fell, and expenses rose because of double-digit inflation. Firms needed to find a way to boost income, and charging a commission to sellers was one option, but in Europe buyers were charged a commission as well – 10% on top of the hammer price. Interestingly, this buyer's premium – although inconvenient -- did not hamper bidders who either ignored it when bidding got contentious or just tolerated it as an additional kind of tax. As standard-bearers in the auction community, competitors Sotheby's and Christie's announced their intention to charge a buyer's premium nearly concurrently (Lacey 1998, 178-179). Keep in mind that the seller's commission still existed, but now it could be adjusted downward to appease sellers because auction houses compete for high-end consignments and adjusting percentages is a tool to entice a noteworthy property. Auction house James D. Julia, Inc., advertises that "seller's commission rates on high value items as low as...0%" (*Antiques* June 2017).

In addition to the hammer price (and there is a literal gavel-type hammer – just the wooden head, held in the left hand of the auctioneer, which hits a spot on the podium, punctuating each sale), successful bidders still pay a buyer's premium for each lot sold – often on a sliding scale according to the value of the lot, explained in Chapter 3. It is important to recognize that the sale and exchange of goods is marked when the hammer strikes, and that simple visible and audible action legally concludes the contract between the seller and the buyer (Heath 2014, 168).

Buyers compete among themselves to obtain items, but groups of more experienced bidders – usually members of the retail trade -- may collude, perhaps stifling bidding, controlling or depressing the price. In eighteenth-century Paris, the *Bande Moire* (Black Gang) was identified as a group of dealers "who do not outbid each other" unless they "see a private buyer

anxious for the article, they bid up and raise the price...supporting the loss...which is divided among the members” when they meet privately (Learmount 1985, 60). Or they may wait for most uninformed bidders to drop out before bidding. The effect can be that impulsiveness and competition may be reduced, and the pressure for price increases may diminish. Ring members generally have specialized knowledge of characteristics of merchandise and may secretly agree not to compete on certain lots, and a buyer monopoly forms (Cassady 1980, 177). However, it stands that if a ring member purchases the object for apparently a good price, what stops others in the room from continuing to place higher bids? Perhaps it was not catalogued correctly, or they did not want it that badly, or the value of the object was unknown to them. It may simply be the difference between “cultural omnivores” (with considerable market-based knowledge) and “cultural univores” (Rademacher 2015, 680).

Before I detail “ring” or “pool” activities, *nota bene* that these are illegal in the United States and ended in the Americana market in the early 1990s after Federal prosecutors investigated and indicted participants, many of whom had no idea this kind of group collusion was illegal because of its decades’-long existence. My informants point out that they are unaware of the existence of rings and pools in today’s marketplace.

The term “ring” refers to the fact that after a sale is completed, the group’s members meet (often off-location) and form a ring to hold a private “knock-out” unofficial sale, and the pool bids to divide goods and settle prices among themselves (Cassady 1980, 181). Inherent in this community is mutual trust. Various ring methodologies exist. As a general practice, each member writes the amount s/he is willing to pay for an item on a small piece of paper. The participant with the highest “bid” becomes the owner. The difference between the originally auctioned price (lower) and the ring price (higher) is divided among and paid out to the ring

members; possibly excluded from this windfall is the winning bidder. Survivors participate in the next bidding and dividend round, which might exclude the person who won the first round.<sup>5</sup> Combatting rings is difficult; however, an alert vendor may recognize ring behavior and report it to proper authorities, who may investigate alleged buyer collusion. When the seller and an auction house set a reserve price, the profitability of the ring is impaired.

Auctioneers can hedge rings and buy-in goods if the reserve price is not reached, which withdraws the lot on behalf of their client, the seller. The lot can be added to another session, or – if ring activity is suspected -- can be awarded to someone who bid outside the ring. Bids can be increased by “accepting” phantom or chandelier bids until the “prearranged reserve price is reached”; in both cases, the bidder may be nonexistent (Cassady 1980, 191). If genuine bidders are present, bidding against the house’s reserve lets the house know if there is willingness to pay the reserve price – often referred to as “bidding on behalf of the consignor” by auction houses (Lacey 1998, 69). When there is a reserve, auctioneers consider it proper to serve the seller by initially “accept[ing] nonexistent bids when they have a higher set reserve” (Smith 1989, 154). An owner can bid below the reserve price just to generate interest, but misleading can go wrong, particularly if another bidder recognizes that the owner is bidding against them to raise the price.

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<sup>5</sup> For example: A table is bought by a ring member for \$1,000, and is sold in the private round-table auction for \$2,000, netting a difference of \$1,000. If five dealers are in the pool, each would get one-fifth of the difference, or \$200. The table would have cost the dealer who bought it in the pool’s auction \$1,800 (\$2,000 minus a share of the split, \$200). Each of the other ring members would make a profit of \$200 (Smith 1989, 70).

In another communal scenario, in former times, pool members re-bid an item. In this private setting, each item is put up for sale again. Members now write their bid on a slip of paper, along with their name. The bids are arranged in descending order. The original auctioned bid amount is deducted from the lowest new bid (which will be higher than the auctioned price), and the difference is divided by the number of bidders; that quotient becomes the commission payable to the lowest bidder. The original sale price at auction plus the commission equals the new value. For the second round: The last new value is subtracted from the second lowest bid; the difference is divided among the pool, less one. The quotient (commission) is added to the prior bidder’s new value becoming the newest value. This formula continues, each time the difference between the pool member’s bid and the prior value is divided among one fewer bidder. Each participant – except for the last and highest bidder – is paid a seller’s commission. The money on the table, to be paid by the highest bidder, would be the total of the commissions plus the original sale price, which will be less than the highest bid placed by the pool members (Informant).

Left bids are coordinated by the desk staff and the auctioneer, who may announce that the desk has a left bid (“the bid is against the room” vs. “in the room”); if there is interest, bidding will escalate from there.

However, manufacturing bids and buyers (say, taking bids “off the wall”) flirts with ethical behavior, tainting a house’s reputation (Smith 1989, 150). If the bidding falls short, legally the lot is bought in or passed – and is announced as such to the audience by the auctioneer. These failed-to-sell pieces are usually returned to the owner, and the auction house can bill them for insurance and advertising costs. They are publicly recorded on sales sheets and on the internet as “passed”; by law they cannot be reported as sales (Lacey 1998; 58, 160).

Another tactic – on a rare occasion -- is for a dealer, bidding for a client, to increase bids because it will net him a larger commission. I have learned that a consultant may be more likely to do this because their income is based on their commission. The ring can be signaled to help in this endeavor. Because this does not harm the seller, auction houses may not object to this scheme (Lacey 1998, 63). As mentioned earlier, fraud and collusion are illegal and unethical; however, in rare situations this certainly has happened.

All of these facets make auctions palaces of intrigue, and details about the final result of the exchange attach themselves to the commodities and become another chapter in their life history.

## **Chapter Five**

### **The Social Life of Things and Auctions and the Commodification Process**

As explained in Chapter 2, commodities are goods, not services, which have value and are intended for exchange. Goods have a “past, present and a future”; these “different points in their social lives,” and their “exchangeability... for some other thing is a socially relevant feature” (Appadurai 1986, 13). Because commodity exchanges with strangers can “dissolve the links between persons and things, balanced by a counter-tendency to restrict, control and channel exchange,” these transformative events, transferring ownership, can be emotive (Appadurai 1986, 24).

Malinowski describes how, during the Kula exchange, valuables in their native villages in the Trobriand Island district are “only in possession for a time” and that the goods that trade ownership “are cherished because of the historical sentiment which surrounds them” (Malinowski 1984, 89). Just as the native men Malinowski observed can recite the history of objects “with reverence...by whom and when they were worn, and how they changed hands, and how their temporary possession was a great sign of importance...” (Malinowski 1984, 89), “objects of desire” offered for sale at American auctions houses have need of a provenance – hopefully “as long as my arm” -- to tell their stories (Freund 1993; jacket, 271). American antiques with “likely but uncertain” cultural biographies do not command the highest prices (Freund 1993, 56). A diligent dealer (my informants, for example) will go to great lengths to construct an impeccable account of a good piece, affirming its significance and meaningfulness in present-day culture. This effort is to ensure that it will become a better piece, even the best; “...great antiques are known for someone who once owned them” (Freund 1993, 24). Select details that document objects and confirm their importance are included in glossy, bound catalogues, produced by upscale auction houses, and are described in Chapter 3.

Appadurai analyzed the Kula exchanges as a system that integrates “the biographies of persons and thing” (Jarvenpa 2003, 575). On January 19, 2017, Sotheby’s sold Lot 2145, a piece of great renown. Three pages of glossy photos and an extensive description -- which includes a network-laden provenance – advertise the “important Hollingsworth-Humphreys family Chippendale carved and figured piecrust tilt-top tea table, probably from the workshop of Thomas Affleck, carving attributed to John Pollard, Philadelphia, circa 1779” (Sotheby’s 9605, Lot 2145). From 1768 onward it descended in the family; probably in the 1960s, a Wilmington, Delaware, dealer purchased it; he sold it to Mr. Isbell in Tampa, who offered it for sale at Christie’s in 1995, Sale 8076, Lot 164. Estimated at \$150,000 - \$250,000, the hammer price was \$480,000 (\$636,500 with buyer’s premium) “to the gentleman on the center aisle” (Sotheby’s 9605, Lot 130). These temporary ownerships by important “traders” added to the pedigree of the lot.

The Kula used “temporary ownership” not only to enhance the goods they traded but also to embellish “tribal conversation and gossip...feats and glory...constantly discussed and re-discussed” (Malinowski 84). When this lot was featured in trade literature, its heritage and the four times it was featured in trade publications became part of – and enhanced -- its identity. One can understand this kind of provenance as an illustration of what Clifford Geertz identifies as a “thick description,” where “meaningful actions are layered with meaning and derive power from them” and is important to an outsider (Geertz 1973, 439). When publicized and detailed extensively in an auction catalog, the context and history of a commodity is embedded and enhanced and becomes permanently attached to the item. These details are profoundly meaningful to nonprofessional observers who hold an explanatory or etic perspective. Proof that *vita brevis; ars longa* (life is short; art is long).

History hides in objects; objects have stories, and these can be “culturally regulated” (Appadurai 1986, 17). For example, in the middle of the eighteenth century, Thomas Willing, a wealthy Philadelphia merchant who “practiced the art of making money,” built a sumptuous Georgian-style mansion he regarded as a “box to fill with treasures” (Freund 1993, 37), enhancing his “social prestige through possess[ing] wealth” (Malinowski 1984, 169). Loving beautiful things, he commissioned a gate-leg card table to be made of solid mahogany, adorned with expensive brass escutcheons. Two front corners were rounded like turrets of a castle, and carved “lush vines dripped down its [curved] legs and the claws of its feet clung tightly to wooden balls” (Freund 1993, 24). An ornately carved skirt beneath the folding tabletop connected the legs. When the table top was opened, the tops of the turrets became four niches where whist players could place a candlestick. Not only was this table to be beautiful, it was a “silent testimony to the beauty of his soul”; as merchant Willing developed his “fund of cultural capital,” important to the family’s legacy, he profited from the distinction as one who pursued riches (Freund 1993, 41). Because of its singularity, in socially stratified eighteenth-century Philadelphia society, Willing gained status from owning and displaying this “conspicuously prestigious object” (Renfrew 1986, 162).

Interestingly, no one knows who made this table or the name of the highly-skillful carver (commissioned as a subcontractor by a Philadelphia furniture maker), whose realistic “leaves and vines appear to be in motion” (Freund 1994). Expert furniture maker and restorer Alan Miller, who has studied Chippendale-era furniture, realized other pieces he had become familiar with “used the same lexicon of shapes” (Freund 1994) and resembled two, well-known, similarly-carved pieces in the Mabel Brady Garvan Collection, donated to Yale University. Thereafter, Miller identified such works as attributable to “the Garvan carver...the greatest American-born

carver to work in this country,” whose carved images were as distinct as a person’s voice (Freund 1993, 34, 50).

When Willing died in 1821, this table was listed on the inventory of his estate. His son George packed it away, probably because heavily carved, rococo furniture was no longer fashionable. The beauty attributed to this table, so admired by Willing and his contemporaries, was subjective. George’s granddaughter re-wrapped the table and other belongings and stored them in a basement of a Philadelphia bank. (Willing had been president of the Bank of the United States, the first national bank.) By 1964, his great-great-grandson (Tom Hughes) found the crate and distributed the goods among family members, keeping the table for himself. Putting sentimental attachments aside, by 1990 (in the midst of a recession), Hughes’s widow of eight years decided to sell the table, and contacted both Christie’s and Sotheby’s, who competed for the sale (Jergensen , 2015). Culturally-connected, this material inheritance had a relevant “social life,” and because of its legacy and its scarcity, the family could objectify the table and focus on the economic value of this one thing and, perhaps, minimalize the form of exchange (Appadurai 1986, 3; Edwards & Ponsonby, 2010, p. 95).

Sotheby’s received the consignment because they assured an \$850,000 reserve – the guaranteed price the Hughes family would receive. By law the reserve can be “at or below the low estimate, but...can be no higher” (Freund 1993, 213). Because this piece had an undisputed provenance (or pedigree) and was the best example of its kind, the estimated selling price was \$1 million to \$1.5 million. To doubly verify its authenticity and originality (the family’s history of ownership was only one aspect), several experts examined the table’s construction and compared it to like-made furniture. Before the sale, Sotheby’s used numerous means to contact every potential buyer in an effort to give this exemplary table “a lot of exposure in the marketplace”

(Freund 1993, 230); the table's "description and provenance occup[ied] two full pages of the sale catalog" (Freund 1993, 268). After several objects were briskly sold and as the consigning family watched through windows in a room on a floor above the action, the auctioneer started the bidding for the card table at \$500,000; however, bidding for Lot 1459 dragged. No one showed enthusiasm, despite extensive and expensive promotion for this legendary table (Freund 1993, 270-2). From his podium well-known auctioneer John Marion raised prices incrementally, able to use the reserve, which allowed him to pretend to have bidders, until he reached \$850,000. It would be perilous to undersell.

Competition was absent; no one present raised their paddles. Interest was tepid. Few had the means, and fewer still were in the mood: No demand, no desire. This was not the anticipated ecstasy. It was agony. Just one phone bidder was active, bidding against the house reserve which had been raised the previous night to \$950,000. He could not eke out any more bids. Fortunately, the table did sell – "and down it goes then" -- for the increased reserve price "up front on the phone" (Freund 1993, 280-281). The Hughes family received their guaranteed price; Sotheby's received a 10 percent commission on top of the selling price to cover their marketing and other costs. If the table had not sold, that failure would have tainted its pristine provenance, and it would be sold either privately or held by the family (who would incur steep insurance costs) for years before it could be re-offered at auction.

In April 1996 Sotheby's auctioned over 5900 items that had belonged to Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. Expertly organized previews were used to wine, dine and foster buyers and were attended by reverent voyeurs, and these sentimental "guests filed past the relics, desperate to touch the sacred objects...tokens that had belonged to American royalty" (Lacey 1998, 4). Mrs. Kennedy-Onassis's appeal was enticing, and Camelot-era magic – transferred to goods now

with a history on steroids -- was to be sold to the highest bidder. Now they were losing their singularized status to become commodified (Kopytoff 1986, 65). These goods, chock full of biographical detail, certainly had the “WOW!” factor. Why else would daughter Caroline’s \$150 stepstool (labeled on its underside in Mrs. Onassis’s handwriting attesting that her daughter used it “to climb onto the window seat”) be bid to \$29,000 (Lacey 1998, 8)?

In Boston, Katherine Lee Bates’ handwritten copy of her signature song (“America the Beautiful” on Wellesley College English department stationery) with a provenance of David Spinney and a bid range of \$7,000 to \$9,000 was auctioned; the final bid – on the phone – was \$10,000. At first blush, one could contend this was a national treasure and should not be sold. However, further research might reveal this not to be the earliest or only handwritten copy.

The dynamics of the cultural commodification of the Hollingsworth-Humphries tea table, Alexander Hamilton’s letters, the Willing card table, the Kennedy-Onassis stepstool and Bates’ iconic song are similar. While in a singularized and decommodified state, the biographical life of these artifacts intensifies. As these objects are offered and then sold at auction, they become “culturally redefined,” returning to their previous singularized and decommodified positions (Kopytoff 1986, 67). Regarding the Washington and Hamilton papers, one wonders why these were suitable for commoditization and were not segregated and marked as “sacred” because they represent the “symbolic inventory” of our society, as discussed in my introduction (Kopytoff 1986, 73). Whether one is looking for authentic history or tangible glamor and magic, provenance is important: These objects are part of our sacred “cultural patrimony” (Bleed 2000, 179) and create culturally-relevant “new forms of object-oriented sociality” (Jarvenpa 2003, 585).

Tactics are involved in bidding, and social skills are important. Attend the preview and examine the goods. A photo caption of a group of four men sitting around a table before a March 2017 auction of "...Still & Mechanical Banks..." records: "The Friday preview is a popular time for collectors to sit about and talk banks, check with clients they will be bidding for, and get a closer look at certain banks they are interested in" (Smith 2017, 15). While it is interesting to listen to others who comment on various lots during previews, be cautious. Not everyone who hypes an item is knowledgeable – or honest. If you do not have the expertise to evaluate the quality or question authenticity, do not impulsively bid. Concentrate on what you have closely previewed. Find out if a reserve has been placed on any items.<sup>6</sup> Set an upper limit for the item, and be disciplined about not surpassing it; do not get caught up in emotional bid-and-counterbid activity and exceed your top limit. Even by sitting in the back of the room, it is not easy to see your opponent, and it may be the house's reserve. (Although an auctioneer should state they are including a left bid on the item.) Phone bids can be distorted: Is a bonafide bidder on the other end of the phone line? This is part of the game; the dynamics are intriguing.

Bidders can gesture or nod, raise their number slightly, stare at the auctioneer or devise another signal. One can either bid at the outset or enter the process mid-course. If the increases are in, say, \$50 increments, a bidder can communicate—by a cut-it-in-half horizontal hand signal -- to the auctioneer asking for \$25 increases. Splitting sequential increments usually happens when bidding has slowed; it may help extend the bidding. Auctioneers announce each bid increase at a quick pace in an almost liturgical chant that is the theme song of the performance and allows the bidding to continue. At center stage, they build tension, using attention-getting

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<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, there is a school of thought that opposes reserves because it contends "reserves" contort the auction market. The question asked is, "Do reserves alter or compromise the definition of a true auction, which is a sale uninhibited by any outside influences?"

filler words between ever-rising bids – i.e., “gimme,” “right now,” “come on, one more bid” (Smith 1989, 117). Even though there is no chant at Sotheby’s, comments, bid requests and announcements are similar. Prices are stated, incremental increases are advanced, and fillers used there include: “I am going to sell it”; “Do I hear any more?” (Notes). To acknowledge a bid, s/he gestures with a closed-fingered, outstretched hand toward the direction of the bidder. When finished, one will hear: “All in? All done? Sold to number xxx.” Then, the gavel falls (Cassady 1980, 140-152). Next item. “Lot X. Who will give me...?”

After sales are over, they may be acknowledged by the trade press. Specific items are headlined, particularly those that exceed – by multiples – the high end of the pre-sale estimate. Some social color might be included. Auction houses publish post-sale, prices-realized lists, which include the buyer’s premium, so that information is available to dealers, collectors, insurance companies and others interested in the most recent value of certain goods. It is unusual for the buyer’s name to be mentioned.

Behind every item is a story, each has a biography with “personal, historical and geographical meaning,” and buyers witness status changes and re-circulation as they purchase not only goods but also – often unknowingly -- their history, becoming linked to (and altering) the provenance of these goods and becoming members of the human chain of the commodity’s prior owners (Jarvenpa 2003, 557; Kopytoff, 1986). This social-ized, re-cyclical nature of goods transfers their “sacred” ownership with their attachment to personal histories to a profane, external location. As goods are traded or exchanged, they gain history. This relocation of goods is reminiscent of the Kula trade circuits and the complex social exchanges among particular men who traded specific goods, as described by B. Malinowski (*The Essentials of the Kula*), the trading model Appadurai regards as “tournaments of value” (Appadurai 1986, 21).

## **Chapter Six**

### **The Socialness of Fieldwork and the Intrigue of Exchange**

Auctions are “socially constructed ceremonies” (Jarvenpa 2003, 557), and the mix of people present is absorbing. Even though I usually take a book or magazine to read during an auction, I am never bored. Incorporating three involved parties, they are unlike the two-party, time-tested and –honored bargaining culture still found in communal seller-buyer/second-hand recycling marketplaces, from tag sales to flea markets to exotic bazaars, all of which integrate fascinating blends of people, process and product. The range of social behaviors at these competitive events can affect auction outcomes, and good auctioneers know how to engage the bidding crowds to more likely ensure a good outcome for the consignor (Adam et al 2001, 198). Whether one buys to use or to resell, an auction can be a theatrical, seductive, social event where an attendee’s interest in getting a good deal may be thwarted by a case of emotional bidding – while being entertained.

Complex systems of gathering information, social interactions and networking are inherent in attending an auction.

Part of the routine of attending an auction is previewing the auction’s goods, an important ritual in this “tournament of value,” described by Appadruai as a “complex periodic event...removed... from the routines of economic life (1986; 21, 20). During viewing times, dealers and collectors thoughtfully mill around and sort through lots, dressed to blend – khakis or rumpled jeans, well-worn sneakers and sweatshirts or padded flannel shirts over tee shirts at local sales to sports jackets and ties at higher end houses. Many attendees know one another. While they acknowledge each other, as potential competitors, each pretty much keeps his/her own counsel, although bits of information are exchanged among them. As they subsidize the house snack bar and eat hot dogs, munch chips, drink coffee and chat, condition of and interest in

certain items is cautiously ascertained. While assessing merchandise, they jot down lot numbers and descriptions. Book people may try to sweeten their lot by rearranging the books in boxes to ensure they are able to bid on what is potentially more profitable for them -- and hope another interested buyer does not reshuffle “their” box. Box lots of costume jewelry can be manipulated in this way. China and glass folks pick up items, examine the surface for chips and hairline cracks and check bases for identifying maker’s clues. Furniture people pull out drawers, look at the bottom of the piece, and examine its outside and inside surfaces, hardware and legs.

In Coventry, Connecticut (January 22, 2017; Ingraham’s), the early bird portion of the weekly Sunday auction starts at 10:30 a.m., followed by the regular auction. Viewing times are the prior day and two hours before the early-bird auction. Attendees banter among themselves. Walking around tables of lots comprised of bric-a-brac and other odd bits of used and second-hand household items, a man picks up a gold-painted tack hammer and comments to his buddy, “I cleaned out a house in Willimantic, and someone painted all of their tools purple so that no one would steal them.” Two others exchange information on some frames: “Did you see those walnut frames? “Yeah, I have a lot of them.” As part of a core community, these buyers know each other, and they know a good deal about each other’s businesses.

As the groups of bidders circle the tables during the early auction, even the auctioneer, who carries a portable mic, comments to regulars along the way: “What’s your number today, Eric? Seven? OK.” When a box of issues of the 1960s *Connecticut Daily Campus* is offered, he satirically comments: “These are from back in the 60s when people were rioting” (the auction was two days after the Presidential Inauguration). As he moves along, he chortles, “I’m trying to get there, but it’s such a huge crowd. I thought I was in the march.” He and his runner (who holds up boxes as they are being offered) josh with one another about comic-book heroes, and

his runner observes, “We got a hundred people waiting, and we’re talking stupid!” These unrehearsed, off-handed comments entertain the crowd, and the auctioneer is able to entice from \$10 to about \$50 for each table lot of “old stuff” throughout an hour and one-half of soliciting bids, often quickly combining lots if he senses no interest.

However, one never knows exactly how an auction will proceed. Occasionally, one will lack interest and enthusiasm. At these, it does not take long for the crowd to diffuse. My fieldwork presented me with such an auction, organized by Wintergarden Auction Services in Monson, Massachusetts. Held in the musty-smelling, past-its-prime dining room -- with a stained, “sticky” carpet -- of a “country” club on the Massachusetts-Connecticut border, the majority of the offerings were a thirty-year collection of what the owner thought would be highly desirable collectibles: toys, games, stuffed animals and dolls. Stacked on large folding tables on the perimeters of the room, most were in unopened boxes and had never been used: Madame Alexander dolls, Cabbage Patch dolls, Barbie dolls, Furskins, boxes of stuffed animals, a tray of Pez candy dispensers in original packages, a group of “vintage advertising dolls” included Lucky Charms, the Jolly Green Giant, Ronald McDonald and the Pillsbury Boy. Between the tables were lots of small furniture – rocking chairs, cabinets, one-drawer stands and drop-leaf tables.

Before the auction, I introduce myself to the auctioneer and tell him about my mission, and give him my Trinity business card. Frank immediately responds, “very interesting, but I don’t think you’d be interested in this auction.” I counter that my interest is in small local auctions, the social aspects and the general environment of such auctions. He was quite friendly, and immediately begins to commiserate about the state of New England’s economy. Apparently, he had just come from the south. “It’s booming in North Carolina; there are lots of antique shops, and they are asking prices there we can’t even dream of.” He continues by noting that

there are “no young people interested in auctions. Look around here. Throughout New England – it’s a dying area, except for Boston where the average age is 34.”

For various reasons, attendance in Massachusetts is scant, which does not support competitive bidding. A lady in front of me mentions to a seatmate that “I have an apartment. I can’t store too much.” Most of the attendees are older, as the auctioneer mentioned to me earlier. As the man who rushed out in the rain with his purchases mentioned, he was selling at a local flea market, which may be the destiny of other purchases of “old stuff.” Disparate comments among bidders indicate that they are market savvy. And most of what was offered has scant market value in this economy. The consigner bought these toys as an investment; however, she misjudged the market.

As in the Coventry, Connecticut, auction, I noticed that relationships develop between auctioneers and bidders, whose perceptions of engagement and evenhandedness are facets to be considered. As the community of dealers and attendees interfaces during the preview, the auctioneer circles through, re-establishing rapport with potential bidders, greeting some with a friendly handshake, swapping stories, answering questions about goods.

Trust in the auctioneer and fairness of the process affect bidders who are uncertain about the outcome. At the auction on the Massachusetts-Connecticut line, Frank, a tall man with a well-trimmed goatee, walks around the room chatting to prospective bidders making them feel welcome. Some he was familiar with enough to put his right hand on their shoulder and pat them on the back before parting. They are performers, star actors who work to engage their audience with the exhilaration of spending money and winning. If a bid is somewhat speculative, the community will clap, acknowledging the bidder and legitimizing the new meaning (higher value) given to an item.

During a conversation I overheard between a man and woman sitting close to me, the woman bemoans that “business isn’t what it used to be. I’ve lost it; have been going to auctions since I was 12, and now I’m 73.” She collects majolica, had a shop near the Big E and ran an auction gallery in Chicopee. In fact, in the midst of this auction, Frank asks her to relieve him for a spell. She concludes that you “learn now to maneuver the system.” She calls out “hello, Natalie” to a grey-haired lady who does not hear the greeting as she purposely walks down the middle aisle to take a seat in the front. To get potential bidders involved, the auctioneer encouragingly announces: “I hope you guys have a lot of money. Even if you don’t want it, you have to buy it. We have about eight minutes to go!”

Front and center of the room is a podium with a mic, and on its top surface is paperwork that contains the descriptive listing of lots – as well as the auctioneer’s opening remarks that include conditions of sale. “Welcome, thank you for coming. Everything is sold as is, where is. Once an item is sold, it becomes your responsibility. Runners are allowed to bid. Pick up your goods by tomorrow at 10. Our next auction is in two weeks – primitives and silver – watch our web site.”

Attendees can be absorbed by the sing-song bidding cadence, rapid price escalations, quick pace (I have witnessed about 100 items an hour), and the entertaining personality of the auctioneer as he/she tries to elicit higher bids on objects that may be more desire driven rather than need based. If an auction is well-attended and well-stocked, tense bidding is driven by competitive behavior, and such motivations can result in overbidding and the prospect of monetary loss. If a buyer catches “auction fever” because of a fear of losing this social competition, egged on by other players or making a quick decision in a very limited time period

and irrationally wanting to win, he may risk overbidding (Adam et al 2011; 197, 201).

Outcomes can be emotional and instinctive; regret can be expected or feared.

The social pressure – heightened by the chemistry in the room -- can be intense. Attendees scrutinize all bids. While bargain hunters dream of a major opportunity, some high bidders prefer anonymity (and bid by phone) and others desire personal aggrandizement in this “tournament of values” and gain social status by offering monetary capital for purchases in this frenzied environment (Aappaduri 1986, 21). When the publisher of *Cigar Aficionado* successfully bid nearly \$575,000 for President Kennedy’s small, walnut cigar box at Sotheby’s, he validated his “big score” by jumping up and lighting a cigar, which did garner attention from the press (Jarvenpa 2003, 574). But the title of his magazine was erroneously reported as *Cigar and Fishing* (Lacey 1998, 10). In his social sphere, visibility was useful: “The only thing worse than being talked about is not being talked about” (Oscar Wilde).

These details are gleaned from settings that are both commercial and social where a subculture of “regulars” and rookies interact quite freely. Events are not structured to be threatening or intimidating, even though the “palace” and process may be exotic to a novice.

While some venues are reminiscent of well-ordered museums that promote the heritage of things, others have the appearance of a jumbled flea market where “the odd, delightful and [possibly] the significant sit alongside each other” (Altenberg, 2017). Generally, though, no one notices you are present. Attendees do not have to pay an entrance fee or make a reservation. Just walk in, feel free to ask staff about lots, walk around and preview the objects, get a number – and buy a catalogue (or access information online) if you wish, and sit and enjoy the show. Remember, you are a potential customer, and their job is to enable purchases of the consigned goods. Whether I was observing in Coventry, Connecticut, or New York City, the basics are the

same, although the quality of goods and class of bidder differ significantly. In fact, more people attend the lower-end sales, probably because they depend less on on-site technology.

Paralleling Frank's introduction at his auction on the Connecticut-Massachusetts border, fifteen minutes before the Skinner auction in Boston was to begin, a voice announcement cut into the Muzak: "Good morning. Today's preview will be ending in 15 minutes. We can help customers register for paddles." As the auction starts, announcements include the conditions of sale (also listed on the back pages of each catalog): property is sold "as-is," sales taxes and buyer's premiums are added to final bid price, pick up the addendum to the catalogues, be courteous with cell phone use. Such pre-sale announcements are standard.

An announcer states the names of both auctioneers – both women – who will field bids from the audience; customers not present participate by way of left bids, phone bids, and via the portals SkinnerLive! bids and Bidsquare, an online bidding platform operated by a group of six reputable auction houses. In the front of the room, to the left of the auctioneer's raised dais, six registrars attend the phone banks and two are situated at computers, the all-important technological channels for bid exchanges. Three large television screens flank the wall area around the auctioneer's podium; as each item is presented for bids, a picture of each, along with its lot number, is flashed onto the screen. About sixty upholstered stacking chairs are arranged in the gallery space for bidders.

With dignified quiet, a few patrons assemble in the carpeted gallery. The audience of about 20 is nearly all male – many with a well-established professorial bent; only three women are present. A couple of groups of older men attend – a social outing to these cadres who may have come to get a sense of the value of their own collections because they did not overtly place bids. Some men nod to one another as a sign of recognition in this club-like atmosphere.

While nearly all houses accept phone bids and respect left bids, internet bidding – in its various forms and portals -- is supported by higher-end auctioneers who need to reach an invisible worldwide audience. Internet bidding began just after 1995 when the U. S. government opened the internet to the public; thereafter, entrepreneurs devised platforms for “electronic commerce” and reinvented “decentralized and dynamic” markets for sellers and buyers of goods (McMillan 2002; 4, 7). As well as being efficient and convenient, sophisticated electronic platforms (and telephone bidding) aid those who wish to bid anonymously. Keep in mind that the telephones and other technologies are one-way communications: outside to inside. However, these do not diminish the importance of careful evaluations at previews. As described in Chapter 7, *caveat emptor!*

The Boston auction opens with three high-school students pleasantly singing *The National Anthem* – acapella. That was especially appropriate because one portion of the auction was dedicated to Mr. David Spinney’s collection of forty-one George Washington-associated documents and papers –signed letters and documents, important prints, Currier engravings, lithographs, a Martha Washington autographed letter, the first edition of Washington’s farewell address, original music for his funeral and so forth.

Although “attending” via technology provides privacy, being physically present is more satisfying to one’s sensory perceptions. Compare listening to a symphony to attending in-house. The nuances and vibes are just better when one is physically part of the community and can visually witness and appreciate the ritualness of the exchange. So, I watch as letters from Washington’s Revolutionary War years (some I had held and read) exceed expectations, others fall short, and some are passed. (My informants suggest this could be the fault of an innocent or uninformed estimator.) Interestingly, a first-edition, first-issue printed quarto of hymns and

anthems commemorating his death, by Oliver Holden, nearly triples its pre-sale high estimate. In the second part of the auction, 496 letters, manuscripts, first editions and autographs are offered and most include provenances. Autographed items range from Alexander Hamilton and Benjamin Franklin to Abraham Lincoln and General Gibbon's handwritten, first-hand instructions to George Custer et al planning the Little Big Horn massacre. Other documents include those signed by Catherine the Great, Anna Pavlova and Susan B. Anthony. Some bids are within range; other items are passed.

While all of these documents have deep meaning and are representative of remarkable historical figures, many just do not find their market. No one wants Hemmingway, Hoover, Lindbergh, or Coolidge. One gallery bidder questions the authenticity of Lot 81, an undated, Lou Gehrig "clipped signature" on a "small rectangle of peach-colored paper with the signature in pencil, 3 ¼ x 2 in." (Skinner 2905B, Lots 32-538). With the price estimate at between \$1,000 and \$1,500, the auctioneer reaches to \$500, "as low as I can go." A voice toward the rear of the room interrupts, "I don't buy fake things. Can I return it if it is not authentic?" The auctioneer's response is firm: "You can have it authenticated after it is bought. I am not having a discussion with you in the midst of bidding."

Items connected to music and arts do well, with Liszt-, Rossini-, Verdi- and Wagner-related items more than doubling the high side of their presale estimates. A montage of nine autographed photographs of musicians and performers, estimated at between \$500 to \$700, sells for \$4750, plus 23 percent. Nevertheless, many items are passed, even a signed letter from James Monroe to the new governor of the Alabama Territory – but it is undated and, therefore, undesirable. For goods where there is a lack of interest, personal views and biases and a

willingness to compete in the “tournament” decide what is desirable, and participants place a value on commodities offered in these one-of-a-kind sales (Appadurai 1986, 56).

A few days after the sale, a trade publication reports prices Skinner’s achieved for two standout lots. The British sent Captain H. Warre (1821-1898) to settle a territorial dispute between Oregon and Canada, and he published his findings in a folio with colored plates to illustrate the wildness of the American West. A phone bidder paid \$53,000, well within the estimate. But add to that a 23 percent auction house premium, and the price swells to over \$65,000. In the Spinney collection of Washington documents, an autographed survey of Augusta County, Virginia, written and signed by him in 1751, was bid \$1,000 over its presale estimate range, for a final total of nearly \$32,000 – which includes the house premium (“Oregon Exploration Book,” 2016). Publicity for achieving high prices is good for the auction house and can be used strategically.

Throughout the Kula trading sphere, diverting exchanges from customary paths might be because of socially disruptive warfare or resultant pillaging and plundering. Art for the tourist trade also removes goods from their usual “circuit of exchange” and frames them as aesthetic objects outside of their cultural milieu (Appadurai 1986, 26). There is sadness passing the sacred – whether it is eighteenth-century Communion chalices, Captain Warre’s folio or a woman’s lifetime collection of toys thoughtfully assembled in the past thirty years, goods she believed would have value some day – to the profane. In the former case, the culture of the church changed; in the latter case, the audience did not value what she valued. She took a risk; they rejected her ideal. As one attendee explained, “She bought what she liked; started in the early 80s.”

Exchanges are multi-dimensional, and while some goods find a new identity at a particular time and place, many others do not. While a poor economic climate or an alternate social or cultural meme can disrupt the routine rhythm of exchange, why demand for certain goods on a particular day is low may be unanswerable, but at least one customer was concerned about “fake things.”

## Chapter Seven

### *Caveat Emptor*

Auctions are fascinating forays into the commodity exchange market, and each bidder must juggle the financial, aesthetic and authentic aspects of an item. Personally, the more I attend auctions and antique shows and talk to dealers, the more I realize how much I do not know about my genre: eighteenth-century furniture and decorative arts. Often there is a good reason why a seemingly important beautiful *looking* piece is offered at auction. And auctions are known to be places dealers put their mistakes.

Inspections are important. Sotheby's warns that "prospective bidders should inspect...before bidding to determine its condition, size and whether or not it has been repaired or restored" (9605, 223). To protect themselves, before bidding begins, auctioneers announce the terms of sale: "as is, where is" which covers the condition of the item – "not its type or pedigree" (Smith 1989, 157). Buyers must be aware of nuances. Sawn off chair legs, added rockers, replaced table tops, "married" bureaus, centennial pieces, skinned surfaces and altered finishes, repairs, replaced tops, finials, hinges or brasses, chipped or hairline-cracked porcelain, clever reproductions, odd proportions, new furniture "restored" – distressed -- to look old: these condition problems significantly detract from the value of a piece and push the ethics envelope. Detailed catalogue descriptions should mention repairs. For Sotheby's Sale No. 9605, the description of a circa 1770 carved, mahogany armchair, Lot 2160, notes: "...approximately one inch has been restored at the top of stiles and splat, rear legs with bottom inch replaced" (152). Estimated at \$200,000 to \$300,000, the lot was passed after reaching only \$140,000. A tall-case clock with a Philadelphia-made case and works from Holland had an indefinite attribution: "Works probably associated, finials and cartouche replaced" (Sotheby's 9605, 144). It is easy to get drawn up in the bidding frenzy and end up with a bad case of buyer's remorse. But, as a

consolation, one can rationalize that “no matter how extravagant...you have only overpaid by one bid”; that is, the under-bidder was willing to pay almost as much as you (Lacey 1998, 302).

Learn descriptive terminology. Auction houses have devised a glossary of terms for paintings and decorative arts; the scaled description is meant to help buyers. For works of art, if the Christian name and surname of the artist is indicated, it is, in their opinion, a work by the artist. “Attributed to,” “studio of,” “circle of,” “style of,” “manner of” and “after” designate degrees of authenticity (Sotheby’s 9605, 227). For furniture and decorations a similar scale of terms exists. Description plus date indicates “in our opinion...no major alterations”; description without a date, piece is “of the period and has undergone significant restoration or alteration;” including the word “style” in the description is a true warning because it is probably an “intentional reproduction” (Sotheby’s 9605, 227-28).

So if I am drawn to an important piece, it is worthwhile to make that purchase from a reputable, knowledgeable dealer. Specialists understand that after 250 years a piece should show the appropriate effect of sun exposure on its top surface, unfinished aged wood acquires a particular patina and secondary woods should show oxidization (and pass the “scratch test”). Also, tooling marks should be appropriate to the era; wood grain inconsistencies set off warning bells; type of secondary (inside) wood and grain direction; wear patterns -- such as tell-tale swing marks underneath gate-leg tables -- should be true; the top of a Pilgrim-century piece typically should be a single plank of wood; indigenous styles of ball-and-claw feet should match the workmanship throughout; shrinkage and hardware should be appropriate to the age, and the placement of and age of hinges and their screws are of interest, as is the effect of exposure to outside weather (i.e., for weathervanes). Sometimes a small discrepancy or repair can be dismissed, but the piece has to retain its integrity.

In a press release promoting “a refined sale of important American furniture, folk art and silver from various owners...266 carefully selected lots,” Christie’s department head Andrew Holter points out, “the theme is condition, condition, condition” (Beach 2017, 20). The last few pages of each of their sale catalogues are devoted to “Conditions of Sale: Buying at Christie’s.” The last sentence of Item 4(a) warns that “if you are planning to bid...inspect it personally or through a knowledgeable representative before you make a bid to make sure you accept the description and its condition. We recommend you get your own advice from a restorer or other professional adviser” (Christie’s Catalogues, “Conditions of Sale”). Limited obligations for faults, refunds and returns are precisely written in in small print in a multi-page appendix in each sale catalogue. For one-of-a-kind pieces, it often requires a team of experts to understand the details and determine worth. Personal appreciation aside, perhaps no one else wants a singular example, despite its impeccability.

Goods of “some age” are auctioned on an “as-is” basis, “without any representations or warranties by us or the consignor as to merchantability, fitness for a particular purpose, the correctness of the catalogue or other description of the condition, size, quality, rarity, repairs, importance, medium, frame, provenance, exhibitions, literature or historical relevance of any property...bidders should inspect the property before bidding to determine its condition, size and whether or not it has been repaired or restored” (Sotheby’s 9605, 223).

“Beware” works both ways. A recent headline, “Sotheby’s Sues over Second Old Master,” details a complaint filed January 17, 2017, in United States District Court in New York. A collector/art historian consigned a painting of St. Jerome he attributed to a circle of sixteenth-century Italian artists. The painting sold at auction in 2012 for over \$800,000; however, recent scientific analyzation of pigment samples has determined that the painting is a recent forgery.

This process of discovery falls within Sotheby's "terms of guarantee": "5 years from the date of the relevant auction, the original purchaser must notify Sotheby's in writing..." (Sotheby's 9605, 224). The house has made the buyer whole, and is now seeking damages from the consignor (Sotheby's Sues...2017, 38).

While buying commodities through the open auction market has its risks, for hundreds of years, this process has provided stability – and fairness – to a situation where goods of unknown value are circulated, find a new function and identity and establish a threshold value.

## **Chapter Eight**

### **Conclusion**

Auctions are resilient open markets that facilitate the transfer of ownership of used goods and convert them into commodities, establishing a price for the exchanged goods. In these theatrical arenas of commerce where people and goods are brought together, the public collectively witnesses and participates in a structured conversion ceremony where commodities are removed from their original state, recirculated and reincarnated with a new status. Reflecting on the Hegelian thesis-antithesis-synthesis construction, one could put forward that this exchange follows a linear process: Thesis (the immobile original), antithesis (no longer motionless) and thesis (a return to its original state, but embellished); even “x” to “non-x” to “x+” with a “+” added after each exchange. Here, the characteristics of things (e.g., history, quality, scarcity) are organized and evaluated, and the taste of buyers and market demand enable goods to be moved from one sphere into another. The socialness of auctions is multi-dimensional; a combination of people and product are enmeshed within a competitive bidding process which assigns specific values to specific items as they change ownership in a structured manner.

Practices and meanings are established by the social behavior of knowledgeable people acting within the framework of this conventional market. Their individual strategies are affected by economic and ideological interests. As they circulate from owner to owner, goods accumulate individualized, meaningful social histories. As I learned when meeting with my informants, the depth and breadth of biographies – or provenances – of each item become an important asset within this structured scheme that facilitates exchange, and is a basis (along with demand and condition) for their valuation. (Arguably, condition is a part of demand because goods with the best condition can be the rarest and, therefore, support the highest demand.) As they gain social status, these commodified goods can better become agents of their own destiny.

Social history is meticulously curated by professionals in the market network who have deep knowledge of all aspects of specific genres, as evidenced by my day at Sotheby's when I watched experts consider written history but use their own expertise to determine authenticity and, thus, potential value. Careful vetting is more prevalent at high-end auctions where thorough documentation coaxes record prices.

My research shows that when goods are offered in the open market and then exchanged, their status is converted from a sacred, personal one into that of a marketable commodity, as illustrated with silver communion pieces from Boston's Old South Church, the Kennedy-Onassis step stool and Alexander Hamilton's papers – all offered by original owners. Reindividualized at the stroke of the auction-house gavel, they are re-embodied with an additional social identity; some goods, such as the Waln's furnishings, move from a dysfunctional site through this orderly transfer into a less chaotic place. Iconic goods, most importantly humans, are set apart from the commodity sphere, and these should permanently be placed in a unique state of singularization, never to be traded as commodities. This was not the case when slaves were auctioned as commodities, their humanity ignored.

While auction structure is similar from high-end to low-end with the goal of exchanging things in a competitive atmosphere, the quality of goods can control "social distance" (Smith 1989, 89). Settings can convey prestige or simple functionality, and expectations correspond to these distinctions. At less formal auctions, where more mundane used goods with uneven quality circulate, there is doubtless more community sociable-ness. This may be aided by the common denominator of a good canteen, general informality, goods with a more anonymous character that are displayed in the same room as the auction (not in specially-designed galleries), walk-arounds by the auctioneer during preview times, as well as less use of technology which

probably encourages greater attendance participation. While knowledgeable staff does circulate within Sotheby's galleries during preview times, their performance is more deliberate. Of course, there is more risk in these highly-polished, high-toned spaces.

Rather than interview auctioneers and present their perspective in this paper, I believe my early intent would have detracted from concentrating on the socialness extant within the auction-house realm, specifically that effused by both bidders and culturally valued goods. Although I incorporated this aspect briefly, a future ethnography spotlighting the social skills of auctioneers and their staff, actors with complex roles on the auction stage proper, detailing how the community within auctions has shaped them (or is it the other way around?), would be another relevant focus.

Returning to my purchase as an auction initiate, Philadelphia photographer Frederick Gutekunst (1831-1917) opened a daguerreotype photographic gallery in Philadelphia in 1856, and his business thrived when Civil War soldiers had their portraits made at his studio. Among his important clients were Civil War hero and later President General Ulysses S. Grant and seventy-one-year-old Walt Whitman, who thought Gutekunst was "on top of the heap"; he considered his photo to be a "first-rater – one of the best, anyhow" (Gutekunst Archive, 2000-2008).

Also, many of the photos have an Internal Revenue Certificate stamp on the reverse. These tax stamps were the result of an act to fund the Civil War, and were affixed to several goods, including photographs. Needless to say, the tax was unpopular, particularly for those who wanted photos taken of family members before they were sent to the battlefield. One photo carries a five-cent stamp, assessed on images that cost between fifty-one cents and a dollar. Photographers were to process these and cancel them by initialing and dating them. While the

tax tells me the cost of each photo, the handwritten “1865” date on one stamp helps me place the photo in a particular year (Harrell-Sesniak, 2012).

My antique photo album verifies the all-around social potential inherent in auctions: I participated in a social environment where goods were exchanged. The “thing” I fancied is a powerful volume that literally speaks through evidence between (and on) its covers. For me, it had a certain value and was exchanged for something of equal value, in this case, cash. This seemingly common event demonstrates that goods, such as my acquired photo collection, have a meaningful and traceable life history with biographical possibilities: In this case, real people visited a real gallery and paid real taxes to acquire status symbols that idealized and memorialized their family’s social life. The double entendre of this album begins with a cultural biography that associates it with a famous Philadelphia photographer in a significant era. Twice-blessed with meaning, additionally, it is enriched with socially-relevant, iconic images that represent a family whose Civil-War-era lives and relevancy are expressed on its pages. It says: “This is who we are.” Pencil notations identify one as “Sam’l Hopkins,” opposite him is “Mary Jessup Gill.” “Caroline Caseby” is dressed in a flowing black, full-skirted, floor-length gown. For generations before it became a commodity heaped on a table in an auction, it had resided as a cherished item in a farmhouse in southern New Jersey, but was re-sacred-ized after I bought it.

The complexity and richness of such stories explains why goods bought at auctions are appreciated for the cycles of life they represent. I probably will never know why the face of one female subject is scratched out of a photo in my album; time and tide erase social histories. That is why one wishes they could just talk.

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