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# African-Americana: Black Boy Scouts, Ink Spots, and Other "Heroes of the Colored Race"

by Jeanne Schinto



*Swann Galleries, New York City*

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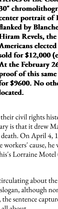
Photos courtesy Swann

At the 2009 African-Americana sale at Swann Galleries in New York City, when a commemorative red and white "I Am a Man" poster—similar to the ones carried by striking sanitation workers in Memphis in 1968—fetched $1920, Swann expert Wyatt H. Day recalled that the auction house sold an original black-and-white example at the one-man department's sale in 1997 for $5200 on the hammer. It was the first that had ever come to auction.




**This 21½" x 14" black-and-white poster—one of the originals carried by striking sanitation workers who marched with Martin Luther King Jr. in Memphis in 1968—sold for $40,800 (est. $8000/12,000). It came to the sale from a Missouri-based collector, active in the civil rights movement, who bought it at an auction 20 years ago, said Wyatt Day. Two other examples, from a press run believed to have been 300 to 400, are on display at Memphis's National Civil Rights Museum.**

"That is the elusive black tulip, no pun intended," said Day back in 2009. If another of those ever came to auction, he predicted, it would bring "a minimum of ten thousand dollars." Well, he was right, and by a wide margin. At Swann's African-Americana sale on February 25, another original sold to one of several competing phone bidders for a remarkable $40,800 (including buyer's premium). Day identified the buyer as a Memphis-based collector.

***Heroes of the Colored Race*, a 21" x 30" chromolithograph featuring a center portrait of Frederick Douglass flanked by Blanche K. Bruce and Hiram Revels, the first two African-Americans elected to the U.S. Senate, sold for $12,000 (est. $5000/7500). At the February 26, 2009, sale, a proof of this same 1881 chromo sold for $9600. No other copies have been located.**

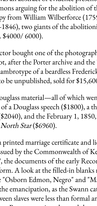
The strike itself, organized after a long period of grievances by the African-American members of the city's sanitation force, wasn't particularly noteworthy, those who know their civil rights history will be able to tell you. What has made it legendary is that it drew Martin Luther King Jr. to the city—and to his untimely death. On April 4, 1968, the night after he gave a speech in support of the workers' cause, he was assassinated on the balcony of downtown Memphis's Lorraine Motel (now the National Civil Rights Museum).

Today there are many stories circulating about the derivation of the poster's simple but profound slogan, although none has been substantiated. Suffice it to say, the sentence captures the essence of what the civil rights movement was all about.

The significance of the James Amos Porter archive of African-American art history, another of the sale's highlights and the top lot of the sale, is not so easy to express in a few words. For more than 40 years, Porter (1905-1970) was a professor in the art department and director of the Gallery of Art at Howard University in Washington, D.C. He pioneered the presentation of African-American art in the broader contexts of American and modern art traditions. His groundbreaking book *Modern Negro Art* (1943) is considered the first in-depth scholarship in African-American art history. The archive containing literally thousands of items in multiple boxes—still arriving on preview days—that came to market was essentially his working library.

Consigned by Porter's daughter, Constance "Coni" Porter Uzelac, the unprecedented trove includes photographs of artworks, exhibition layouts, and artists in their studios; correspondence to and from Porter; rare exhibition catalogs, fliers, and pamphlets; newspaper clippings; precious other primary materials that feature many of the artists whose works have been sold for record prices at Swann's African-American art sales over the last few years; and documents relating to Porter's own career as a visual artist.

Here are just three examples: a 1956 letter from artist Hughie-Lee Smith that discusses his sale of a painting to Porter ("I am delighted that you would like to add 'Woman on Wharf' to your collection. I feel honored indeed."); a 1946-47 catalog from the exhibition *Three Negro Artists*, i.e., Jacob Lawrence, Horace Pippin, and Richmond Barthé, at Phillips Gallery, Washington, D.C.; and Porter's high school yearbook from Armstrong Technical High School in D.C., showing he was salutatorian and treasurer of his senior class of 1923.




**The African-American art history reference archive (see photos at bottom of page) of James Amos Porter (1905-1970) sold to an institution for $50,400 (est. $30,000/40,000). Schinto photos.**

An institution accessible to scholars would seem the right place for such a treasure, and one did claim it at the sale. Estimated at $30,000/40,000, the archive sold for $50,400 to an entity that Day was not permitted to name but described as "Ivy League."

"About a third of the sale usually goes to institutions; this time it was closer to fifty percent," said Day, who conceived of and organized the first sale of African-Americana for Swann in 1995. This annual event remains the only sale in the world entirely devoted to the subject.

Some of the institutions bid for themselves, invariably by phone; two others used a broker, whose phone bidding via Swann's Kimberly Grey dominated a good portion of the sale. Besides the Porter archive, major items destined for public collections included one of the earliest items. A pro-slavery treatise, it was published in 1742 by an African-born Dutch slave given the name Jacobus Elisa Joannes Capitein by his master.

Capitein (c. 1717-1747), who was educated in theology at Leiden University in the Netherlands, argued in De Slaverny that slavery was not "contrary to Christian freedom." Not surprisingly, it was exploited as a defense of slavery as a form of paternalism. No copies of De Slaverny have appeared at auction in the last 25 years, according to Day. This one went to the institutional broker on Grey's phone at $13,200 (est. $8000/10,000).

Another early item from the other side of the Atlantic went to a collector, but he's not the type simply to file it away, said Day; he has a history of frequently lending to institutions. Published in London in 1791, the item was an abstract of evidence presented in 1790-91 to the House of Commons arguing for the abolition of the slave trade. A presentation copy from William Wilberforce (1759-1833) to Thomas Clarkson (1760-1846), two giants of the abolitionist movement, it sold for $11,400 (est. $4000/ 6000).

That same collector bought one of the photography prices, and the third-highest-priced lot, after the Porter archive and the "I Am a Man" poster. A quarter-plate ambrotype of a beardless Frederick Douglass, an image that is believed to be unpublished, sold for $15,600 (est. $8000/10,000).

Other strong Douglass material—all of which went to institutions—included a copy of a Douglass speech ($1800), a third edition of his autobiography ($2040), and the February 1, 1850, edition of his weekly newspaper *The North Star* ($6960).

A left bid took a printed marriage certificate and license for $2400 (est. $1500/2500). Issued by the Commonwealth of Kentucky on December 25 and 26, 1867, the documents of the early Reconstruction period were typical only in form. A look at the filled-in blanks revealed that the bride and groom were "Osborn Edmon, Negro" and "Malvena Castleman, Negro." Before the emancipation, as the Swann catalog noted, marriage ceremonies between slaves were less than formal and generally reserved for house servants. Reconstruction changed that, restoring legal rights to tens of thousands of couples and their children.

Also extremely rare—the first of its kind that Day had ever seen—was a list of tribal African runaways. Handwritten in Havana in 1857, it names and describes in detail 33 captured slaves, including in many cases ritual tribal scarification on face, chest, and stomach, along with such things as a limp or missing teeth. The list made $3360 (est. $3500/5000).

The sale as a whole realized a healthy $549,254 (with buyers' premiums) on expectations of $497,500/736,250. "I'd been wanting to break half-a-million," said Day, obviously pleased at this result. "This material, regardless of where the economy is, did well because the interest remains strong on, most important, the institutional level. It's something to see that this sale did so well as it did in an otherwise crappy economy."

A second feather in Day's cap derives from the nature of the unsuccessful lots—most were minor players. One major work that didn't find a buyer until after the auction was a four-page autograph letter from abolitionist Charles Henry Langston (grandfather of poet Langston Hughes) to Benjamin Coates, a Philadelphia Quaker. A discussion of their participation in the Oberlin-Wellington Fugitive Slave Rescue, in Oberlin, Ohio, it was dated June 8, 1859. Eventually it sold for $4800 (est. $6000/8000).

A passed lot, which opened and closed at $15,000 (est. $20,000/ 30,000), was a Civil War archive. It belonged to African-American soldier George R. Rome (1835-1900), who served with the 55th Massachusetts regiment. The lot included a New Testament Bible, signed five times with several pages of diary entries, a leather shoulder strap, waist belt, and bayonet scabbard, as well as a tintype portrait of Rome in partial uniform.

Sitting on a shelf behind a counter at the previews was a painting of a prison yard at night. Thinking it looked like an interesting little folk art piece, a woman asked about it. When told it was by James Earl Ray, convicted assassin of Martin Luther King Jr., she shook her head, obviously not the least bit interested in exploring it further. Together with a letter of authenticity signed by Ray, it failed to sell at the auction but later fetched $2400 (est. $3000/5000).

A sale like this can't help but remind us of shameful moments in our country's history, but at the same time this department brings to light some fascinating cultural materials, e.g., a mid-20th-century archive devoted to African-American Boy Scouts and another one devoted to the musical group the Ink Spots.

Likewise, facets of African-American business history are regularly revealed by the artifacts that Day assembles annually. This time, from his own collection, he consigned two lots in the business category.

One was a 1926 illustrated brochure advertising Poro College, the first American school of Black cosmetology. Poro was founded by Annie M. Pope Turnbo-Malone (1869-1957), who inscribed the brochure to a Raymond Pittman. According to Day, Turnbo-Malone is unfairly overshadowed by hair products empire-builder Madam C.J. Walker, who is generally credited with being the first Black millionaire. "But she actually worked for Mrs. Turnbo-Malone at the turn of the twentieth century," said Day. "Mrs. Turnbo-

Malone was indeed a millionaire before Madam Walker, and it's obvious she inspired Madam Walker."

The other business item that Day consigned was a pictorial poster dating from 1916-20 that advertised the Patterson-Greenfield automobile, made by the one and only African-American auto manufacturer in U.S. history. Founded by a former slave, Charles Richard Patterson, a blacksmith and coach-and-buggy maker, the company grew into the car business with the second generation, Charles's son Frederick Douglass Patterson. C.R. Patterson & Sons of Greenfield, Ohio, continued into the mid-1930's, when the Depression did in it. "Still, I find it amazing that an ex-slave and former blacksmith should become the founder of a successful car company-truly amazing," said Day, who has searched without success for an actual example of a Patterson-Greenfield car in an auto museum. Perhaps a reader knows of one in a private collection.

For more information, phone (212) 254-4710 or visit (www.swanngalleries.com).

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