

Neal Auction Company, New Orleans, Louisiana

The Louisiana Purchase Auction

by Karla Klein Albertson

Photos courtesy Neal Auction Company

For collectors of southern regional material from fine art to artifacts, the annual “Louisiana Purchase Auction” at Neal Auction Company in New Orleans is a much-anticipated opportunity for new acquisitions. The event also serves as a yearly reunion of like-minded individuals who congratulate and confront one another over the long weekend.

The auction on November 21 and 22, 2009, brought over 1200 lots to the podium and achieved a healthy total of \$3.84 million. As always, the fun lies in observing just how this total is constructed. Some bidders stay all day, enjoying the get-together mood. Others arrive just in time for a block of special interest material, such as the Confederate money, Mardi Gras souvenirs, or Native American baskets. Off the salesroom floor, advertising and the Internet encourage invisible ranks of buyers to participate with anonymity.

President and chief auctioneer Neal Alford had a very busy day Saturday polishing off the first 850 lots of the sale in the main showroom on Magazine Street. Lack of interest in some lots was more than compensated for by wild enthusiasm for others. Auctions are subject to many unpredictable factors—the national economy, market trends in antiques and fine arts, and competition for good consignments. Yet, after many years in the business, Alford tries to hold a slow-and-steady-wins-the-race philosophy in approaching these variables.

“The marketplace has that volatility,” said Alford. “It’s a pretty good market, but it’s not that easily understood—hard to estimate. You do see more potential in certain things than in others. But the effort should be the same. The advertising and marketing need to be consistent. The marketplace has its own vagaries and contradictions now, but if your effort remains the same, then the potential will be realized.”

As befits the regional focus of

the Louisiana Purchase auction, the top lot was a rare 1858 map, *Norman’s Chart of the Lower Mississippi River* from Natchez to New Orleans. The map was created by French-born Louisiana artist Marie Adrien Persac (1823-1873), who had journeyed down the river in a

“The marketplace has its own vagaries and contradictions now, but if your effort remains the same, then the potential will be realized.”

skiff. He not only charted the twists and turns of the waterway but also marked divisions of land and the names of owners—valuable information indeed.

The rapid bidding from phones and the floor, with new competitors jumping in as the price mounted, strongly suggested interested parties with strong ties to the plots of land

depicted. Estimated at \$18,000/25,000, the map sold to a Louisiana collector bidding on the phone for \$315,999.91 (includes buyer’s premium).

Even Marc Fagan, head of Neal’s books and manuscripts division, was amazed by the final result. “I was hoping for

fifty thousand and wouldn’t have been surprised by seventy-five thousand. There was tremendous interest. It’s an iconic map, but it’s more than that—it’s almost like a painting. Persac was a painter and an architect, and some of his early works—highly sought after—are architectural renderings.

“It’s a map everyone has seen in museums, and there was also a reproduction done in the 1930’s. Everyone has seen the reproduction on the market, but no one sees this original available for auction.”

When asked how many were made, Fagan replied, “Nobody knows, but in institutions there might be seven or eight. You’re never going to get a chance like this.” In fact, there really was no auction record to gauge an estimate against. The last example had changed hands privately several decades back.

Fagan was also pleased with the price for the 1860 “Bien Edition” folio of Audubon’s *The Birds of America*, which sold for \$271,999.91 (est. \$150,000/200,000) to a collector bidding in the room against multiple phones. This edition, offered by the artist’s son John Woodhouse Audubon, was to include 44 separate parts, only 15 of which were issued. This example included 14 of the parts with 140 images. Neal has become a go-to firm for Audubons with results at times topping the New York houses.



Neal Auction Company enjoyed great success in 2009 with Audubon material. This 1860 “Bien Edition” folio of *The Birds of America*, with 14 of its projected 44 parts, was purchased by a Louisiana collector at the sale for \$271,999.91. Audubon’s wading birds are especially popular in the South—a purple heron sold in April for \$86,950, and a blue crane (or heron) sold in September for \$82,250.

Very rare to be found in its original 1858 printing, *Norman’s Chart of the Lower Mississippi River* from Natchez to New Orleans, after Marie Adrien Persac, was the top lot of the sale. Determined and rapid increases—perhaps from parties now living in the area depicted—took the price leagues beyond its \$18,000/25,000 estimate to the \$315,999.91 paid by a Louisiana phone bidder.



Southern painting is always a strong component of this particular auction, but November’s offerings included works by both classic and contemporary artists. *Youth Holding a Pomegranate*, a mid-20th-century portrait by Hughie Lee-Smith (1915-1999), sold for \$26,290. The pensive little girl watercolor *Flip Flops and Lace*, a 1991 work by Florida artist Stephen Scott Young (b. 1957), brought \$155,350.

A *Hat for Jolie Blonde* by Louisiana favorite George Rodrigue (b. 1944) sold to a phone bidder for \$23,900. Australian-born painter Simon Gunning (b. 1956) made a series of paintings of Honey Island swamp in St. Tammany Parish. The one offered in this sale, made three-dimensional by the addition of cypress wood and bark on the surface, went at \$14,340. A mid-1960’s oil and mixed media work by popular New Orleans artist Ida Kohlmeyer (1912-1997) surprisingly did not sell.

Wonderful faces emerged from a group of portraits of the 18th and 19th centuries. Principal among these was the diminutive 1780 image of

Revolutionary War hero Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens by Charles Willson Peale (1741-1827), which sold for \$107,550. Institutional interest set three phones against a bidder in the crowd, and the result was a record price for a miniature by the artist. Another military portrait of a Lexington, Kentucky, light infantryman was attributed to José Francisco Xavier de Salazar y Mendoza (1750-1802) and sold to a phone bidder for \$32,862.50.

The initial 93 lots in Saturday’s sale came from the Belle Cheniere collection of Dr. and Mrs. William deG. Hayden, Louisiana natives who lived in Texas. In addition to good American furniture, decorative arts, and paintings, the lots included prints from major photographers of the 20th century. Edward J. Steichen’s *The Flat Iron Building* brought \$4302, and Alfred Stieglitz’s *The Steerage, 1907* sold for \$6572.50.

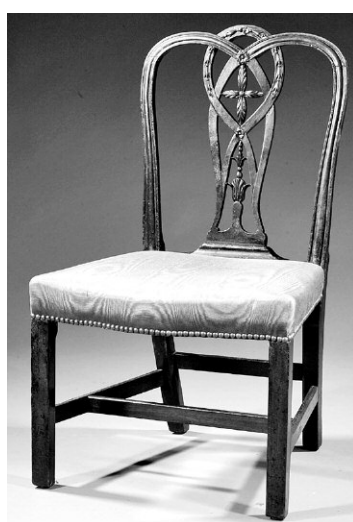
A collection of baskets woven by the Chitimacha Indian tribe of Louisiana had an intriguing history. They had been discovered packed in the original Ball Jar box that Sarah A. McIlhenny (of the family known for Tabasco hot pepper sauce) had used to ship the baskets to Philadelphia collector Charles M. Biddle Jr. in 1922. A special group of bidders appeared on the floor and picked up their phones for the group. Prized for their intricate patterns woven in black, red,



No New Orleans auction would be complete without a Campeche chair, a comfortable seating form found in Spanish Colonial areas in the New World. This inlaid example is related to one given to James Madison by Thomas Jefferson and sold for \$11,950.



Very special wicker indeed, this late 19th-century rocker was remarkably well preserved with a partial Heywood-Wakefield label. Lively phone bidding took the price to \$7648.



Saturday’s auction opened with nearly 100 lots from the Belle Cheniere collection of Americana formed by the Haydens of Paris, Texas, which included fine art, photographs, furniture, and decorative arts. This Federal side chair sold for \$10,157.50 and is closely related to an example at the New-York Historical Society.



John McCrady (1911-1968) was raised in Oxford, Mississippi, and later joined the Bohemian community in New Orleans’ French Quarter. His vision of farmland painted in 1940, *Sic Transit*, sold for \$107,550.



This rosewood Rococo Revival étagère, adorned with all possible bells and whistles, sold to a phone bidder for \$17,925. The lot was attributed to Thomas Brooks of Brooklyn, New York, on the basis of a similar example with the cabinetmaker's stenciled mark that was auctioned at Neal in October 2007.

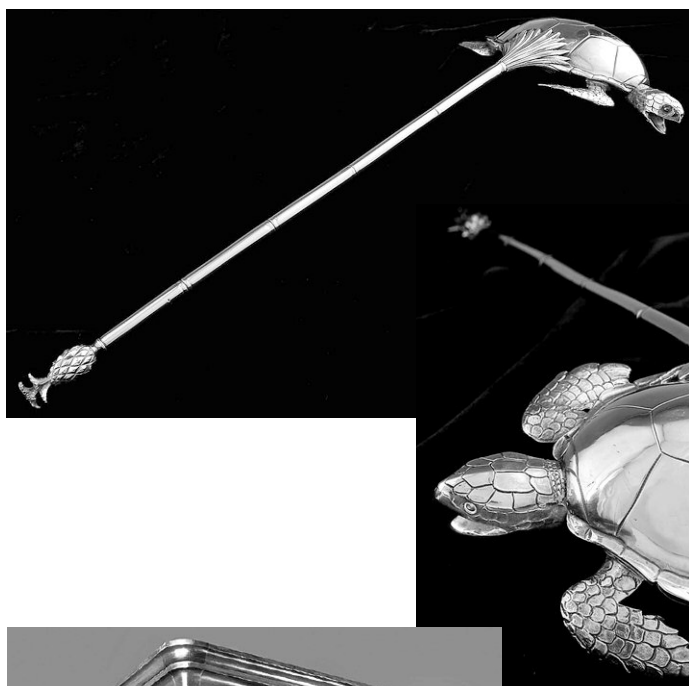
and natural cane, the baskets sold well above estimates.

The baskets were followed by two vintage pieces of Acadian woven cotton that brought \$1673 and \$3226.50.

Director of furniture Rachel Weathers picked her own sweetheart in her specialty—a Louisiana armoire of mahogany and cypress. The circa 1800 piece had its original hardware, beautifully curved cabriole legs, and a scalloped apron below. It sold for \$18,522.50 to someone in the room. Weathers commented, "I was pleased with the armoire. It went to a good private collection."

This Louisiana Purchase auction really did have something for everyone, from museums interested in the historic Peale miniature to the guy who only wanted to know where the Confederate money was. Michelle LeBlanc, auctioneer and director of administration and finance for Neal, summed it up. "It's hard to single out one particular item. We really were grateful to have so many wonderful collections. What I think is so special about this particular auction is the individual collections that contain numerous lots of significance. We're very honored to have had the opportunity to present these to the market."

Neal Auction Company maintains a vigorous schedule of sales. For more information, call (504) 899-5329 or go to the firm's Web site (www.neal auction.com).



Exotic George III silver, this ladle with a bowl in the form of a Caribbean sea turtle and a pineapple finial sold for \$10,370. The elegant inscription inside documents its presentation in 1807 to Hon. F.P. van Berckel, once the representative from the Netherlands to the U.S. during George Washington's first term and later stationed in what is now Guyana.



More furniture and decorative arts were sold at Neal's Carondelet Gallery on Sunday. This mahogany tester bed, which had descended in a Plaquemines Parish family, sold for \$8663.75.



Flip Flops and Lace by Florida watercolorist Stephen Scott Young (b. 1957) sold for \$155,350.



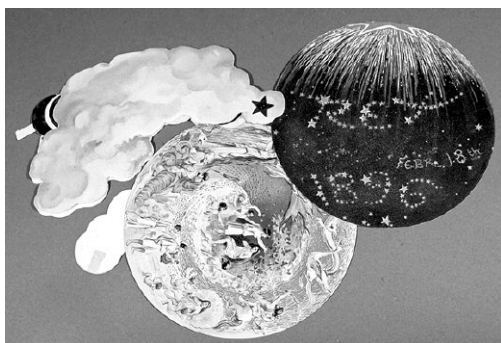
This South Carolina hunt board or "cupping table" of pine with traces of blue paint, 42" wide, brought \$10,755.



A massive oak library table in the Gothic Revival style, possibly Burns & Trainque, New York, brought \$16,730.



In the galleried auction room on Magazine Street, Neal Alford at the podium glanced to his left to pick up phone bids from his staff. Below the podium is a mountain landscape by Thomas Doughty (1793-1856) that sold for \$23,900. Albertson photo.



Mardi Gras memorabilia from the John W. Mecom Jr. collection was sold for the benefit of the Galveston Art Center, damaged by Hurricane Ike. The lots included colorful krewe pins dating to the late 19th and early 20th centuries and paper invitations, such as this Rex Ball "Heavenly Bodies" design from 1896 that sold for \$1314.50.



No sugar plantation restoration is complete without some vintage equipment. This railroad cart was found in the sugar mill of a Louisiana estate and sold for \$2748.50.

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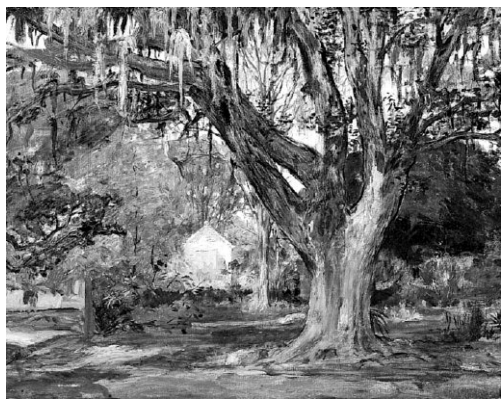
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One more proof that people can find what they are looking for in a minute on the Internet, this 18th-century Chinese stone dragon seal left behind its modest \$1000/1500 estimate to bring \$18,695.

Well-known William Woodward (1859-1939) of New Orleans painted this *Live Oak on Broadway* around the turn into the 20th century. Once part of the collection of architect A. Hays Town, the work sold at New Orleans Auction Galleries in 2005 for \$55,225, then realized \$107,550 at this Neal auction.



A nice mix of young and old, the bidders on the floor bring a friendly reunion spirit to the annual "Louisiana Purchase Auction" at Neal. Texas collector Jon Wickham, at right front, stayed put for the long haul, as did many. Albertson photo.



Auctioned off near the end of Saturday's sale were 52 lots of Meso-American art from the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, which realized a total of \$68,430. Notable was the Nayarit pottery house, 300 B.C.-A.D. 300, sitting on the counter, which sold for \$7887. Albertson photo.



In the art pottery case, the monumental bowl with bacchantes and grapes, designed and carved by artist Walter Inglis Anderson at the Shearwater Pottery in Ocean Springs, Mississippi, circa 1930, went to a local collector at \$23,900 after spirited phone and floor bidding. The shelf below held examples of Newcomb College pottery, including a 1902 oil lamp base with a quotation from Shakespeare that sold for \$23,900 and a high-glaze vase in the back corner decorated by Marie de Hoa LeBlanc that brought \$26,887.50. Albertson photo.



Rachel Weathers, Neal's director of furniture, is shown standing by one of her favorites in the sale, a late 18th-/early 19th-century Louisiana armoire with cabriole legs. The mahogany and cypress example had descended in the family of Don Esteban Quinones of Havana and New Orleans and sold to a bidder on the floor for \$18,522.50. Albertson photo.



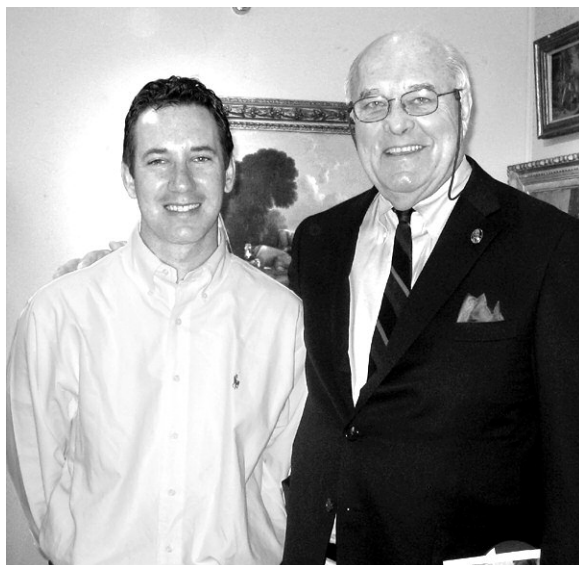
Auctioneer Michelle LeBlanc shared podium duties with Neal Alford. Albertson photo.



Selling to a phone bidder for \$12,547.50, the massive armoire in plum pudding mahogany, circa 1850, was attributed to Haitian-born cabinetmaker Dutreuil Barjon, who had a shop on Royal Street in New Orleans. The Boehm porcelain figurial of a brown pelican brought \$5676.25. Albertson photo.



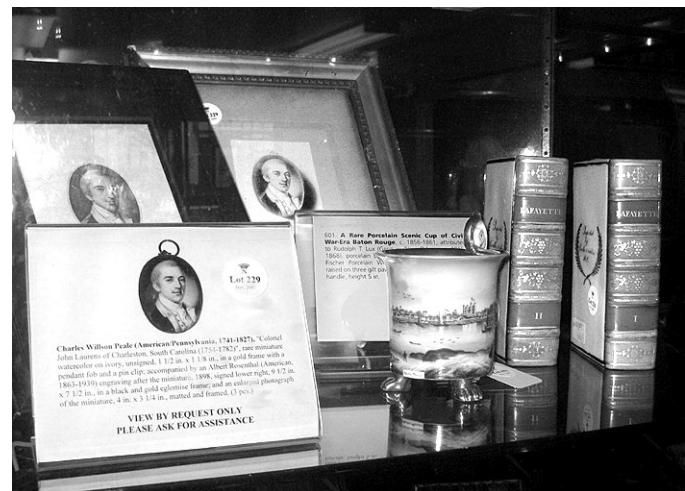
Amanda Mantle Winstead, senior appraiser of fine arts for Neal, drew attention to two prize paintings in her division. The Jean Joseph Vaudechamp 1828 portrait of a young woman in green velvet (bottom) sold for \$32,265. The dashing young man above, captured by Louis Antoine Collas in 1823, brought \$23,900. Albertson photo.



Chairman John R. Neal put in an appearance on Saturday. General manager Jason Leckert at left is married to auctioneer Michelle LeBlanc, who serves as director of administration and finance. Albertson photo.



Casually sharing display space, an Audubon mockingbird from the Belle Cheniere collection sold for \$20,315; a bronze bust of Robert E. Lee, after Henry Merwin Shrady, sold for \$15,535; and two diminutive paintings by Charleston, South Carolina, painter William Aiken Walker brought \$8365 and \$19,120. Albertson photo.



The well-documented 1780 portrait of Colonel John Laurens of Charleston, South Carolina, by Charles Willson Peale (1741-1827) set a record for a miniature by the artist when it sold to a bidder in the room for \$107,550 after brisk competition. The German porcelain cup with a rare Civil War era view of Baton Rouge brought \$9560; the Paris porcelain book flasks, \$5377.50. Albertson photo.



Director of books and manuscripts Marc Fagan was looking mighty pleased after his department took top lot honors with the Persac map and Audubon folio. At his left shoulder is the portrait of a Kentucky light infantryman attributed to Salazar, which brought \$32,862.50. Albertson photo.



An antique in its own right, the St. Charles streetcar carries visitors to the front door of Neal's Carondelet Gallery, site of Sunday sessions. Albertson photo.



A cache of early 20th-century Chitimacha baskets turned up in the original box that pepper sauce queen Sarah McIlhenny had used to ship them to Charles M. Biddle Jr. in Philadelphia. All lots did well, with this lidded basket in red, black, and natural cane bringing \$8365.



One way to keep bidders around is to feed them well. But only in New Orleans can you get delectable bowls of shrimp-laden bisque. Albertson photo.

A special group of bidders showed up to face off over the Confederate money. The 1861 \$1000 bill with images of Calhoun and Jackson reached \$33,460—as did a scarce \$5 note.

Where Does It Go?

Classical and Rococo Revival furniture, regional landscapes and portraits, silver made in New Orleans and Mobile, and other material culture of southern interest are the staples of auctions in New Orleans. Steady supply and demand give rise to the questions, where does it all come from, and where does it go?

Houmas House and Bodge—

two early 1800's houses on the Louisiana River Road between New Orleans and Baton Rouge—illustrate the cycle of acquisition and dispersal that makes the southern market so vibrant. Both houses have changed ownership in the last decade, and in both cases Neal Auction Company handled the sale of the contents.

Collectors interested in

Louisiana furniture in the French style will remember the important Crozat collection, sold from Houmas House in May 2003. The site's new owner, Kevin Kelley, has filled the rooms of the sugar plantation with the American Classical furniture and decorative arts that are his own collecting passion. Not only is the house open for public tours, it offers elegant

dining, a perfect setting for period films, and all the amenities needed for a splendid wedding. Take a virtual tour at the Web site (www.houmashouse.com).

Only three minutes down the road, Bodge—once owned by another member of the Crozat family—was acquired by Houston pathologist Dr. Marion Rundell in January 2008, after the contents were auctioned off by Neal in December 2007.

The elegant parlors and bedrooms are now furnished with pieces from the doctor's own substantial collection of Rococo Revival furniture, French porcelain, and cut glass.

After considerable structural renovation, Bodge opened as a bed and breakfast in autumn 2009. Visitors can tour the house and examine the Meeks parlor set, a Belter meridienn, or a Roux dresser exactly like

the ones that fly through New Orleans salesrooms. One can spend the night and dream in an ornate half-tester bed from Mallard. See the collection on line (www.bodgeplantation.com).

In the first place, Rundell thought the house was a good buy, and then the doctor—who also has an engineering background—rose to the challenge of stabilizing the structure for future generations. Collectors who care about regional history, who want a proper showcase for their collections, are central in the process of preserving Louisiana's architectural heritage. "I want the house architecturally to be as pure as possible," said Rundell. "There's not a single wall we moved. Bodge is not over the top or underdone, it's just pretty. That's what I want."

Rundell expects the popular seasons at the house will be spring and fall. Bodge can host small weddings or conferences or serve as base camp for visitors touring other historic plantations in the area. He assumes that others will appreciate what he has created. "We have bedrooms that are pretty. I want to stay in a place that's comfortable. I want to stay in a place where I might meet interesting people with whom I would have things in common."



Ghostly in the morning mist, Bodge Plantation—now a bed and breakfast—sits on the River Road between New Orleans and Baton Rouge. The Greek Revival house with main rooms on the upper level was built in 1837 for Louis Arthur Colomb and his wife, Mathilde. (An original house was built in 1801 as a wedding gift to Françoise Bringier from her father when she married a Parisian named Christophe Colomb. It burned, and the remains have been found on the grounds. The land passed to their son Louis Arthur.)



Dr. Marion M. Rundell, a serious collector based in Houston, Texas, has owned Bodge since January 2008. The upper living area and bedrooms are furnished with 19th-century Rococo Revival furniture, including examples by Meeks, Mallard, and Roux.



When winter rules in the North, camellias begin to bloom in Louisiana.

