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## Big Money Matisse

by *Mary Lapidus* 11/04/10

Christie's pulled off a marathon sale last night at Rockefeller center, selling a total of \$231.4 million, a result in the middle of its projection. A healthy sale-67 lots sold, of 84-suggests tht collectors are rebounding and ready to compete for good works. While the sale was jam-packed with hard won estate property it also suffered from "filler" and some artists performed poorly, like Renoir and Bonnard. Despite the phonebook size catalogue and the 85-lot sale (which seemed endless), Christopher Burge kept the room energized from start to finish.



There were some impressive prices, most notably the record set for Henri Matisse's *Nu de dos, 4 etat*, a dark brown monumental sculpture depicting the back of a nude woman against a wall. The series of which it is a part depicts four versions of the female back moving from a realistic depiction to abstraction, and was conceived during intervals from 1900 to 1901 according to the catalogue and inspired such mural size canvasses as *La Danse* (in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art). This cast is one of 12 that exists and only one other is in private hands. The complete set of four reliefs are spread over nine different museums, including the Museum of Modern Art.

After fierce bidding between three bidders, Larry Gagosian bought the lot for \$43.5 million, against the work's pre-sale estimate of \$25-35 million. Connor Jordan, Head of the New York Impressionist and Modern Department, "new and seasoned buyers were going after the work... the rarity of the object sold it."

The other record-breaking lot of the evening was a brightly hued Juan Gris from 1913, consigned by Henry Kravits. It sold for \$28.64 million to an undisclosed European collector, according to Christies. It carried a pre-sale estimate of \$18-25 million. Other works from the Kravits collection

included a Miro. *L'Air* (1938), a brightly-colored canvas, sold for \$10.3 million; an emerald green Paul Klee canvas sold for \$4.4 million to a phone bidder; and lastly, a 1921 Picasso pastel head, *Tete d'homme*, sold for \$6.1 million.

Picasso results were scattered throughout the evening. *Femme assise*, a 1920s drawing of a monumental woman, made \$700,000 in the middle range of its estimate, A Neoclassical pastel of bathers, *Nus sur la plage*, from the same period failed to sell, as did *Maternite* from the collection of Himan Brown, which carried an estimate of \$7-10 million but had no takers at \$5.8. Neoclassical Picassos are a tough sell.

Over all, estate property was a boon for the auction house, which listed no fewer than 11 estates or collections by name in the catalogue. Of those several Legers were stand-outs from the collection of Max Palevsky and James Johnson Sweeney. The first, *La Tasse de the*, a 1921 canvas, sold in the room to a dealer for \$8.1 million, while *Nature morte* from 1927 sold for \$7.9 million.

The top 10 sellers for the evening included only one Impressionist painting. Gustave Caillebotte's *Le Seine a Argenteuil*, a stunner in the artist's favored idiom-boats in high-key tones-sold from the Walter and Phyllis Shoreinstein collection and made \$5.1 million. A superb group of Seurat drawings from one French collection attracted the interest of buyers. Christie's Jordan persuaded the French seller they would be more powerful

Jordan later commented, "supply in the Impressionist market had been difficult," echoed by veteran dealer Christopher Eykyn's assessment, "They did a great job, given the material." The successful bidder on the early Raoul Dufy, dealer David Benrison (who last summer underbid Sotheby's \$40 million Turner in London), said, "There are not many trophy pieces, collectors are still waiting for the market to rebound."

All told Christie's sold \$231,439,500. "There is always a premium attached to rare works," said Jordan.