

Iceberg Art auction draws the spenders.

By CORINNE ABATT

After all the fanfare about the discovery of the small version of Frederick E. Church's oil painting, "The Icebergs," the actual sale of it came and went surprisingly fast.

A buyer, identified only as a resident of suburban Detroit, bid \$225,000. Frank Boos' gavel hit the block and the bidding was over.

Anyone who squeezed out of the crowded Stalker & Boos lower level auction gallery in the Great American Mall for a cup of coffee at the wrong moment would have missed the early afternoon's big event.

"Boos, auctioneer and co-owner of the gallery, had been busily selling items listed in the catalog and addendum since 11 a.m. Silver buyers and speculators turned out en masse to snatch up sterling silver flatware and tea sets.

"After Boos had sold one Ogdon Pleissner oil painting for \$4,000, a second Pleissner for \$2,500, a William Russell Flint watercolor for \$4,000, a Zochi oil for \$2,250 and passed by an Elihu Vedder oil, he announced with barely a change of pace, "Number 114."

There was a flutter of pages as audience members doubled-checked the catalog.

BESIDE 114, it read "The Icebergs," oil on canvas, mounted on board, unsigned, painted circa 1859-1861; 10 inches by 18 1/2 inches. PROVENANCE: Continual ownership within Church family and presently property of the artist's great-grandson. Complete provenance with names and addresses will be given to the successful bidder." (Provenance refers to history of ownership of a work of art.)

The painting was brought to the auction platform and the bidding opened at \$100,000. Stalker was on the phone at the right corner of the room hearing the out-of-town bids as he does at every auction. Boos called for a jump to \$175,000 in one leap and got it and moved on rapidly to \$225,000. That one, too, came quickly. The audience sensing that it was from one of those standing at the back of the room, turned to watch but saw very little because of the arranged signals between bidder and auctioneer.

After asking several times "Are you all done?" in his typical auctioneer style, Boos brought down his gavel and the sale was completed.

Most of the back of the room standees left immediately, several reportedly were there representing out-of-town bidders. A Stalker and Boos representative later said the actual buyer was present in person.

Stalker & Boos, like many of the large, international auction houses, sells on consignment and charges both seller and buyer a flat 10 percent of the sale. The buyer paid \$247,500 for the painting and the seller, a Birmingham resident, received \$202,500 from the sale.

Before the auction, Stalker & Boos estimated the work would bring \$300,000-\$400,000, based in part on the \$2.75 million larger Church painting of the same scene brought last year at Sotheby Parke Bernet in New York. The price, which included the 10 percent buyer's fee, is the highest ever paid for an American work of art and the third largest for any painting.

The larger "Icebergs," nine feet by five feet, was purchased by Lemar Hunt and given to the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts. It was found hanging in an English reform school and was a relatively unknown work when it surfaced on the international art scene last year.

Both paintings were done as a result of a trip Church made in a 65-foot schooner to sketch icebergs off the coast of Labrador in 1859.

The one sold Saturday, authenticated by Church scholar David Huntington of the University of Michigan who was in the auction audience, is considered a complete work rather than simply a study for the larger one.

In the small one, the wreck of a sailing vessel is in the lower right foreground. There is a faint outline of the wreck in the center foreground indicating the artist changed his mind about the location. In the Dallas Museum work, the wreck is in the left foreground. The mast in both paintings forms a cross, a Church hallmark, for in many of his paintings, either implied or obvious, there are symbols of his religious faith. His paintings of the American landscape also glorify the magnificence of the natural beauty of each scene with a slightly more subtle, but clear statement about the Creator.

SIX OTHER paintings went on the block after the Church painting was sold. An oil on canvas, "Along the Road," by Adolph Schreyer brought \$30,000. The bidding never got going on a still-life with fruit by Andre Derain. "The Church at Cluhy" by J.P. Raffalli went for \$14,000, "Natura Morta" by Gino Severini, oil on canvas, sold for \$25,000, Marc Chagall's 1910 "Portrait of V.M." went for \$25,000 and a Montmartre street scene by Maurice Utrillo was passed for lack of an appropriate bid.

The interest in silver is attributable in large part to its rapid rise in value. Early this week, Birmingham Stamps & Coins was paying around \$40 a Troy ounce. The price fluctuates making it impossible to quote an exact figure.

And Boos pointed out in his comments about the sterling silver pieces that they could be taken down the street and sold for more than the auction price.

A sterling silver tea and coffee service, said to have belonged to the late poet Edgar Guest, brought \$8,000. It weighed about 284 Troy ounces.

Another silver coffee and tea service, about 253 Troy ounces, sold for \$6,500 and a third, 219 Troy ounces, sold for \$5,500.

Stalker & Boos moved from the Penobscot Building in Detroit to Birmingham in 1968. That was also the year of their first auction. The firm now holds four auctions a year in its 300-seat national auction gallery. Saturday, when that filled, the upstairs rooms of the retail outlet were fitted with a large video screen and telephone hook-up.

Saturday's sale of the Church painting was the largest the firm has handled. Before that they had set a new world record for bronzes by Frederic Remington with the sale of "The Rattlesnakes" for \$95,500.

Update Series starts

"Close Encounters" will be the first of the Update workshops to be held on Wednesdays in Northwest Branch YWCA, 25940 Grand River during the coming term which starts the last week in January.

Mike Best, local investigator for Center for UFO Studies, in Evanston, Ill., will discuss case studies of UFO reports, show slides and tell how to identify between an unidentified flying object and an identified flying object.

The session runs from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Wednesday, Jan. 30.

Best is also an investigative reporter

for Detroit News, an astronomy teacher, author, lecturer and founder of Astronomy Club of Livonia.

In his workshop, he will tell of the precise investigative methods used by a trained scientist.

Registrations are being taken now for all Update programs. Fee is \$10 per session for each of the four sessions in the series for non-members. Lunch is available from the Y salad bar for about \$2.

Inquiries and registrations will be taken by calling the Y, 537-8500.

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Food stamp benefits up

Most households that receive food stamps will see an increase in the amount of benefits they get beginning this month.

The rise in food stamp amounts reflects changes in food prices surveyed and published periodically by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. The Food Stamp Act requires semi-annual adjustments in the coupon allotments. The Consumer Price Index (CPI) is used as the basis for these changes.

All food stamp recipients — except for one- and two-person households at the upper income levels — will benefit, said a spokesman for the Michigan Department of Social Services which administers the federally sponsored program in this state.

However, the amount of the increase will vary with household size.

For example, a four-person household with a monthly net income of \$150 will get food stamps worth \$164 in January instead of the \$159 they received in December.

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