

To the Highest Bidder

Canadian ski posters bring top prices at annual Swann Galleries auction. **BY EVERETT POTTER**



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A collector paid \$1,200 for this 1940 poster produced by an unknown artist for Canadian Colonial Airways.



Swann Galleries president Nicholas Lowry called this mid-century Maine poster “very rare...no one had ever seen it before.”



This poster by artist Peter Ewart sold for \$3,400, more than double its estimated price. The poster was printed in 1941 by Canadian Pacific Railways to promote ski vacations in the Canadian Rockies.

The annual February vintage poster auction at Swann Galleries in New York is the single most important auction—and benchmark—for ski posters in the United States. Overseeing this year’s proceedings, as usual, was Swann president Nicholas Lowry. Looking dapper in one of his trademark checked Bookster suits from London, Lowry has long presided over the poster auctions at Swann, and the annual ski poster auction happens to be one of his personal favorites.

“A ski poster can combine travel,

sport and fashion,” he said. “One collector may bid on a Mount Mansfield poster because they have a house at Stowe, but others may bid on the same poster because of the artist, or even the equipment and clothing that’s depicted.”

Hung on the walls of train stations and tram stops in Europe and the United States from the 1920s through the 1960s, ski posters were a visual jolt that transported you to Sun Valley, Cortina or St. Moritz. At this year’s auction, Canadian ski posters were the standouts.

“The Canada posters are rare and that’s why they did so well,” Lowry said, in the deep voice that sounds awfully familiar if you’ve watched him sizing up posters on PBS’ *Antiques Roadshow* for the past decade. The Canadian lots included a 1940 “Ski Planes to the Laurentian Mountains” by an unknown designer, showing a female skier looking up as a Canadian Colonial Airways plane comes in for a landing. A collector paid \$1,200 for it, while its estimate was \$1,000 to \$1,500. Artist Peter Ewart’s “Canadian Rockies/ Via Canadian Pacific” dates from 1941, with a solo skier against a background that might well have been Lake Louise. Estimated at \$1,000 to \$1,500, it shot up to \$3,400. Another work by Ewart, “Canada Welcomes U.S. Skiers No Passports” dates from 1940 and went for \$3,200, also far above its \$1,800 top estimate.

Lowry’s personal favorite in this auction was a “Ski Maine” poster by an artist who signed his name “Hamabe.” Estimated at \$1,500 to \$2,000, it sold for \$1,353, a bit below estimate.

“I’ve never seen it before, and



This poster by artist Dwight Clark Shepler, circa 1940, sold for \$8,610. Lowry describes it as “iconic...the best Sun Valley poster of them all.”

its design has all of these wonderful mid-century modern aspects,” he said. “It’s very rare. No one had ever seen it before, and buyers often get cautious when that happens. They may have been testing the waters. Should another example come up in the future, it could go for considerably more.”

The ski posters at the Swann auction were designed by some of the masters of 20th century graphic art, such as Sascha Maurer and Herbert Bayer. They’re also original examples, fragile artworks on thin, aging paper that have survived the vagaries of time. What makes them even more valuable is that posters as advertising art fell out of fashion in the early 1960s, about the time that television—think *Mad Men* and *Madison Avenue*—was making strong inroads. They were discarded and disregarded until a handful of collectors, most notably Mason Beekley, the founder of the International Skiing History Association, began buying them and driving up auction prices in the 1990s.

Every auction brings surprises, and in this one, it was the 10 posters from various Dartmouth Winter

Carnivals, long a source of high prices and even bidding wars. Yet five of these posters failed to sell and Lowry admits that the prices of those that did were “a little flat.” Dartmouth posters are traditionally coveted less for their artwork, which could be amateurish, and more for their sheer memorabilia quality. If your grandfather graduated from Dartmouth in 1938, you might well have been a bidder for artist T.N. Joanethis’s Winter Carnival poster depicting a skier launching toward the viewer on massive wooden skis, a marvel of perspective. When the gavel fell, it went for \$2,400, shy of its \$3,000 to \$4,000 estimate.

Auction estimates are highly educated guesses determined by artist, rarity and image, as well as past performance at auction. But condition is also critical, with posters graded from A to B minus. Repairs and minor tears are noted and every poster has been backed on linen, a standard practice to protect the artwork (see sidebar).

As for the auction itself, over time it’s become less like Hollywood’s image of an auction and a bit closer to that of a trading floor on Wall Street.

“The auction room is less and less crowded,” Lowry says. “I’d guess about 40 percent of the sales come from those sitting in the room, raising their paddles. But another 40 percent comes through phone bids during the auction and the remaining 20 percent comes from the Internet.”

One of the best treats for ski history buffs—and bargain hunters—at this auction were seven Sun Valley posters, including Dwight Clark’s Shepler’s “Sun Valley, Ketchum, Idaho” from 1940. It was the star of the bunch, a poster that Lowry describes as “iconic. It is the best Sun Valley poster of all, both graphically and artistically.” Estimated at \$10,000 to \$15,000, it went for the bargain price of \$8,610. The last time Swann had it at auction, it commanded the astonishing sum of \$27,000. “That was in 2009,” Lowry recalls, “and we had an under-bidder then. That may have been him bidding this time. Sometimes, it pays to wait.” ❄️

SKI POSTER CONSERVATION

How do you take care of a ski poster that you buy at auction, discover for a bargain price on eBay or unearth in an antiques shop? Before you frame it, consider having it backed on linen, which is what most galleries and auction houses do.

Lee Milazzo runs Poster Conservation, one of the handful of studios in the United States that offers linen backing. Located in a 5,000-square-foot studio in Stamford, Connecticut, Milazzo employs 14 artists who have linen-backed more than 250,000 posters for dealers, museums and private collectors. In many cases—and for higher fees—they’ve repaired tears and restored paper that might be damaged or even missing.

“We bring posters back to life,” Milazzo explained, as he scoured the posters at the recent Swann auction on behalf of private clients who were concerned about condition before they bid. “People ask if a restored poster is devalued, and the answer is ‘no.’ A poster that’s been professionally restored won’t be worth the same as a mint condition version, but it will usually be worth much more than you paid for it.”

At the very least, having a ski poster mounted on linen and framed professionally will protect it. At the low end, a typical 32 x 40 inch ski poster might cost about \$100 to back on linen and another \$350 to put in a wooden frame with UV plexiglass to protect it. You can email photos of the poster to Poster Conservation for an estimate. For more information, go to www.posterconservation.com. —E.P.