The Potomack Company opened its 2019 auction schedule with three days of sales, February 2, 5, and 6, at its galleries in Alexandria, Virginia. The February 2 sale was live, and the sales on February 5 and 6 were online only. During the three sessions, around 1100 lots crossed the block.

The live session was loosely divided into three sections, opening with a run of fine porcelain from the collection of the late Roberta L. Tankel. Tankel was a distinguished Washington, D.C., collector and dealer for more than 50 years. She was also a lecturer in the George Washington University Appraisal Studies Program for a decade. The Tankel lots featured examples from virtually all of the highly prized porcelain names: Minton, Copeland, Royal Worcester, Spode, M üssen, and KPM were all represented. The Tankel offerings were very well received, with most selling above their estimates.

It may have been a bad day for New York shanties, but it was a very good day for ex-presidents and Revolutionary War notables.

The Tankel lots were followed by a group of ten items consigned from a private French furnishings collection from a chateau in France. Most of those lots were of the refined form and high style associated with late 19th-century Europe. (For more on this see, M.A.D., April 2018, “The Potomack Company Begins Its Year in Grand Style,” p. 26-D.) These items were not as well received as the previous group offered in 2018. In fact, only one of the ten lots sold, and that was in a post-sale transaction. That lot, a pair of lions carrying pierced baskets, is among the photos with this story. The bulk of the live sale consisted of American and European fine art, furniture, books, and documents. The high lot of the sale came from that group and was somewhat of a surprise. A so-called “corn mummy” from ancient Egypt sold for $112,500 (with buyer’s premium), well over its $45,000/75,000 estimate. Until 2018 the mummy figure had been on loan to the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland. There it had been exhibited in one of the museum’s permanent exhibits, a reconstructed Wunderkammer within the Renaissance and Baroque galleries. The “chamber of wonders” was created as it might have been imagined in the home of a European aristocrat. The corn mummy was one of the many curiosities installed in that exhibit. The corn mummy is further described among the accompanying photos.

One disappointment at this sale involved a recently discovered oil on canvas by Childe Hassam (1859-1935). The painting depicts a New York City shanty amid more modern buildings. The auction catalog notes that this painting likely dates from 1892 to 1900. It will be included in the forthcoming catalogue raisonné of Hassam’s work in preparation by Stuart P. Feld and Kathleen M. Burnside. The corn mummy is a bit the worse for wear, but it retains its original beeswax overlay mask with remnants of the figure’s painted features, Atef (crown), and beard. This piece of ancient history sold to a telephone bidder for $112,500 (est. $45,000/75,000).

The high lot of the Potomack sale was this Egyptian corn mummy dating from 525-332 B.C.E. Corn mummies are not mummies in the familiar sense. They are small figures constructed of dirt, mud, and seeds, wrapped in strips of linen and coated with various waxes, resins, and oils. The figure would have been burried in a carved wooden sarcophagus-like casket, most likely during a ceremony celebrating the god Osiris. This 19½” long example retains its original black and gilt-decorated falcon-form casket. The corn mummy is a bit the worse for wear, but it retains its original beeswax overlay mask with remnants of the figure’s painted features, Atef (crown), and beard. This piece of ancient history sold to a telephone bidder for $112,500 (est. $45,000/75,000).

Among the top lots was this Thomas Jefferson autograph letter signed to John Dickinson, dated July 23, 1801, four months into Jefferson’s presidency. The letter reflects Jefferson’s concern over possible divisions growing within the new nation. That concern is a timely one that resonates more than 200 years later. He stated: “...if we do not learn to sacrifice small differences of opinion, we can never act together. E very man cannot have his way in all things....” Dickinson, a respected figure during the Revolutionary War era, authored the so-called “Pennsylvania Farmer” letters during the 1760s. This letter sold in the room for $53,125 (est. $18,000/25,000).

Circa 1770 two-piece mahogany chest-on-chest. The dramatic scrolled hood is accentedor by three spiral-turned finials. The upper section features a central shell-carved drawer, flanked by two small drawers, with four graduated drawers below, all flanked by fluted columns. The base section is fitted with four graduated drawers and is raised on tall bracket feet with single spurs. The catalog notes that the base section is inscribed in pencil “S.F. Smith, Newton Centre, Mass.” Samuel Francis Smith (1808-1895) was a prominent resident of Newton, Massachusetts, and writer of the lyrics to “My Country, ’Tis of Thee.” The chest-on-chest sold to a telephone bidder for $12,500 (est. $4,000/8,000).
These elaborately decorated late 19th- or early 20th-century Meissen potpourri urns are decorated with continuous scenes depicting sea gods, dolphins, Classical maidens, and numerous putti. The bodies of the urns are modeled with draped leopard pelts, and the lids are in the form of leopard heads. The 14” high urns exhibit Meissen’s underglaze blue crossed swords mark. They sold to an Internet buyer for $9375 (est. $3000/5000). Tankel collection.

The catalog notes that these Meissen Limoges pieces are decorated in the manner of E.A. Leuteritz, which dates them to the late 19th or early 20th century. The 6½” tall bottle-form vase is decorated with putti. Both pieces display a deep cobalt blue ground with gilt highlights. The lot sold to an Internet buyer for $6250 (est. $1500/2500). Tankel collection.

These winged lion figures carrying baskets are not glazed and stand on marbleized tole plinths. The baskets are finely pierced and gilt decorated. The early 19th-century French Sévres figures are 13½” in overall height and 15” wide at the base. The catalog provided documentation regarding the history and rarity of the form. The pair sold for $37,500 (est. $30,000/40,000) in a post-sale transaction.

A copy of John Binns’s engraving of the Declaration of Independence. The 1819 broadside is one of the earliest engraved copies of the document and one of the most sought-after. The engraving presents the Declaration’s text, along with its facsimile signatures, framed within a necklace of medallions, each representing the seal of one of the 13 original colonies, and portraits of John Hancock, Thomas Jefferson, and George Washington. The approximately 36” x 26” engraving with scattered toning, staining, and chipping sold to an Internet buyer for $5625 (est. $500/1000).

The value of some pieces of ephemera is determined by what bibliophiles call “association,” the fact that a single item may relate to more than a single individual or owner. One letter in the sale has five names associated with it. The letter (not shown) was written on November 16, 1861, by Daniel S. Dickinson, attorney general-elect of the state of New York. The recipient was Simon Cameron, Abraham Lincoln’s secretary of war. The letter endorses the promotion of Maj. Gen. Abner Doubleday to the rank of brigadier general. Doubleday is credited with having fired the first shot in defense of Fort Sumter and with playing an active part in the Battle of Gettysburg. Doubleday was also erroneously linked with the invention of baseball. Shown here is a note written on the back of the letter, dated November 27, 1861, that encourages Doubleday’s promotion “…so soon as Gen. M.C. Kelian is willing.” That four-line missive is signed “A. Lincoln.” A telephone bidder won the letter for $15,000 (est. $5000/7000).

Rory McEwen (Scottish, 1932-1982) is considered one of the greatest botanical artists of the 20th century. This watercolor on vellum by McEwen, 15¾” x 10¾”, signed lower right, depicts three tulip varieties. The watercolor bouquet sold in the room for $6875 (est. $1500/3000).

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John Hancock was a successful Colonial businessman, president of the Second Continental Congress, and the first governor of Massachusetts. He is perhaps best known for his bold signing of the Declaration of Independence, making his signature unquestionably the most famous in American history. This military appointment, signed by Hancock as governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, is dated November 29, 1790, and bears his distinctive signature below the embossed paper seal of Massachusetts. It sold for $3125 (est. $600/800).
Frank Dorn (1901-1981) was a military man, artist, and cartographer who spent a great deal of time in East Asia from the mid-1920s to the 1950s. In 1936 he created this incredibly detailed pictorial map and history of the city now known as Beijing. The map is illustrated with colorful images depicting events related to the city over time. It was published by Peiyang Press one year before major battles of the Second Sino-Japanese War. The 34" x 29½" map sold in the room for $4062.50 (est. $600/800).

One of the most interesting lots at the sale was this cast bronze snake, which may have been one of the castings created by Frederick Casali, the first foreman of the Capitol Bronze Shop (1855-59). The shop was established by Montgomery C. Meigs (1816-1892) in his capacity as supervising engineer of the Capitol building extension. The shop and its foundry produced numerous ornamental architectural elements for the project, many of which are still in use. The doors of the House of Representatives are still fitted with snake figure door handles from the extension. This snake is 9¼" at its widest point and extends 3¼" upward from its mounting surface. It descended directly from the estate of General Meigs and sold to a telephone bidder for $4687.50 (est. $300/800).

The reverse breakfront cornice of this finely carved 40" x 26" Federal giltwood mirror is supported by spiral-carved columns. The mirror features a reverse-painted scene of a naval battle between what appears to be British and American vessels. Neither ship is identified. The mirror sold for $2000 (est. $400/800).

This 9½" high Japanese bronze ovoid jar with an irregular impressed spiral design exhibits a six-character seal mark cast under the base. The surface has a reddish-brown patina with areas of verdigris. The jar sold to a telephone bidder for $937.50 (est. $600/800).

This 1931 New England harbor scene is by Anne Ramsdell Congdon (1873-1958), who worked in the plein-air tradition, completing her paintings in one sitting. This colorful oil on board likely depicts the boats and shanties along Nantucket’s commercial wharf, where she kept a studio. The 7" x 9½" painting, signed and dated lower left, sold to a telephone bidder for $13,750 (est. $10,000/15,000).

The paintings of Hudson River school artist Asher Brown Durand (1796-1866) have become frequent offerings at Potomack sales. His oil on canvas is the third example of the artist’s depictions of wilderness areas of New York state to be offered within the past year. Bolton-Lake-George, 9½" x 11¼", dated 1863, sold for $8125 (est. $3000/5000).

James Edward Buttersworth (1817-1894) is recognized for his dramatic nautical paintings. His oil on canvas is an unidentified schooner under sail ahead of an approaching storm. The background reveals a second vessel in the distance and a lighthouse. The painting is signed lower right and at 8" x 10" is smaller than most of Buttersworth’s images. It sold to a telephone bidder for $25,000 (est. $20,000/30,000).

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Auction Feature

**John Scott the Wizard of the North** by John Alfred Wheeler (British, 1821-1903), oil on canvas, titled and dated 1873, depicting the thoroughbred Thetis and a jockey; a well-dressed young man, listed on the plaque as William Scott, John Scott’s son; and a dignified gentleman, presumed to be John Scott (1794-1871), a preeminent trainer of thoroughbreds in the mid-19th century. The racecourse in the background is likely at or near Langton Wold in Yorkshire, where Scott achieved much of his success. The 43” x 54” portrait sold to an Internet buyer for $4825 (est. $2000/4000).

**By British artist and author Edward Lear (1812-1888), this pen-and-ink and graphite image depicts the rocks at Kasr-Es-Saad, a rugged area along the western banks of the Nile River bordering the easternmost portion of the Libyan Desert in Egypt. This sketch may be one of several studies made by Lear in preparation for his large oil on canvas of this same scene that is now in the Legion of Honor Museum, San Francisco. A second rendering of the scene, drawn from this same perspective but with color added and pencil notations related to further coloration, sold for $2500 on July 4, 2018, at Sotheby’s, London. This example sold to an Internet buyer for $6875 (est. $1500/3000).**

**Oil on canvas by John Frederick Herring (British, 1795-1865) depicting Victorian-era coachmen walking four well-appointed horses along a dirt road, 15” x 19¾”, signed lower center. Herring was a coachman and an artist. The painting sold to an Internet buyer for $12,500 (est. $10,000/15,000).**

**Each of these circa 1900 9½” diameter Renaissance-style KPM reticulated plates features a central Classical portrait on an elaborately decorated deep cobalt blue ground, sphinx figures facing center, and a rim pierced with interlocking design elements. An Internet buyer bought the plates for $6875 (est. $2000/3000). Tankel collection.**

**The pair is marked with underglaze blue crossed swords. The 10½” high sticks came with later molded bobeches and sockets (not shown). The Swan service is considered one of the finest porcelain sets ever made. When complete, it consisted of more than 2200 pieces. These candlesticks sold to a telephone bidder for $8125 (est. $1000/2000). Tankel collection.**

**Large (51½” x 36¼”) ink and color on mulberry paper portrait of a Korean scholar, seated in a traditional pose, dressed in a red robe with a rank badge showing two white tigers, with a patterned rug on the floor, cloud forms on either side of the figure, and a black six-character inscription. There are several lengthy inscriptions on the reverse. This portrait sold for $43,750 (est. $600/800).**