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NEWS

Russell museum announces \$25 million in contributions at Russell Art Auction

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An electric feeling was in air as the first live Russell Art Auction in two and a half years was about to begin. The excitement was not only for the return of one of Great Falls' premiere cultural events, but also for the transformative changes and impressive acquisitions the Russell Art Museum was able to announce.

Roughly 400 attendees filled an enormous white tent erected on the campus of C.M. Russell Museum; a major departure from past Russell actions typically held at the Mansfield Convention Center. There were significant changes in format as well, with the art for sale on view within the museum, but not displayed live on stage.

With 205 pieces up for sale the bidding came at a brisk pace. There were both some unexpected surprises - as when veteran western artist Tom Gilleon's oil painting "*Mourning Star*" sold for \$350,000 - a Russell Auction record for a living artist's work - and a few disappointments as well, as when the C.M. Russell oil masterpiece "*Piegans*" failed to draw a single bid.

However; exciting as it was, the details of the auction itself were somewhat overshadowed by announcements made about the museum's fundraising success and the impending addition of three Russell paintings to the C.M. Russell museum's permanent collection.

Early during Saturday's auction the bidding was briefly paused to announce the museum had raised more than \$22 million in contributions in the past few years, which will enable it to obtain the Russell paintings "*Brother Van on Buffalo Hunt*", "*Death of a Gambler*" and "*The Hold Up*."

All of these success were completed ahead of the backdrop of a newly expanded campus, and completed in the midst of a once-in-a-century" pandemic.

"Obviously, 2020 was an unpredictable year at best, and not an ideal environment to launch the largest fundraising campaign in our institution's history," said Museum Executive Director Tom Figarelle, recalling the chaotic past two years.

Until yesterday the C.M. Russell Museum had not hosted a live auction event since March 19, 2019. Annual auction sales account for approximately 40% of the museum's operating budget. Despite the challenges presented by the pandemic - even having to close its doors to the public for three months in 2020 - the C.M. Russell museum pressed forward with an ambitious fundraising effort entitled "Art & Soul: A Campaign to Ignite the American Spirit."

The campaign's goal is to raise \$25 million by December 2022. At Saturday's auction Figarelle was able to announce to cheers in the audience that the museum had already reached that goal nearly a year-and-a-half ahead of schedule.

Figarelle said he believes the \$25 million Art & Soul to be the largest private fundraising campaign in Great Falls history, and the largest campaign for a Montana art museum in state history.

"The circumstances that we had to navigate were extraordinary," Figarelle said of moving ahead with such ambitious plans during a pandemic. "Extraordinary opportunities also presented themselves along the way."

The museum announced its Art & Soul campaign on July 18 of 2020. Prior to this public announcement, the C.M. Russell had already secured contributions of around \$17 million through quiet negotiations with prominent donors. Since then, an additional \$5 million has been donated through various efforts within the Art & Soul campaign, including another \$402,500 contributed during the auction to help secure the Russell masterpiece, "*The Hold Up*".

The success of Saturday's "Hold Em' Up for the Hold Up" event was driven by a generous two-to-one match by philanthropists Craig Barrett and Tom Petrie.

"That paddle raise completed the final step of the match challenge of "*The Hold Up*", - a painting worth well in excess of \$3 million," Figarelle explained. "We were fortunate to enjoy the energy and philanthropic support of a whole host of people in the room, which qualified us for their two-to-one match. That put us well over the top for our goal for "*The Hold Up*", which we now are able to gladly say is part of our collection."

In addition, Tom and Jane Petrie have pledged to donate the Russell masterwork "*Death of a Gambler*" to the museum, on condition that the C.M. Russell add \$6 million to the museum's

endowment.

"It allowed us to add two phenomenal Russell masterwork oils that we could never otherwise imagined to bring back to Great Falls and have as permanent parts of our collection," Figarelle said.

Working with Benefis Health System, the museum has also been able to purchase "*Brother Van on Buffalo Hunt*."

"It's a piece Benefis has owned for a number of decades," Figarelle explained of newly acquired piece. "They've always been so gracious to keep it on loan here at the museum."

Through the efforts of longtime Benefis Health System board member Gene Thayer and many generous donors, the museum was able to raise \$100,000 to purchase "*Brother Van on Buffalo Hunt*" through a subsidiary fundraising effort called the "Brother Van Fellowship."

"Gene was very eager to lead this effort," Figarelle said of Thayer's involvement. "He worked with hospital administration which graciously provided support in this acquisition. Gene really became the voice in galvanizing focus behind the Brother Van acquisition."

Aside from the excitement of the undeniable success of the Art and Soul campaign, there was of course the drama of the auction itself.

The marquee painting up for sale Saturday was Russell's oil painting "*Piegans*", expected to draw a bid of between \$2.5 million and \$3.0 million. Although the bidding started off at \$1.5 million, "*Piegans*" failed to draw a single bid. Similarly, a Russell painting from early in his career entitled "*Close Quarters*" failed to find a new owner. Expected to bring between \$175,000 and \$225,000, bidding was halted on "*Close Quarters*" when it failed to push past the \$120,000 mark.

Other Russell paintings did far better. The Russell oil on canvass "*Drifting*" doubled expectations, selling for \$550,000 when bids of \$250,000 to \$350,000 were expected. "*Cochrane Shot the Indian*"; Russell's depiction of a gun battle in Wyoming, also did remarkably well, selling for \$850,000; at the upper end of anticipated \$600,000 to \$900,000 price

The most electric moment of the auction came when Skull Society artist Tom Gilleon's oil painting "*Mourning Star*" sold for \$350,000 - a record, both for Gilleon who was in attendance as the hammer went down, and for The Russell as the highest price paid to a living artist at auction.

"That was definitely an exciting moment," said the C.M. Russell's Director of Art, Duane Braaten. There were a couple collectors who each wanted it in the worse way. It was fun to witness the competition. The smiles from across the room were very evident. I'm happy for Tom and his success."

"In so many respects we have navigated a trail here that has had both challenges and wonderful opportunities for us," Figarelle said. We're at this place right now where the museum will only continue to grow and develop and enhance its programing, it's scholarship and its exhibitions."

"That's been made possible because of donor generosity, an expanded campus and the best staff we've had in the history of our institution. We're fortunate to have a union of people ... who make this organization what it is, what it has been and what it promises to be well into the future

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