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Ernie Barnes Iconic ‘Sugar Shack’ Painting on Loan to Houston Museum One Month After Record-Shattering Auction Sale

THE VICTOR IN A FIERCE BIDDING WAR, art collector Bill Perkins paid a record-shattering \$15.3 million for “The Sugar Shack” (1976) by **Ernie Barnes** (1938-2009) at Christie’s New York on May 12. The iconic painting was estimated to sell for about \$200,000, so the staggering price made international news and brought long overdue, widespread attention to Barnes and his image of a lively dance hall scene at the Durham Armory in North Carolina.

Following the auction, Perkins gave several media interviews. He said owning “The Sugar Shack” was a childhood dream, he would have paid a lot more, and he planned to loan the painting to a museum. He wanted “to let other people connect with it. It means a lot to America, and it definitely means a lot to Black America,” Perkins told Bloomberg, “and then I’m going to hang it in my house.”

Only a month after acquiring “The Sugar Shack,” Perkins is making good on his stated intention to share the work with the public. The Houston hedge fund manager and founder of Skylar Energy has loaned the famous painting to his local museum.



Ernie Barnes, “The Sugar Shack,” 1976 (acrylic on canvas). | Collection of William O. Perkins III and Lara Perkins.
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On June 15, “The Sugar Shack” will go on view at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH), where it will be displayed through Dec. 31.

“I want to thank Bill Perkins for his generous loan to the Museum of Ernie Barnes’s extraordinary painting,” MFAH Director Gary Tinterow said in a statement. “The Sugar Shack will take pride of place in the Museum’s newest home for modern and contemporary art, the Nancy and Rich Kinder Building, where it can be appreciated by our visitors in the context of works in the permanent collection.”

“*Collector Bill Perkins called ‘The Sugar Shack a ‘phenomenal painting’ and said he is thrilled to share it with all of Houston.*

Born in Durham, N.C., Barnes was a professional football player before he dedicated himself full-time to his artistic practice. He lived and worked in Los Angeles, but his roots in the segregated South continued to inspire his figurative images of the African American experience. “The Sugar Shack” became the artist’s most well-known work via its association with popular culture.

Barnes made two versions of the painting. The first was featured on the cover of Marvin Gaye’s 1976 album “I Want You.” A second version, the painting now owned by Perkins, appeared during the credits of Good Times, the 1970s television sitcom.

“Lara and I are thrilled to be able to share this phenomenal painting with all of Houston,” Perkins said in a statement, referring to his wife Lara Perkins. “As I’ve said many times, acquiring ‘The Sugar Shack’ was for me the realization of a childhood dream. I know that Ernie Barnes’s masterwork will be as inspirational for all those who will see it as it has been for us.” **CT**