

Ernie Barnes's 'Sugar Shack' Painting Brings Big Price at Auction

An iconic image sells for \$15.3 million at Christie's to Bill Perkins, an energy trader, who says he's been waiting his whole life to buy that work of art.



"The Sugar Shack" by Ernie Barnes, from 1976. Credit...Christie's Images Ltd.



By [Robin Poarebin](#)
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Ernie Barnes's most famous painting, "The Sugar Shack," an exultant dancing scene that was featured on the cover of Marvin Gaye's album "I Want You" and during the closing credits of the TV sitcom "Good Times," sold for a whopping \$15.3 million at Christie's 20th Century auction on Thursday evening to the energy trader Bill Perkins. It was 76 times its high estimate of \$200,000.

"I stole it — I would have paid a lot more," said Perkins, 53, in telephone interview after the sale. "For certain segments of America, it's more famous than the 'Mona Lisa.'"

Though based in Houston, Perkins said he did not want to risk being on the phone, so he flew to New York City with his fiancée, Lara Sebastian, to attend the sale in person. He was worried that he might be outbid by someone of greater means. "What if Oprah shows up? What if P. Diddy shows up?" he recalled thinking. "I'm not going to be able to buy this piece."

Should anything happen to hinder Perkins at the auction, he said he and Sebastian had a plan. “I said, ‘Hey, babe, if I have a problem or I pass out, do not worry about me: *Keep bidding.*’”

Perkins was amazed by the extent of the competition, which drew a total of 22 bidders and took 10 minutes. “It started and it just went nuts,” he said.

In the end, the bidding came down to Perkins vs. someone else in the room — the art adviser Gurr Johns, according to the art reporter Josh Baer —who was bidding on behalf of an unidentified person on the phone.

“He turns to me at one point and says, ‘I’m not going to stop,’” Perkins said of Johns. “To which I replied, ‘Then I’m going to make you pay.’”

The staggering price — more than double that of a Cézanne in the sale, and more than a Monet and a de Kooning — reflected not only the rarity of Barnes’s image, which was painted in 1976, but also the heightened interest for work by Black artists at a time when the art world has woken up to issues of diversity and made a strong commitment to expanding the canon. The result toppled Barnes’s previous auction record of \$550,000, set last November with the sale of his 1978 painting “Ballroom Soul,” also at Christie’s.

Born in 1938 in Durham, N.C., the young Barnes discovered paintings by the old masters at the home of a prominent lawyer where his mother oversaw the household staff (his father was a tobacco company clerk). Barnes attended North Carolina College of Durham — now North Carolina Central University — on an athletic scholarship and went on to play professional football, but his heart remained in drawing and painting. Physical movement continued to inform his artwork, which often featured kinetic figures. Barnes created five official posters for the 1984 summer Olympic Games in Los Angeles and made commissions for clients like the National Basketball Association, Sylvester Stallone and Kanye West. He died in 2009.

Perkins, who was raised in Jersey City, where his father, an attorney, and his mother, an educator, owned several works by the abstract artist Norman Lewis, said the Barnes painting — which he saw featured on Gaye’s album and “Good Times” — was formative in his artistic consciousness.

“You never saw paintings of Black people by Black artists,” he said. “This introduced not just me but all of America to Barnes’s work. It’s the only artwork that has ever done that. And these were firsts. So this is never going to happen again. Ever. The cultural importance of this piece is just crazy.”

Perkins said he was educated about art in part by Rick Lowe, the Houston-based artist and community organizer, whose Project Row Houses have become a leading example of social practice art. He has several other Barnes works, and those of other important Black artists of the past, including Charles White and John T. Biggers, the renowned mural artist, as well as younger visual artists such as Angelbert Metoyer and Dowolu Jabari.

Lowe talked about how “the role of the collector is to send a signal of what is important to museums and the world,” Perkins said. “I took this to heart; OK, I am now the defender of certain things, this is my role — to be a steward of certain pieces of art and also have fun doing it.”

He has collected work by Black artists whose value the world had yet to fully recognize. “I’m not the art historian, I’m not the art genius, but I know markets,” he said. “And I know when something is way, way, way out of whack.”

The Barnes was a prime example of that, Perkins said.

He added that he hoped to loan the Barnes painting to a museum so the public could enjoy it before the work holds pride of place in his home — where “I can see it every day and soak up the memory dividend and the happy absurdity that I can own it.”

Female artists also fared well on Thursday night, namely Howardena Pindell, whose work of sewn canvas squares sold for \$1.3 million (estimate \$300,000 to \$500,000); Ruth Asawa, whose brass and copper wire work sold for nearly \$2 million (estimate \$800,000 to \$1,200,000); and Grace Hartigan,

whose colorful abstract “Early November” sold for \$1.4 million (estimate \$800,000 to \$1.2 million).

The auction’s blue-chip artists brought solid prices, including Monet, Van Gogh and Pollock. But there were a few surprises, namely Emanuel Leutze’s grand “Washington Crossing the Delaware,” which sold for \$45 million, more than twice its high estimate of \$20 million.

A 1909 Picasso bronze cast, “Head of a Woman (Fernande),” brought \$48.5 million for the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s acquisition fund, having recently been deaccessioned by the museum and expected to sell for \$30 million.

The impact of the Barnes sale was immediately apparent in Christie’s day sale on Friday, where another work by the artist — “Storm Dance” — sold for \$2.3 million on an estimate of \$100,000 to \$150,000. Perkins said he had intended to buy both, but after “Sugar Shack,” he was “weary and elated from battle.”

“I’ve been waiting like 40 years for this moment,” he said.

“The good news is, I got the piece,” Perkins added. “The bad news is, I don’t think I’m going to be able to steal these things anymore.”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/12/arts/design/ernie-barnes-sugar-shack-monet-leutze.html>