

Thomas LeClear Follow-Up

By John H. Conlin

Because of our article in the Summer 2007 issue featuring the Buffalo Newsboys painted by Thomas LeClear (1818-1882), we were contacted by the DuMouchelles Auction Gallery in Detroit. They brought to our attention a 19th century genre painting in their catalogue of an upcoming auction. It was titled "American School, oil on canvas, in the manner of Thomas LeClear." The unsigned painting was a scene with a dozen figures, including multiple street urchins, all focused on a boy standing on a wooden crate near a board fence covered with handbills. The auctioneer said that several scraps of paper in the scene had the word "Buffalo" on them. Another handbill contained the phrase "Young America." There were several similarities to LeClear's known genre work.

Was it possible that this work was the famous lost work of Le Clear, painted in Buffalo of a Buffalo street scene, and titled

"Young America"? It was "Young America" that got Le Clear admitted to the National Academy. The late Chase Viele, who tried to track down all the known LeClear paintings, referred to "Young America" as "missing" in a January 1962 article he published in *New York History*, "Four Artists of Mid-Nineteenth Century Buffalo." Chase had never seen the painting. He referred to it as a genre scene "based on downtown Buffalo street life of the 1850s" and quoted a description of it from Henry Tuckerman's *Book of the Artists*, 1867:

"'Young America,' which contains over a dozen figures, is remarkable for its skilled grouping and the harmony of tone, which pervades it. The chief interest of the work centers in 'Young America,' a lad who, from the top of dry goods box, is making a speech to the boys gathered about him. The figures are drawn with a true perspective and each is evidently a study from life. The basket, and the old woman with apples, are especially noticeable. The locality is a street in Buffalo, and the man on the sidewalk evidently engaged in counting up his gains is a

portrait of a well-known operator in stocks, who goes by the name of three per cent a month."

A further look at Tuckerman brought out important additional information that the painting was commissioned from the artist by the, then late (1867), Colonel Peter A. Porter of Niagara Falls. (Porter was killed in the Civil War in 1864.)

The estimated value of the painting listed in the auction catalogue was \$30,000 to \$50,000. Just days before the December 16 auction date, a Buffalo foundation, desiring to acquire the work for Buffalo, was preparing to bid up to 10 times the estimate. It was not enough. At noon, on December 16, the painting sold for \$4.3 million, setting a new record for a painting sold in the Midwest. The buyer of the painting is not known.

The good news is that this important Buffalo painting by Thomas LeClear is no longer missing. It is to be hoped that one day the new owner of the painting, whether an art museum or an individual, will lend it for exhibition in Buffalo, perhaps as part of a comprehensive exhibit of the artist's work. ■



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