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## The Comeback Kid: Ernie Barnes' Spectacular Quintet Leads Heritage's May 12 American Masters Event

*The tightly curated auction is packed with surprises by Arthur Wesley Dow, George Bellows, Charles White, George Tooker and more*

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DALLAS, Texas (April 20, 2023) — The works of American painter Ernie Barnes are experiencing a comeback like that of no other artist of the last decade. Barnes' circa-1989 painting Quintet — a highlight of Heritage Auctions' May 12 Diverse Visions: Important Works by American Masters Signature® Auction — is among the most recognizable pieces by the former pro footballer who was once fined by the Denver Broncos' head coach for sketching during team meetings. Barnes, perhaps best known for his painting The Sugar Shack, used in the credits of the TV show Good Times and on the cover of Marvin Gaye's 1976 album I Want You, is one of the 20th century's most distinctive painters. Last year, The Sugar Shack sold at auction for \$15.3 million — 76 times its high estimate of \$200,000.



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"Almost like a more modern Thomas Hart Benton or El Greco," says Aviva Lehmann, Heritage's Senior Vice President of American Art. "His works are lyrical, as close to dancing as a painting can get. And Quintet is among the most intimate masterworks of his entire oeuvre."

Quintet was exhibited in the fall of 1990 at New York's Grand Central Art Galleries as part of Barnes' solo exhibition The Beauty of the Ghetto, which was subtitled Exhibition of Neo-Mannerist Paintings — and that "neo-mannerist" is apropos, given that a hallmark of Barnes' work is how elongated and fluid his human figures are; Barnes' background as an athlete granted him a breathtaking interpretation of bodies in motion. And Quintet ranks among Barnes' masterworks, a joyful depiction of jazz musicians at work and at play, a piece so alive it echoes with a bebop soundtrack. Their eyes are closed — a hallmark of Barnes' work that dates back to 1971, when he said he first conceived of The Beauty of the Ghetto as an exhibition.

"I began to see, observe, how blind we are to one another's humanity," Barnes said at the

time. "We don't see into the depths of our interconnection. The gifts, the strength and potential within other human beings."

Barnes has long been acknowledged as a master by musicians who often used his works as album covers, among them Curtis Mayfield, B.B. King and Gaye. Barnes' father played piano in the family's Durham, North Carolina, home, and Barnes was so influenced by Dad he framed each painting in distressed wood as a tribute: "Daddy's fence," he once said, "would hug all my paintings in a prestigious New York gallery."

The painter was also raised listening to church choirs. Listen closely. *Quintet*, much like *The Sugar Shack*, roars and reverberates like the long Saturday night before Sunday-morning services. The painting brings the viewer directly into the fold of five musicians who are in deep connection with the music and one another; the viewer is not only in the room with the protagonists but also sitting right inside this tight circle of players who lean in as they hit a long, blue note. The jazz club's close darkness is filled up by the men, punctuated and delineated by the musicians' strong diagonal physicality and their burnished and gleaming instruments: piano, two saxophones, a stand-up bass and a trumpet. The pianist's torso sways back from the center, his elegant fingers poised mid-note. There is a delicious tension and harmony between the men, that intimacy of shared flow, as they move through the music. Barnes' golds, black and browns evoke the weight of centuries of painting even as he updates action and venue: Here the gathered gods wield brass and strings instead of scepters, and the dusty old Roman plaza gives way to a smoky and celebratory 20th-century Harlem. When the art world talks about updating the canon, it could not do better than *Quintet*.



The physicality of his world — the way bodies merge, move, interact and dissolve into one another — has informed his pictures. As often as he painted solo figures, Barnes' showstoppers (like *The Sugar Shack* and *Quintet*) often feature groups of people in shared and responsive motion. In fact, Heritage's May 12 auction offers another significant Barnes work — [Scrum, 1980](#),

which depicts exactly what the word describes: a mass of faceless rugby players locked together through sheer muscular force. Through the dust kicked up by their cleats, a forest of thigh muscles heave in sinewy explosion; expressive hands grasp, dig and push. The perspective puts the viewer so close to the action that you can hear the men's grunts and smell the sweat. It is a tour de force of Barnes' incisive take on bodies working in unison and in tension. By the 1980s the artist was known for this territory and was asked to create five official posters for the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles. In this vein, Heritage also offers a study of Barnes' [The Team, 1989](#), which takes us right up to a circle of men discussing their next play. The amateur athletes in this picture — all with bowed heads and closed eyes — present a vertical stack of long limbs, broad shoulders and smooth heads. Here they confer with one another in a relaxed and smiling moment, a pause of conjoined focus, just before springing back into electrified action.

Barnes is one highlight of a tightly curated auction that marks an evolution in Heritage's continued strong relationship with the American masters of the 19th and 20th centuries. For this twice-a-year foray, the auction house has raised the floor of the lot estimates and shifted more accessible works to its Showcase auction series beginning in June. Works in the May 12 auction represent the apex of American artistic achievement with a host of both expected and unexpected works by names that make collectors and institutions sit up and pay attention: George Bellows, Charles White, George Tooker, Thomas Moran, Arthur Wesley Dow, and more. There are however only 68 lots in this event, and each one of them is remarkable.

Charles Wilbert White, one of the best portraitists and draftsmen of the last century, is represented here by sepia, charcoal, ink and pastel on paper work from 1959 titled [Patriarch, Portrait of John Brown](#). The work depicts abolitionist Brown, who played a crucial role in the anti-slavery movement in the United States during the mid-19th century. This work's provenance is impeccable; the artist himself gifted it to Clarence B. Jones, legal advisor to Martin Luther King, Jr. Black artists present and past are having a significant moment in the collecting sphere. Another highlight of this auction is Hughie Lee-Smith's oil-on-Masonite [Seascape](#), from 1954. It exemplifies the artist's highly realistic

and somewhat surreal paintings of figures in desolate landscapes that are fraught with psychological tension.

Moving from Surrealism to its younger first cousin, Magic Realism, the May 12 event boasts a couple of true gems: George Tooker's Sleepers I, from 1951, is informed by canny neoclassical techniques while remaining unequivocally modern. Over the course of his career, Tooker mastered the art of portraying evocative psychological images in a dreamlike style using the traditional medium of egg tempera. Henry Koerner, who was a Holocaust survivor, painted The Showboat in 1948, and its tempera-on-Masonite depiction of carnivalesque chaos is a direct reference to Hieronymus Bosch's Ship of Fools. Koerner's Magic Realism exemplifies the best and most important qualities of this subcategory of Modern Art exclusive to America. The great George Bellows was most famous for his stunning depictions of boxing matches at the turn of the last century, and May 12 brings us a doozy by the master: Introducing the Champion, from 1912, is black crayon and India ink with collage on board and shows us the moment the ref calls the fight for the exhausted athlete in the foreground of the ring. In the background, his opponent slumps on his corner stool.



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No other artist plunges us into the theatrics of a boxing match like Bellows does.

The tight and limber May 12 auction in fact punches well above its weight, lot after lot, and great American illustrators have a strong presence here. Joseph Christian Leyendecker's cover for the July 1, 1911 issue of The Saturday Evening Post is titled Fourth of July and shows us a grinning young boy lighting a firecracker at the feet of an unsuspecting policeman. It is Leyendecker at his playful best. Maurice Sendak's Sundance Children's Theater (watercolor, ink, and pencil on paper, from 1988) came to fruition while Sendak worked with Robert Redford's Sundance Institute to develop a national repertory theater for children. It is widely considered the artist's finest depiction of the 'real' world sans the fantastical creatures of his imagination, and this marvelously detailed work is not only a prime example of Sendak's work in posters, but it exemplifies his creative genius as one of the greatest storytellers of all time. And Elizabeth Shippen Green, Harper's Monthly illustrator at the turn of the last century, is represented here by the beguiling The King o' Dreams, created in watercolor and charcoal for the magazine in 1903. In its Japanese-woodcut inflected language, a young woman flanked by cherry blossoms grasps the top rail of a stone balustrade and imagines herself at the prow of a ship.



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It would be difficult to name an event "American Masters" without a showing of Winslow Homer and Thomas Moran. They're both here — Homer with Shepherdess Resting, from 1878, in gouache, watercolor, and pencil on paper laid on board, and Moran with a breathtaking oil-on-canvas landscape titled Summer Squall, Long Island, from 1889. You can feel the barometric pressure plunging in its deep greens, darkening skies and pale horizon. And on May 12 another East Coast great, Arthur Wesley Dow, is represented by a surprising and dazzling large painting

from 1912 titled Cosmic Cities, Grand Canyon of Arizona. Dow's expansive trip to out to the American West in 1911 freed his imagination to follow the dictates of the canyon itself. He unveiled the Grand Canyon group at Montross Gallery in New York in April 1913 and showed the world, in his pictures, "a cañon quite different from any other known to modern art," the New York Times would declare at the time.

"At Heritage, we revere American Art and understand its significance within our country's history framework," says Lehmann. "We feel honored to have been entrusted with selling

such diverse, beautiful, and important masterworks. We are thrilled to partner with the American Art community on finding new homes for these extraordinary works." Images and information about all lots in the auction can be found at [HA.com/8113](https://www.ha.com/8113).

Highlight preview at Heritage Auctions, by appointment:

Dallas:

May 10-11, 2023  
10:00 AM - 05:00 PM CT  
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