



Fig. 1: *The Yacht Sappho in New York Harbor*, circa 1871.
Oil on canvas, 20½ x 30¼ inches.
Courtesy Hyland Granby Antiques, Hyannis Port, MA

James Edward Buttersworth (1817–1894)

by Lisa Bush Hankin



Fig. 2: *Puritan and Genesta, America's Cup Race*, 1885. Oil on board, 9 x 12 inches.
Courtesy Godel & Co. Fine Art, New York.



Fig. 3: *Clipper Gaspee off Sandy Hook*, n.d. Oil on canvas, 24 x 34 inches.
Courtesy Quester Gallery, Greenwich, CT.

Considered among the finest painters of the sailing vessel, the English-born James Edward Buttersworth (1817–1894) is renowned for his ability to render maritime action with exacting detail. During the second half of the nineteenth century, Buttersworth was the marine painter of choice for well-to-do yacht owners seeking to commemorate their sporting triumphs on canvas. As Howard Godel of Godel & Co. Fine Art, New York, notes, present-day yacht owners are among the most enthusiastic collectors of this artist's work. Buttersworth's racing scenes regularly bring

James Edward Buttersworth Record Prices for Work at Auction	
1990	\$242,000
1995	\$242,000
2000	\$321,500
Current	\$728,500

six-figure prices at auction—even with multiple works in the same sale. This was the case at Christie's New York in May, where one determined buyer prevailed in two back-to-back rounds of spirited bidding. "Buttersworth's market is way beyond strong," Godel says, "it's amazing. People really want the yacht pictures, and they're selling for way beyond what they'd bring just four or five years ago."

In addition to his prized yacht-racing scenes (Figs. 1–2), Buttersworth painted clippers (Fig. 3), steamers, naval warships, and other marine craft, as well as a small number of landscapes and other subjects (Fig. 4). The son of a noted British marine painter, Buttersworth emigrated to America in the late 1840s after beginning his career in England, eventually settling in West Hoboken, New

Jersey. That location offered him unrestricted access to the varied maritime activity in New York Harbor, where he often painted from a small craft on the water. Soon after Buttersworth arrived in America, Currier & Ives arranged to publish some of his ship pictures, establishing his reputation in this country. “Personally, I have enormous affection for his clipper ship pictures,” says Alan Granby of Hyland Granby Antiques, Hyannis, Massachusetts, who has dealt in Buttersworth’s work for twenty-five years. “They’re the earliest works of his American period, although the real market is in his racing scenes.”

Michael Florio of Greenwich, Connecticut’s Quester Gallery agrees. “The America’s Cup scenes have always brought high sums,” he explains, “because of the pure beauty of the yachts, as well as the glamour of the event itself.”

The high prices commanded for Buttersworth’s work are a result not only of his extraordinary precision in depicting the rigging, sails, and movement of marine craft, but also for his appealing—and highly convincing—treatment of sea and atmospheric conditions (Fig. 5). Granby observes, “Buttersworth’s works transcend ship portraiture, and along with works by (Fitz Henry) Lane, (William) Bradford, and a few others have achieved a level of stature among the top American fine artists.” Notes Florio, “There used to be a division between collectors of marine art and fine art but not any more. Now I see traditional American art buyers widening their sights to include works by the best marine artists in their collections, and Buttersworth is most definitely among that group.”

Godel, Granby, and Florio all agree that the increased interest in Buttersworth’s work has sent prices dramatically upwards, particularly at auction. “You can go to almost any gallery that handles work by Buttersworth and probably buy a picture for less than you



Fig. 4: *Hudson River from West Point*, circa 1885. Oil on canvas, 10 x 14 inches. Courtesy Hyland Granby Antiques, Hyannis Port, MA



Fig. 5: *Schooner Yacht Atalanta*, n.d. Oil on canvas, 12 x 16 inches. Courtesy Quester Gallery, Greenwich, CT.

could if you purchased the same thing at auction today,” Granby observes. “For whatever reason, even minor scenes seem to be bringing incongruous prices at auction.” When making an acquisition Granby advises buyers to strive for the artist’s best works, those whose prices have consistently outpaced the market. “The right picture would bring

over a million dollars today,” says Godel, “which is something almost no one would even have dreamt of a few years ago.” @

Lisa Bush Hankin is an independent art researcher and writer based in New York. She specializes in 19th- and 20th-century American fine art.