

Laverty Collection Beyond Sacred – a benchmark sale by Deutscher and Hackett launches the Aboriginal art calendar for 2015.

By Jane Raffan, on 10-Mar-2015

On what was a glorious late summer Sunday afternoon, the Sydney quay-side museum setting for the Deutscher and Hackett sale of the Laverty Collection's *Beyond Sacred, Australian Aboriginal Art*, offered cachet, catering and fresh air. And it attracted collectors and other buyers providing for that ilk in droves, most of whom stayed glued to their spots competing for the 166 lots in a laid-back if not gruelling 4 hour event that saw the sale rack-up a total of \$3.4 million (incl. BP) and break many artist records.



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The bidder registration trickle started at 1:30 and by 2:30, when an expectant hush fell, all 200 plus seats were full and the auditorium walls were lined with latecomers. It quickly became apparent that the bidding competition would be fierce, if not fast, and there were many amongst the crowd who did not ever get a chance to lift their paddles.

The in-room bidding affray was anchored by die-hard collectors, several long-time high-profile art advisor consultant/dealers, as well as more recent ex-auction house specialist dealers, and newcomer art advisory agencies active in the city centre, and just about everybody else in the Aboriginal art industry who was or could have been in town. There was an air of calm about proceedings, as if everyone knew the game was afoot.

In a misplaced nod to the audience's familiarity with each other, auctioneer Roger McIlroy even referred to bidders by name – "it's yours Geoff (Hassall)", "bid's with you John (Cruthers)", "yours Annette (Larkin)". Among the successful bidders not blessed with a call-out was Sue Hewitt (regular bidder for Ros Packer) who, along with Geoff and John, was highly active across the sale. In most cases these operators easily fended off tentative bidding incursions from hopeful domestic buyers/decorators in the room, which, rather amusingly, painted a picture of the large audience peppered with a small group of people busily swatting at an annoying fly.

Deutscher and Hackett is, and should be, thrilled with the results: a gratifying reward for the work the firm imparted

to the sale's presentation, in particular, as an excerpt from the highly regarded Laverty collection book, *Beyond Sacred*, rather than simply a "Part 2" collection sale with "Part 1" being sold by Bonhams on 24 March 2013.

Executive Director Damian Hackett was keen to emphasise the strategy: "the catalogue format/ordering in regions made it a valuable, informative/educational publication, and also gave the auction a series of rhythmic peaks, rather than the standard 'front-end loading' of high value works."

Of course this tactic also ensured that the crowd didn't thin after highlight lots, which was lucky, as the phone bidders were overburdened from the start. At one point Hackett was seen to be (jokingly?) testing the resolve of a certain-to-be-trusted attendee for potential hijacking as a last-minute phone bidder. In the end, the company handled its record number of telephone and absentee bids with aplomb, including a high volume over the internet, pitting national interests against competition from the USA, UK, Europe, and Asia on the phones, and the huge attendance of around 300 people.

Just what one needs to clear a sale, including, interestingly, several works from the first Laverty sale that went unsold first time around. The total turnover of \$3,416,640 (incl. BP) represented a clearance of 99% by volume, and 170% by value.

The auction predictably began with artefacts and ended with APY works and assumed tough-asks, which all sold well including setting two new records for Gertie Huddleston (Lot 150 🎯) at \$17,500 (est. \$6-8K) and Barney Ellaga, lot 158, at \$13,000 (est. \$3-5K). Only two lots failed to sell (one sold the day after), very few works were hammered at/below the low end, and only a few more ended up within estimates.

Naata Nungurrayi secured the top price with an importantly provenanced work (Pizzi, ARCO, Madrid, 2002). *Rockhole and Soakage Water Site of Marrapinti* (Lot 109 🎯) reached \$180,000, equalling the artist's saleroom record. To the crowd's amusement, the drawn out battle for this prize was punctuated at \$90,000 by a deep, drawn-out sonic boom from the nearby cruise liner, which, in another context, could easily have passed as the call to attack from an alien mother-ship. The drama was unexpected, not unwelcomed, and it did not affect the atmosphere, which was quickly restored to an ambience of serious intent.

Indeed, most works in the sale made the conservative estimates seem like proofing oversights with repeat performances of works doubling, tripling, and quadrupling low and high end estimates. The star performer in this regard was an extremely beautiful work by a founding member of the Peppimenarti community (NT), Dorothy Sams (Lot 123 🎯), which reached a hammer of \$13,000 against its humble \$2-3K estimate.

In fact, nearly every section of the book/sale boasted a star performing lot. Another useful characteristic of this exercise in grouping works by geographic regions was the ease with which buyers could compare results for the same artist, and perhaps adjust their bidding accordingly. And the essays were a value-add during protracted bidding wars ...

The first section of works by Paddy Bedford proffered top ten results rather than records. An elegant mid-sized work, *Brumby Springs, 2004* (Lot 11 🎯) was the best performing, with a hammer of \$75,000 against expectations of \$30-50K, while lot 14, the handsome *Motor Car Yard, 2005*, was the sale's second best result at \$140,000, just under its low-end.

From the section devoted to the Kimberley (WA), Bidadanga artist Alma Webou's star shone brightly with a sublime work rare to the market. *Pinkalakara, 2006* (Lot 19 🎯) was hotly contested and more than doubled previous records with its hammer of \$50,000, which was also more than twice the high end. From the far north eastern region, Peggy Patrick's bold and loaded *Mistake Creek* (Lot 49 🎯), set a proper new benchmark for the underappreciated artist, achieving \$24,000 against \$5-7K.

The rather mysterious and unique hand of Janangoo Butcher Cherele captivated, with several works catapulting over estimate, in particular *Goornanggi, 2006* (Lot 57 🎯), which made \$14,000 (est. \$6-8K). Records were set for artists from Fitzroy Crossing to Balgo: Wakartu Cory Surprise's *Untitled, 2010* work, lot 50, doubled its high end to make \$14,000; Tjumbo Tjapanangka had everyone jumping in their seats (couldn't resist) with the \$65,000 result for *Walartu, 2003* (Lot 64 🎯), nearly double his previous record.

The Papunya Tula/Kintore section also produced expected records with a stunning early work by Makinti Napanangka, *Untitled, 1997* (Lot 106 🎯) making \$88,000 (est. \$30-40K), and a superb untitled piece by Joseph Jurrra Tjapaltjarri (Lot 105 🎯) running off to \$28,000 (est. \$8-12K).

In the 'Art of the North' section, another rare-to-the-market work by Prince of Wales, *Body Marks, 2000* (Lot 121), sold for \$26,000 (est. \$15-20K), and a very unassuming work by Sally Gabori, *Dibirdibi Country, 2008*, lot 118, shot to \$22,000, almost three times its high end.

Still in the north, bark painter John Mawurndjul secured a new artist record and sale top lot with the exceptionally well exhibited *Mardayin Design at Kakodbebuldi, 2003* (Lot 124), which made \$100,000.

The Lavery *Beyond Sacred* sale cannot be judged as turning point for the beleaguered Aboriginal art market; single owner prestigious collections are always exceptional, and it comes early in the 2015 sale calendar. Multi-vendor sales to follow will provide statistical evidence on the market's health, but in the interim, this sale's beacon will shine, and the staff of Deutscher and Hackett should rightly bathe in its warm glow. If they get the time.

Other top ten prices (hammer):

Lot 18	Paddy Bedford	\$105,000
Lot 83	Emily Kame Kngwarreye	\$105,000
Lot 88	Tommy Watson	\$87,500
Lot 87	Maggie Watson Napangardi	\$80,000
Lot 29	Rover Thomas	\$75,000

Other artist records (hammer):

Lot 100	Patrick Tjungurrayi	\$38,000
Lot 144	Wukun Wanambi	\$19,000
Lot 159	Dickie Minyintiri	\$26,000
Lot 164	Milly Kelly	\$11,000

Sale Referenced: Important Aboriginal Art from the Lavery Collection, Deutscher and Hackett, Sydney, 08/03/2015

About The Author

Jane Raffan runs ArtiFacts, an art services consultancy based in Sydney. Jane is an accredited valuer for the Australian government's highly vetted Cultural Gifts Program, and Vice President of the Auctioneers & Valuers Association of Australia. Jane's experience spans more 20 years working in public and commercial art sectors, initially with the AGNSW, and then over twelve years in the fine art auction industry. Her consultancy focuses on collection management, advisory services and valuations. She is the author of *Power + Colour: New Painting from the Corrigan Collection of Aboriginal Art*. www.artifacts.net.au.