

Sotheby's London set to expand Aboriginal art sales after striking success

By Jane Raffan, on 11-Jun-2015

Despite “virtually no Australian buyers or interest”, according to specialist in charge Tim Klingender, the Sotheby's London inaugural sale of Aboriginal art centred on the Thomas Vroom collection cleared 83% by lot, set record prices for several artists and racked up a hammer total of £832,500 (£1,040,625 including premium), around \$1.9 million Australian dollars.



The Sotheby's London inaugural sale of Aboriginal art centred on the Thomas Vroom collection cleared 83% by lot, set record prices for several artists and racked up a hammer total of £832,500 (£1,040,625 including premium), around \$Au1.9 million. Jack Karedada's wandjina, Namarali – the First One made £100,000 (AUD \$199.6K), a staggering tenfold increase on pre-sale expectations. Sotheby's UK is now committed to build on this success with an annual auction “at a more ambitious level”

Despite Klingender's “amazement” at the lack of interest shown from Australia, one Australian institution mustered funds to acquire a rare-to-the-market South Eastern Australian broad shield for £47,500 (Lot 1 🍷), at almost AUD

\$95K. A new record in this category was set with the early 19th century lower Murray River broad shield (Lot 2 🎯), which realised £87,500 (AUD \$174.7K), making its sturdy pre-sale estimate of £35-45K seem whimsical.

According to Klingender, most buyers – of whom 90% actually viewed the sale – stemmed from the UK, Middle East, Europe, USA and surprisingly, Russia. In a sign that the Aboriginal art market has reach, and legs, Klingender reports that a large percentage of buyers were actually new to the field, including a private UK museum that acquired many of the works in the sale “with an eye for exhibitions”.

In Australia, the market for bark paintings is generally under appreciated and languishes behind other collecting areas. The northern hemisphere interest saw important new benchmarks in this field with two paintings almost doubling the previous record for a bark at auction (\$102K for a work by Mingelmanganu, sold in 2007 at the market’s peak).

Jack Karedada’s wandjina, *Namarali – the First One* (Lot 56 🎯), in the Vroom collection since 1998, made £100,000 (AUD \$199.6K), a staggering tenfold increase on pre-sale expectations. With documented provenance tied to a 1972 film, *Lalai Dreamtime*, it eclipsed wandjina master Alec Mingelmanganu’s work, *Austral Gothic* (Lot 58 🎯), which realised £93,750 (AUD \$187.2K) against £20-30K.

The major failing of the sale was the group of Papunya Tula ‘stars’ (with a presale tally of £195,000), all of which had very strong estimates compared to comparable local offerings and none of which found a buyer.

Not hampered by the need for Australian export permits for items deemed of significant cultural heritage, the lack of buyer interest in Aboriginal art’s first and most important wave of contemporary expression suggests that the perception of cultural authenticity amongst the sale’s cashed up audience was firmly located in an ethnographic/anthropological paradigm.

In contrast, the works by the great Rover Thomas were reasonably estimated (lots 66–68), and yet only one attracted interest, the earliest and earthiest of the bunch. Two paintings by Balgo master Wimmitji failed to sell (lots 69, 70), proving more work needs to be done in educating the European taste about this important second wave.

The best performing work from amongst the contemporary offering was Emily Kame Kngwarreye’s gorgeous *Wild Yam 2* (Lot 73 🎯), which sold for £100,000 (AUD \$199.6K) against expectations of £80-120K.

The inclusion of contemporary works by Tommy Watson and Ningura Napurrula was a nod to the artists’ presence and profile in France, where works feature in the fabric of Paris’ ethnographic *Musée du Quay Branly*.

The Watson, lot 74, was inexpensive at £15-25K, and carried a provenance that included AAMU exhibition history/literature. Its failure was probably tied to its early and relatively subdued colour field and sparse working. Selected, no doubt, for its art centre provenance, it was no match to the artist’s potent and brilliant later works executed outside that model, which are now the preserve of retail and private sales due to the consignment policies of all major firms.

Ningura Napurrula’s *Woman’s birth site at the rockhole site of Wirrulnga* (Lot 75 🎯) stemmed from the Gabrielle Pizzi Collection, and was a superb and extremely elegant example of the artist’s classic iconography. It made £77,500 (AUD \$154.7K) against expectations of £35-50K; a new record for this pioneer painter.

Klingender is very pleased with the result, especially since he considered the sale to have been “relatively risky” (only in postscript). He has confirmed that Sotheby’s UK is now committed to build on this success with an annual auction “at a more ambitious level”. Given the lack of interest in the contemporary works I asked him what he meant by ‘ambitious’. The clarification: that he would be working towards “a small masterpiece auction” in London next June, again with a New York preview.

Local firms offering dedicated auctions of Aboriginal art will be happy the market is showing strength and reaching new audiences. Outside of lucky strike single-vendor sales, however, these firms are down to one multi-vendor sale per year, so Sotheby’s concerted competition in this arena poses a definite threat.

Sale Referenced: Aboriginal Art – Thomas Vroom Collection, Sotheby’s, London, 10/06/2015

About The Author

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Sotheby's London to Hold its First Dedicated Aboriginal Art Auction with Star Centrepiece Collection

By Jane Raffan, on 08-May-2015

Having dispensed with a department dedicated to Aboriginal art, Sotheby's Australia has exposed itself to a raid by the company's London branch. The independently owned and operated firm's practice of including major works of Aboriginal art in their Australian Fine Art sales was clearly not considered an effective trigger for the "no competition" agreement between the two entities.

Industry sources say Sotheby's Australia was blindsided. In what appears to be a snub, the London sale has been put together by Tim Klingender, Sotheby's former Director of Aboriginal Art, who resigned from the Australian entity in 2009 and consulted for international newcomer Bonham's from late 2010 until the end of 2013.

The London sale is centred on select works from the Thomas Vroom Collection, described by Sotheby's as "one of Europe's largest, most valuable and significant collections." Vroom himself made this claim in 2002[1]. At that time he was Director of the Amsterdam arm of Songlines Gallery, which was closing up shop and commented that "educating clients is difficult. They have no references. They don't know what's good and why it's good ... The quality is not really improving ... It's getting too commercial."

Vroom was indeed a major player in the market twenty years ago, flying to remote art centres and buying up big at auction. In 2004 he was named alongside Karl-Heinz Essl as one of around twelve European collectors who accounted for approximately a third of all auction sales of Aboriginal art at the top of the market[2].

In 2011 it was reported that Vroom had consigned about 150 paintings (including 60 barks) to Coe-ee Aboriginal Art Gallery for sale, as part of the process of whittling the collection down to 400/500 key works[3].

Many of the Vroom Collection works in the Sotheby's sale have been on long-term loan to the AAMU, the Museum of Contemporary Aboriginal Art, in Utrecht. In April 2010, works from Vroom's collection featured in the AAMU exhibition *Aboriginal Art Today!*, which showcased works from 1971 through to examples from contemporaneous developments, all drawn from Dutch collections.

Sotheby's has indicated that the June sale will feature several works from amongst Vroom's AAMU loans, and will also include material with provenance from the collections of the late Lance Bennett (son of famed collector Dorothy), and anthropologists Drs Kim Akerman and Joseph Birdsell. Collectors can expect "early artefacts, figurative carvings, many rare erotic bark paintings and major contemporary canvases by Rover Thomas and Emily Kngwarreye" amongst the offerings.

Aboriginal Art - Including Selected Works from the Thomas Vroom Collection

10 June 2015, London, with previews in New York 9-14 May

[1] Sebastian Smee, 'The fortunes of Aboriginal art outside Australia: ethnographica or art?', *The Art Newspaper*, June 2002

[2] Michael Hutak, 'Aboriginal art in Paris: in your Dreaming', *The Bulletin*, 2004

[3] Arts - About Town, *The Australian Financial Review*, 21st July 2011

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