

## Chapter 6. Sotheby's Australia

Sotheby's was not formally established in Australia until November 1982, although it did have an Australian presence prior to that. Reginald Longden, a collector and dealer of Oriental art, was Sotheby's representative in Australia and New Zealand (based in Melbourne) from early 1968 and was responsible for sourcing stock to be sent to London for sale and conducting valuations. His purview included Australia, the Philippines, Japan and Hong Kong. Longden resigned after only one year because he found the job to be 'most frustrating'.<sup>1</sup> Sotheby's next representative was Bruce Rutherford who owned a jewellery and antiques firm in Collins Street, Melbourne. Rutherford's role was similar to that of Longden and was defined as simply distributing catalogues to 'local collectors, with the aim of generating material for consignment abroad'.<sup>2</sup> This was also essentially the same manner in which Christie's operated when it was a representative office. Ingram noted that Sotheby's intended to conduct auctions in Australia in the early 1970s, saying 'Sotheby's (which has had a branch here for more than two years shuttling works of art [to] or from its auctions in London) has disclosed that it is in the market to conduct auctions locally'.<sup>3</sup>

Sotheby's held a sale of paintings and drawings from Sir William Dobell's studio on behalf of the Sir William Dobell Art Foundation on 19 November 1973 at the Sydney Opera House. The auction was originally scheduled for March 1973, but Sotheby's delayed it in order to include more works to make it 'a presentation of the artist's work'.<sup>4</sup> Despite the success of the sale of Foundation paintings at the Christie's auction in 1971, the Foundation decided to consign the remaining works from Dobell's studio to Sotheby's, as the firm agreed to hold what was ostensibly a single-owner collection sale, thereby giving the works the greatest possible prominence. This was not only Sotheby's first sale in Australia, it was also expected to be the largest art auction ever held in Australia, as well as Sotheby's third ever single-artist sale.<sup>5</sup>

Works sourced in Australia and sold in London were generally by British or European artists, rather than Australian ones. The Dobell works were exhibited in New York, Los Angeles, London (at the Qantas art gallery in Piccadilly), Melbourne and Sydney prior to the sale, in order to generate interest on the part of potential international buyers. This sale represented the first occasion on which Sotheby's had travelled a collection around the world and commission bids were accepted for works at each of the exhibition venues. However, as this collection comprised the remnants of the artist's studio, it was not a true reflection of his *oeuvre* and ability and, therefore, perhaps not the most appropriate collection to introduce his work to the international market. Sotheby's had only ever auctioned one Dobell drawing in London before and this sale was thus a

real test of the international interest in Dobell specifically and Australian art more broadly.

There were only a handful of international collectors who owned Dobell works at that time, including the Klebergs from the Texan ranching dynasty, who had acquired at least six. One of these, *Boy Sunbathing*, had been purchased for the princely sum of 1350 guineas at an unidentified Sydney auction in 1962. Yet, despite these collectors and the international release of James Gleeson's book on Dobell (revised by Thames & Hudson in 1969), it was felt in 1973 that 'Dobell's international esteem...[was] negligible, largely because of the absence of an Australian identity and the lack of any machinery overseas for promoting an 'international' Australian artist'.<sup>6</sup>

The Dobell estate sale was held at the Opera House before the landmark building had been officially opened. It was conjectured that the sale may have been booked for the Opera House because of the Dobell Art Foundation's strong links with the building, which included having recently commissioned John Olsen to paint its mural, *Salute to Five Bells*.<sup>7</sup> (The funds for this commission [\$35,000] were part of the proceeds obtained from the Dobell sale at Christie's in 1971.) The auction was conducted by 'the persuasive voice' of Peter Wilson, Chairman of Sotheby's, to an audience of more than 1000 people packed in the concert hall.<sup>8</sup>

The most important work in the sale was *The Sex Kitten (Kitten on a Balcony)* (1970) from Dobell's later body of work. This was expected to fetch \$30,000, but realized only \$22,000. The purple chalk *Study for The Irish Youth* (1935) sold for a comparatively respectable \$10,500 and Dobell's pencil drawings doubled their accepted market value, with *Sailor and Girl* — a pen and red ink and wash over pencil work — selling for \$2400. Denis Gowing, a Melbourne-based car dealer who had purchased *The Dead Landlord* at the 1973 Christie's sale for the remarkable price of \$60,000, made a number of purchases at the Sotheby's sale, including *Study for The Dead Landlord* for \$1600 and *Study for The Sex Kitten* for \$4100.

These remnants of Dobell's studio works had been valued at \$130,000 in 1970, but were expected to fetch \$200,000 at the 1973 sale. In actuality, the works reaped \$381,650 for the Dobell Art Foundation, demonstrating a dramatic increase in prices. This increase caused havoc with the original valuations for the works and Dobell's market suffered. Works had almost certainly been purchased at over-inflated prices and a 'mini-depression' occurred in the following year.

Many of the buyers at the sale were reputed to have been new to the market, inspired to attend by Sotheby's astute publicity campaign, the glamour of the occasion and the fact that it was in aid of a charitable cause, as under the terms of Dobell's will, money raised from the sale of the works in his studio was to be used for the promotion of art in New South Wales. The buyers' determination

to make a purchase reportedly resulted in 'the uneven relationship throughout of prices and artistic merit'.<sup>9</sup> Ingram, while noting that the catalogue was superb, pondered 'It is questionable whether the auction will in fact say anything relevant about the state of taste in today's saleroom', owing to the unusual amount of publicity and the social cachet of the auction.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, the success of this sale probably contributed to the decision to allow Robert Bleakley to establish Sotheby's Australia in 1982.

## **Robert Bleakley and the Establishment of Sotheby's in Australia**

Robert Bleakley began to collect so-called 'Tribal Art' in 1965 while still a child, inspired by nineteenth century novels set in exotic places. He began to study arts at the University of New England in Armidale, leaving partway through the course when he enrolled in Sotheby's London art appreciation course in 1972–3. Bleakley was employed by Sotheby's antiquities department in about 1974. The traditionally-named 'Primitive Art' department was formed in 1978 and Bleakley became its director, Sotheby's youngest director, at the age of twenty-eight. His directorship coincided with a surge of interest in collecting Indigenous art. Bleakley remained working in London until he established Sotheby's in Australia at the end of 1982 and he thus trained as an auctioneer in the London salerooms. His auctioneering style differed from that used by Australian auctioneers and he was credited with bringing the London auctioneering style to Australia, as mentioned previously.

While working in the London antiquities department, Bleakley had particular success with the Ortiz sale of Tribal Art on 29 June 1978. This sale was the result of the kidnapping of Ortiz's daughter by the Italian Red Brigade terrorists in 1977. Ortiz was forced to sell his beloved collection, one of the world's most spectacular Tribal Art collections, to repay the US\$2 million loan he had taken to pay the ransom. Although the girl was returned unharmed, the kidnappers disappeared with the ransom money.

The Ortiz auction was a phenomenal success, breaking all records for Tribal Art and achieving an auction total of approximately US\$2 million.<sup>11</sup> An Hawaiian figure which had been collected by Captain Cook and was Ortiz's personal favourite broke a world record, selling for approximately \$250,000. David Nash, who worked for Sotheby's for 35 years, said of the Ortiz sale that 'PCW [Peter Wilson] discussed prices way above the market, I thought he'd lost his judgment, he was putting crazy reserves onto the lots. But he said simply, "I thought I knew the market", and of course he was right.'<sup>12</sup> The success of the Ortiz auction enabled the separate 'Primitive Art' department to be established. The auction made newspaper headlines, was featured on the cover of *Newsweek* and created Bleakley's reputation.

Bleakley's proposal to establish an Australian office was twice rejected. However, he was finally able to persuade the directors of Sotheby's in November 1982, primarily through offering to fund around half of the endeavour personally, and he was given a corresponding amount of equity in the firm. Bleakley commented that the directors had been very 'reluctant' because they had just been forced to close their Los Angeles office owing to the 1981–2 recession.<sup>13</sup> This was the first time that Sotheby's had suffered an annual loss and the firm was interested in contracting rather than expanding. Moreover, in early 1983, Sotheby's New York was beginning to retrench two hundred members of staff.

One could make a number of assumptions regarding Sotheby's decision to allow Bleakley to open the Australian branch at that time, especially given the fact that Christie's had withdrawn its saleroom presence in the 1970s and did not reopen until 1984. The Australian market may have been considered to have been under-represented or an Australian branch may have been seen as a means to gain access to the Asian market. As noted earlier, the Dobell sale in 1973 was hailed as a great success and may also have contributed to Sotheby's parent body eventually being amenable to opening a permanent office and saleroom in Australia. According to Max Germaine, a founding Director of Sotheby's Australia, the main reason was that Sotheby's new Chairman, A. Alfred Taubman, saw 'investment potential in Australian art' that the former Chairman, the Earl of Westmorland, regarded as 'inconsequential'.<sup>14</sup>

Bleakley had researched the Australian art market carefully for at least a year before establishing Sotheby's Australia; dealers Charles Nodrum and Chris Deutscher recalled being approached about giving their assistance to the venture in about 1981.<sup>15</sup> This research demonstrated that Sotheby's could fulfil a role at the top end of the market and Sotheby's therefore planned to cater to the top 10 per cent of the population. Bleakley said of the 1982 market, 'The performance of local auction houses was very poor, in terms of marketing and presentation. Guarantees of authenticity, if they existed at all, ran to a couple of weeks'.<sup>16</sup> He said more recently that, through his visits to Australia, he had perceived that the art auction industry could be injected with a greater degree of professionalism, based on the London system, that this would be 'an interesting challenge' and that this was the main prompt for his proposal to establish a permanent Sotheby's presence in Australia.<sup>17</sup>

It was generally expected that Sotheby's venture would be unsuccessful even though Christie's had 'seriously stimulated' the Australian auction system in the 1970s.<sup>18</sup> In 1982 the market was at a low point; there had been a recession in 1981 and Christie's had withdrawn from conducting Australian paintings sales. According to one report, 'When Sotheby's arrived other Australian auction houses were somewhat underwhelmed [sic]' and took bets on how long it would stay.<sup>19</sup> However, Bleakley's timing was perfect. Sotheby's establishment actually

created or coincided with a swell in the Australian art market. The firm's advanced and professional marketing techniques assured its immediate success and predominance. Sotheby's worked extremely hard and 'very effectively, to the extent that they tempted Christie's to come back' to the Australian marketplace.<sup>20</sup>

Sotheby's initially had to 'dispel the image of toffy-nosed Poms coming in, telling Australians what they should be buying and selling', because, as one would have expected, there was some local resistance to this perceived invasion.<sup>21</sup> Some collectors, however, were already used to dealing with Sotheby's London and were less resistant to Sotheby's setting up an Australian branch and competing with local firms.

Bleakley thought it was 'lunacy' that no auction house had had a substantial presence in both Sydney and Melbourne, despite the fact that the market appeared to be 'evenly distributed' between the two.<sup>22</sup> He set up salerooms in both cities, with the Melbourne representative office a subsidiary company answering to the Sydney headquarters. Establishment costs were \$200,000, with half paid by Bleakley himself. Initial costs for Sotheby's office in York Street, Sydney were very low, essentially confined to renting a small office space, hiring a basic staff and utility expenses. Although it budgeted to operate at a loss for three or four years, Sotheby's began to turn a profit immediately. This profit was directed into marketing as the firm 'wanted to create an appearance of substance, of having been here all the time'.<sup>23</sup>

Auctions were held in various venues, including a number of Sydney hotels and commercial galleries, such as the Macquarie Galleries. Bleakley developed a good relationship with the management of The Regent Hotel in Sydney, as the hotel benefited from the patronage and Sotheby's received reduced hire rates.

Approximately two years after its establishment, Sotheby's Sydney branch leased the ground floor of 13 Gurner Street, Paddington. By 1987, about twenty members of staff were employed. Sotheby's underwent a programme of expansion in the late 1980s, which included installation of a computer system. This not only assisted with general administration, but also provided a valuable resource, with databases of works and clients. In early 1997, the Sydney office relocated to Queens Court, on the corner of Queen Street and Moncur Street in Woollahra. This move enabled some auction previews to be held on the premises and situated Sotheby's in the heart of the auction and antiques district.

Sotheby's Melbourne representative, Ann Roberts, originally worked from home. After the first year, she moved into a Queen Street office in Melbourne's Central Business District and Sotheby's later moved this office to a terrace in High Street, Armadale. Later still it moved to the old art deco picture theatre at 926 High Street, Armadale, where it remains today. Acquiring its own salerooms in

Melbourne was cost-efficient, as transport fees did not have to be paid for moving objects between viewing and auction venues. By 1988, the Bicentenary year, Sotheby's had become one of the country's largest art auction houses, selling approximately 60 per cent of Australia's top end art.

Bleakley's partial ownership of the company made Sotheby's Australia unique, as all other offices were wholly owned by the parent company. Although Sotheby's had to conform to the practices and standards set by the parent body, to follow rigorous reporting procedures and to maintain the reputation, quality and style associated with Sotheby's, Bleakley could manage the firm on a day-to-day basis as he saw fit.<sup>24</sup> This gave Sotheby's the degree of independence to tailor itself to the peculiarities of the Australian arena that Christie's had not enjoyed. Moreover, all Sotheby's auctions were conducted by Australian auctioneers and the printing of catalogues was generally done locally in either Sydney or Melbourne.

Bleakley sold his portion of the company to Sotheby's in the late 1980s/early 1990s. The Australian firm became fully integrated into the multinational network and with this came contemporary business practices with 'internal regulations', including target setting, business transparency, corporate compliance and corporate governance with regards to ethics and collusion.<sup>25</sup> Bleakley began to decrease his involvement with the firm from about 1992 and became a Senior Director and Chairman of Sotheby's real estate company.

## **Sotheby's First Australian Sale — The Webber Portrait of Captain Cook**

The inaugural sale of Sotheby's incorporated Australian company was held on 23 March 1983. This auction of Australian and European Paintings and Oriental Ceramics and Works of Art was held at The Regent Hotel, 25 Collins Street, Melbourne. The Property of the Corporation of The Hull Trinity House, *A Portrait of Captain James Cook RN (1782)* by John Webber, was the star attraction of this so-called first Australian sale. The portrait was honoured with a full-page colour illustration in the catalogue and an extensive three-page essay. It was also the only work listed as 'estimate on application' and, although it was given the most prominence in the catalogue, it was not featured until page 28 as lot 45; this is owing to the structure of the sale as pre-ordained by Sotheby's to set the rhythm. It sold for \$506,000 (including the buyer's premium) against a reserve of around \$220,000, tripling the highest price ever paid at auction for an Australian work.<sup>26</sup>

The painting is significant because it was the only portrait painted of Cook by an artist who actually knew him, even though it was painted posthumously. Webber sailed with Cook on his third voyage (1776–80) on the ship *Resolution*, survived the massacre in Hawaii, which claimed the life of Cook, and completed

drawings and engravings from the voyage on his return to England in October 1780. There are two other extant portraits of Cook by Webber, one in the National Portrait Gallery, London and one in the National Art Gallery, Wellington.

Christie's had auctioned Webber's estate on 14–15 June 1793, when this Cook portrait was probably sold to William Seguiet, the first Keeper of the National Gallery in London. On Seguiet's death in 1843, his paintings were sold by Christie's on 4 May 1844. However, the Cook portrait was not listed in the catalogue. The Hull Trinity House — a charitable trust founded in the fourteenth century for infirm seamen — acquired the portrait in 1844, possibly from a private treaty sale. There it remained until the early 1980s when Bleakley was in England prior to Sotheby's first Australian auction. He had heard from a colleague that The Hull Trinity House was interested in deaccessioning the portrait in order to raise funds, approached the Trust and was able to secure the painting.

The vast majority of lots at Sotheby's auction were sold to art dealers, either in their own capacity to use as stock or as agents acting on behalf of clients.<sup>27</sup> Lady Angela Nevill purchased Webber's portrait of Cook on behalf of notorious businessman Alan Bond. The Mitchell Library in Sydney and Canada's National Archives had been underbidders for this work, but were unable to compete with Bond's buying power. The National Library of Australia had also been interested in acquiring the portrait but could not obtain the additional funding it required from the Government. The Australian National Gallery (now the National Gallery of Australia) had not been interested in bidding for the work.

The journey of this portrait then became even more intriguing. After Bond's company, Dallhold Investments, collapsed the portrait was sold by Bond Corporation Holdings to George Way (a friend of the Bond family) at the High Street Gallery in Fremantle in 1990, after which it was effectively missing until it was found in Switzerland in 1993.<sup>28</sup> A Sotheby's staff member attending a function in New York was asked whether his firm would be interested in a portrait of Captain Cook, as the lady's father had reportedly received the portrait from Bond as part of a debt settlement.<sup>29</sup> In Bleakley's second brush with this particular painting, he retrieved it and was intending to give the Australian National Gallery the option to buy the work through a private treaty sale for about half the asking price of \$3 million. The portrait appeared to have been exported illegally from Australia — no export licence was ever requested or received — and it was claimed at the time that this may have made the anonymous vendor, represented by Nevill Keating Pictures, lenient on the asking price.<sup>30</sup>

Bleakley had tried to establish title to the painting, but there were no title deeds. He did ascertain to his satisfaction that it no longer belonged to Bond so the vendors would be liable to any claims if their statement of title proved false.

Interestingly, Bond claimed in July 1993 that he had never owned the portrait.<sup>31</sup> Despite his assertions, the portrait had toured with the Bicentennial exhibition, *Terra Australis: the Furthest Shore*, in 1988 and was listed in the catalogue as belonging to Bond. Moreover, the portrait had been hung in pride of place in Bond's boardroom at Dallhold Investments, Perth and Bond had often been photographed standing in front of it. Betty Churcher, then director of the Australian National Gallery, in a glowing testament to the business credentials of Sotheby's said that 'she believed the title would be secure because the work was being sold through Sotheby's'.<sup>32</sup> However, as clear title was unable to be obtained on this occasion, arrangements to purchase the Cook portrait ended in 1993–4.

Attempts were made from 1994 to 1996 to sell the portrait to others. Lady Nevill wrote to Sotheby's with instructions that the work was no longer for sale and to cease all attempts to sell it, as the Bond liquidator had put a stop on the sale of all assets.<sup>33</sup> From March 1996, the painting was held in secure storage by Christie's in London, 'pending litigation'.<sup>34</sup> The South Australian Supreme Court ruled in June 2000 that the Cook portrait be given to Bond's liquidator.

The National Portrait Gallery, Canberra bought the portrait for \$5.13 million in August 2000 with funds from two patrons — Rosemount Wines' Oatley family and Tempo Cleaning Services' John Schaeffer — and \$2.8 million from the Australian Government. This deal was brokered by Lady Nevill in conjunction with Christie's. McIlroy commented that 'It is a tribute to the discretion of Christie's private sales department that our involvement was not indicated prior to the conclusion of the transaction'.<sup>35</sup>

Lady Nevill had approached Andrew Sayers, Director of the National Portrait Gallery, in September 1999, asking if his institution would be interested in acquiring the Cook portrait. Sayers went to London to view it in November 1999 and was amenable to the purchase, having previously seen the work in *Terra Australis*. Arranging an export permit for the painting from London was a tiresome and protracted affair, despite Sayers originally being informed that it was a formality.<sup>36</sup> Clandestine negotiations went on until 2000 and the painting was finally unveiled at the National Portrait Gallery by the then Prime Minister, John Howard, in August 2000 (Figure 11).



**Figure 11: John Webber, *A Portrait of Captain James Cook RN*, 1782, oil on canvas, 114.3 x 89.7 cm, Collection: National Portrait Gallery, Canberra. Purchased by the Commonwealth Government with the generous assistance of Robert Oatley and John Schaeffer 2000.**

In addition to the Cook portrait, Sotheby's literally had good fortune at its inaugural auction with Nicholas Chevalier's *Mount Zero and Lake Taylor, Victoria* (1862), which sold for \$176,000 against an estimate of \$50,000–\$70,000. This was a successful launch into the Australian market. Sotheby's first Australian auction became known as the first sale of the Australian art boom and greatly assisted Sotheby's to establish its credibility in the Australian marketplace.

## The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Market

It is generally acknowledged that Sotheby's made a substantial contribution to the development of the international market for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art (hereafter known, in Sotheby's terminology, as 'Aboriginal art', as this term is an international signifier). Bleakley's background and interest in the 'Tribal Art' spectrum meant that it featured in Sotheby's auction schedule from the beginning of its operation in Australia, with the auction of the Holt Collection in October 1983. There was not a lot of international participation in this sale, but enough interest was shown to indicate that the expansion and development of an international market for Aboriginal art might be possible.<sup>37</sup>

Sotheby's held annual Aboriginal artefacts and contemporary art auctions from the mid-late 1980s onwards, when Aboriginal works were still very much viewed as ethnography, rather than art. The catalogues for these early sales were inexpensive because Aboriginal art did not command huge prices at auction and it was therefore unnecessary to garnish the catalogues with illustrations. From the mid-1990s Aboriginal art grew into a very 'substantial part' of Sotheby's business, and sale prices escalated rapidly.<sup>38</sup>

Aboriginal art had monumental exposure in the United States in the late 1980s, with more than a dozen major exhibitions held in a two-year period in locations including Chicago, Los Angeles, St. Louis and New York.<sup>39</sup> *Dreamings: the Art of Aboriginal Australia*, arguably the most important of these exhibitions, was organized by the New York-based Asia Society Galleries and the South Australian Museum, travelling to the University of Chicago, the Museum of Victoria (Melbourne) and the South Australian Museum (Adelaide) in 1988–90. The American John Kluge, one of the world's wealthiest men, was influenced by the *Dreamings* exhibition and assembled an exceptional private collection of Aboriginal art. He gifted The Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection to the University of Virginia in 1997.<sup>40</sup> According to the latter's website, Ruhe actually began to collect Aboriginal art in 1965 while he was in Australia as a Fulbright Scholar and exhibited his collection in America from 1965–77.<sup>41</sup>

Other American commercial galleries that promoted Aboriginal art included the Caz Gallery (Los Angeles) and the John Weber Gallery (New York). It was estimated that American and European buyers accounted for 50 per cent of Aboriginal art and craft purchases — totalling \$14.1 million — in the period

from 1987 to 1988.<sup>42</sup> In 1989, the *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition opened in Paris, cementing the presence of Aboriginal art in the international marketplace and as art, rather than ethnography. Also in 1989, Lauraine Diggins, a Melbourne dealer, attained record prices for works by Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri and Michael Nelson Tjakamarra on the secondary market.

A lucrative private treaty sale for Sotheby's was that of forty-seven early Western Desert paintings to the National Gallery of Australia from the Peter Fannin collection in 1998 for \$1.27 million, which included *Warrana* (c.1960) by Mawalan Marika. Sotheby's earnings in 1998 were attributed, in the main, to its sales of Aboriginal art and its Aboriginal art expert, Tim Klingender, was thus appointed as a director of the company.<sup>43</sup>

Klingender joined Sotheby's in 1990 and was to be given the task of developing the firm's sales in Aboriginal and contemporary art. He was ubiquitous in 1995, making two heavily publicized trips through Western Australia and the Northern Territory to scout for Aboriginal works for auction.<sup>44</sup> Approximately 100 works were discovered on these trips, including Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri's *Love Story* (1972). This work was auctioned by Sotheby's on 18 June 1995, as part of a record-breaking auction of contemporary and Aboriginal art. The sale realized a total of approximately \$600,000 with ten works, including *Love Story*, passing their high estimates. *Love Story* sold for \$50,600 against an estimate of \$15,000–\$25,000; even the upper estimate would have been a record price, but the hammer price was actually a world record and thus obtained international media attention.

In June 1996, a number of important pieces were purchased by international buyers, confirming the belief that contemporary Aboriginal art is truly international in its appeal and outlook.<sup>45</sup> In October 1996, Sotheby's auctioned 820 lots over two sessions, 399 of which belonged to the Christensen Fund Collection of Oceanic and African Art. The Christensen Fund was established in 1957 by the American collector and founder of Utah Mining and Construction Company, Allan Christensen. Christensen had also founded Texas Mines in Carnarvon, Western Australia in the late 1960s and had been a big buyer of art at Christie's early auctions. The works had been on loan to the Art Gallery of Western Australia and the Queensland Art Gallery. Other works included in the auction were those deaccessioned from the Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Canada; from the Collection of the Late Major Alex Wynyard Joss; from the Collection of the Late Dr Douglas Burns; and from the Collection of Sir William Dobell. The sale was the 'largest of its type ever held in Australia'; it had grown in size because, as it contained a number of significant pieces, it had attracted the consignment of other items.<sup>46</sup> The success of these auctions paved the way for Sotheby's first specialized Aboriginal art auction in Melbourne on 30 June 1997.

Sotheby's well-publicized success with its previous auctions of Aboriginal art had resulted in works of great quality being consigned. The quality of the material persuaded Sotheby's to exhibit forty of the choice pieces at Sotheby's in New York for the first time in juxtaposition with the major Contemporary and Tribal Art sales. The New York auctions were the principal location in the world for show-casing art and the display of Sotheby's Australia's works generated a huge amount of international interest in the Melbourne auction.

The auction included deaccessioned works from the Holmes à Court Collection (culled owing to over-representation or duplication), the Tim Guthrie Collection of Early Western Desert Paintings and the Tom and Adi Barnett Collection of Bark Paintings and Sculpture, which had been on loan to Columbia University, New York for approximately thirty years.

At the June 1997 auction, 800 people squeezed into Sotheby's Armadale rooms — as both spectators and bidders — with the sale realizing \$2.7 million. The high prices attained set a benchmark, with the auction representing a crucial moment in the development of the fledgling Aboriginal art market. Johnny Warangkula Tjupurrula's *Water Dreaming at Kalipinypa* (1972) sold to a Californian buyer for the record sum of \$206,000 against an estimate of \$50,000-\$80,000 (Figure 12). Aboriginal art was increasingly being viewed as a positive flagship for Australia and three Aboriginal artists — Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Yvonne Koolmatrie and Judy Watson — were even chosen to represent Australia at the 1997 Venice Biennale.

The undoubted quality and provenance of the works, the wide catalogue distribution and Sotheby's heavy promotion of the sale internationally, all contributed to the auction's success. In America, the arts programme on CNN, *Visions*, aired a one minute story about the auction every four hours over a period of one week to 220 different countries. The BBC, the London *Sunday Observer*, the *Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times* ran stories on it. Sotheby's own magazine included an article on the sale, the first occasion on which Sotheby's Australia had received press in its international magazine.



Figure 12: Johnny Warangkula Tjupurrula, *Water Dreaming at Kalipinyapa*, 1972, synthetic polymer powder paint on composition board, 75 x 80 cm. Copyright the estate of the artist licensed by Aboriginal Artists Agency 2008.

It was primarily the New York and London collectors (both institutional and otherwise) who were responsible for the high prices and thus defining the Aboriginal art market. The Australian collectors could not compete with the international ones, who had begun to lodge telephone bids, on an unprecedented level, weeks prior to the auction. Thirteen people manned the telephones on the night, taking bids from Australia, North America, Europe and Asia. Thirty per cent of the lots, including half of the ten highest prices, were purchased by overseas collectors, mainly from America. Approximately 95 per cent of the works sold, compared to an auction average of 70 to 80 per cent. Although the quality of the auction was exceptional, it set a precedent. It was anticipated that future Aboriginal sales would prove as fruitful and Sotheby's decided to tour its next major Aboriginal art auction overseas.

Sotheby's auction of *Important Aboriginal Art* in Melbourne the next year, on 29 June 1998, followed along similar lines, with half of the top ten lots again going to overseas collectors. Billy Stockman Tjapaltjarri's *Wild Potato Dreaming* (1971) sold for \$200,500 (estimate \$20,000–\$30,000) to a Los Angeles buyer. This work was included in the American preview of the auction and illustrated in the *Architectural Digest* magazine. Ingram claimed that there were two primary motivations for the frantic bidding at the auction: that collectors were concerned firstly about the scarcity of quality early works and secondly, that the *Protection of Movable Cultural Heritage Act 1986* — which regulates the export of works deemed to be of great cultural significance to Australia — once amended, would make it difficult to export the works and hence greatly reduce the number of international bidders.<sup>47</sup> Sotheby's lobbied against amendments to the Act which, according to it, would increase the burden of paper-work, restrict its increasingly lucrative international business in Aboriginal art and damage the Aboriginal art market.<sup>48</sup> In 1998, Sotheby's Aboriginal art turnover increased to rival the success of its other Australian art auctions.

Sotheby's auction of *Important Aboriginal Art* in June 1999 was notable for the interest shown by American investors, with seven out of the top ten works purchased by Americans, prompting one reporter to comment that 'The result proves the success of Sotheby's overseas marketing campaign. The top 10 selling works were among the 42 paintings previewed in Cologne and New York.'<sup>49</sup> The Melbourne dealer, William Mora, observed that 'This represents the first time we have had an art movement with an international market, [sic] that is certainly driving prices'.<sup>50</sup>

Deutscher-Menzies attempted to enter the market for contemporary Aboriginal art on two occasions, in June 1999 and June 2000, but was unable to compete with Klingender's superior network, reputation and international client base. Anita Archer, Deutscher-Menzies' auctioneer, admitted that 'Domestic demand is not so great that it warrants a separate catalogue. If we were marketing to the

international market we could justify continuing with stand-alone sales but we don't have the infrastructure to sell overseas'.<sup>51</sup>

Nonetheless, 2004 witnessed fresh competition for Sotheby's supremacy of the Aboriginal art auction market with Bonhams & Goodman, Christie's and Lawson-Menzies holding specialized Aboriginal art sales. This resulted in some high prices but also flooded the market. Since that time Bonhams & Goodman has sold some works for high prices but has integrated Aboriginal art into its general Australian and International art sales. Christie's was able to source some important works, such as Rover Thomas's *Lundari (Barramundi Dreaming)* (1985), an early and significant work by the artist and one with the desirable provenance of The Holmes à Court Collection. This was widely expected to fetch more than \$1 million, but Christie's was unable to sell it in August 2005. Christie's actually withdrew from the Australian market altogether (although this was not related to its Aboriginal art sales). Lawson-Menzies has achieved some success with, for example, Maggie Watson Napangardi's *Digging Stick Dreaming* (1995) attaining \$216,000 (estimate \$200,000–\$300,000) at its November 2005 auction. This was an auction record for the artist. Lawson-Menzies' market share has grown from \$1.5 million in May 2004 to \$3.4 million in May 2006.<sup>52</sup>

The Hallinan Collection of New Guinea Art, at the time the largest collection of tribal art offered in Australia, was auctioned by Sotheby's at the Powerhouse Museum on 28 November 1993. Peter Hallinan was a Brisbane art dealer suffering from financial difficulties and therefore in need of liquidity. He had collected the pieces over a twenty-five-year period, during more than twenty visits to Papua New Guinea. Ninety per cent of the lots sold for a total of \$400,000 (double the expected total) to a bidding audience comprising numerous collectors of contemporary and modern art, prompting one dealer to remark that 'Primitive has arrived'.<sup>53</sup>

Aboriginal art dealers were reportedly pleased with the high prices and publicity produced by Sotheby's; however, dealers in Contemporary art were less than pleased, as Sotheby's set its prices lower than retail ones to ensure a positive outcome.<sup>54</sup> Whether this is also a positive outcome for the Contemporary dealers and living artists is debatable.

As previously mentioned, Sotheby's had been holding combined auctions of Aboriginal and Contemporary art since the 1980s. However, Sotheby's had earlier conducted Australia's first specialized Contemporary art auction in Melbourne in June 1991 of paintings and sculpture from the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Brisbane. Many of the works sold below their estimates, doing little to set respectable benchmarks for the works of Contemporary Australian artists. Sotheby's stand-alone Contemporary sales were not a resounding success overall and were later discontinued.

The importance of international buyers of Aboriginal art was once more highlighted by Sotheby's *Aboriginal Art* auction on 26–27 June 2000, where an interpreter was employed to aid European buyers bidding on the telephone. This was yet another record sale which realized \$4.4 million; 62 per cent of the lots (by volume) went to American and European buyers, with private museums purchasing approximately 50 lots.<sup>55</sup> Forty-five of the star attractions had been previewed in Paris and New York, making the catalogue, photographs and condition reports of prime importance in attracting sales. Johnny Warangkula Tjupurrula's *Water Dreaming at Kalipinypa* (1972) was resold at this auction, again attaining the top sale price. It sold for \$486,500 to the Melbourne art dealer, Irene Sutton, on behalf of a New York client and further demonstrated the degree to which Aboriginal art had infiltrated the international marketplace. This sale also raised the issue of the potential need for an art resale royalty again, as Johnny Warangkula Tjupurrula was originally paid only \$150 for the work and was living in poverty.

Sotheby's 2003 auction of Aboriginal art was held over two evenings on 28–29 July at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney. The sale, estimated at \$6.5–8.5 million, realized \$7.46 million. The collection of Kimberley Art which had been assembled by American anthropologist, John McCaffrey, in the mid-1960s was featured in the sale and favoured with its own museum-standard catalogue. The top bids, yet again, hailed from overseas, mainly Europe and America, with an estimated 70 per cent of works selling to international collectors. Klingender noted that 'It's fabulous that indigenous art is appreciated somewhere, if not in Australia, then internationally'.<sup>56</sup> This makes an interesting point about the comparative lack of interest in Aboriginal art by Australians.

The star attraction of the sale, *Ngurrara Canvas I* (1996), a collaborative work by artists represented by the Mangkaja Arts Resource Agency, sold for only \$210,000 (estimate \$300,000–\$500,000), to a Perth businessman, Paul Naughton. This work had been marketed extensively to Americans, having been travelled in an Aboriginal art exhibition in 1999 and featured on television and in the print media, including the front cover of the Arts Section of *The New York Times*. According to Ingram, 'This week's sale was a triumph of slick marketing and stage management with even a potential disaster [sic] the aesthetically challenging star lot turned to great advantage...The work's dismal performance after the hype came too late for most newspaper deadlines.'<sup>57</sup>

The key works from Sotheby's eighth annual auction of Aboriginal art on 26–27 July 2004 were previewed at Sotheby's galleries in London for the first time. They had also been shown in Paris alongside Sotheby's auction of African and Oceanic Art. However, the auction's signature painting, *Uluru (Ayers Rock)* (1987) by Rover Thomas, failed to sell amid concern regarding the subject matter (it seemed unlikely that a Kimberley artist would be painting Uluru) and the

high estimate of \$700,000–\$1,000,000. The work was passed-in at \$675,000. It would have set a world record if it had reached its top estimate. At the time of writing in October 2007, the highest auction price for an Aboriginal painting is for Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri's *Warlugulong* (1977), which sold at Sotheby's in July 2007 for \$2.4 million.<sup>58</sup>

Increased competition resulted in Sotheby's halving its usual offering of Aboriginal art in July 2005. A large proportion of the works in this auction were sold to international buyers at a value of \$2.04 million, almost half of the sale total of \$4.83 million (estimate \$6 million–\$8.5 million). These included two works by Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri: the first painting he created, *Emu Corroboree Man* (1972) (estimate \$150,000–\$250,000), which set a record for the artist when it sold to an American via the dealer Irene Sutton for \$411,750 (including commissions) and *Man's Love Story* (c.1993) which sold to a French buyer also for \$411,750 (estimate \$40,000–\$70,000).<sup>59</sup> However, auction turnover was much lower than anticipated. Sotheby's Aboriginal and Oceanic Art auction in Melbourne on 15–16 November 2005 — its second Aboriginal art auction for that year — achieved \$1.4 million, with many works selling beneath the lower estimate or being passed-in.

The Aboriginal art auction market was worth \$666,000 in 1988; by 2006 this figure had risen to a staggering \$14,325,000 and the value of the Aboriginal art market as a whole was estimated to be upwards of \$200 million.<sup>60</sup> According to Klingender, Australians began to collect Aboriginal art seriously in the late 1980s.<sup>61</sup> In the early 1990s, international buyers had only accounted for around 10 per cent of buyers at Sotheby's Aboriginal art sales.<sup>62</sup> Sotheby's sold \$288,086 worth of Aboriginal art in 1994. This figure increased to \$893,318 in 1995, followed by \$1.2 million in 1996. In June 1996, less than 20 per cent of works from Sotheby's June Aboriginal art auction were purchased by international collectors; this figure had increased to 30 per cent by volume in 1997 and 50 per cent by volume in 1998.<sup>63</sup> Justin Miller commented at the time that Sotheby's achieved its highest annual turnover in 1998 because of the weak Australian dollar and the popularity of Aboriginal art, accentuating the importance of said art for the firm.<sup>64</sup> This success has had a flow-on effect to Australian dealers of Aboriginal art, with Gabrielle Pizzi estimating that her international sales of Aboriginal art doubled from the late 1980s to the late 1990s.<sup>65</sup> International dealers, such as Stephane Jacob in Paris, have also been promoting Aboriginal art for several years. Aboriginal art has now attained such status at an international level that it has been included in the collection of the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris.

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>3</sup> Terry Ingram, 'UK art dealers scent Aust pay dirt', *Australian Financial Review*, 26 July 1971, p.5.
- <sup>4</sup> Author unknown, 'Dobell art auction cancelled', *The Northern Territory News* (probably), 2 November 1972, p.5.
- <sup>5</sup> Brian Adams, *Portrait of an Artist: A Biography of William Dobell*, Vintage, Milson's Point, New South Wales 1992, p.318.
- <sup>6</sup> Terry Ingram, 'Price and Prejudice interest in mammoth Dobell sell-out', *Australian Financial Review*, 13 September 1973, p.36.
- <sup>7</sup> Terry Ingram, 'Where there's a will there's a way — Dobell's Opera House auction', *Australian Financial Review*, 1 November 1972, p.1, 11.
- <sup>8</sup> Adams, *Portrait of an Artist*, p.319.
- <sup>9</sup> Terry Ingram, 'Dobell prices uneven', *Australian Financial Review*, 22 November 1973, p.42.
- <sup>10</sup> Ingram, 'Price and Prejudice interest in mammoth Dobell sell-out', p.36.
- <sup>11</sup> Michael Fitzgerald, 'Urban man heeds call of the tribal', *The Age*, 25 July 1990, p.3.
- <sup>12</sup> Quoted in Nicholas Faith, *Sold: the Rise and Fall of the House of Sotheby*, Macmillan, New York 1985, p.94.
- <sup>13</sup> Ava Hubble, 'Robert Bleakley: Dealer with a Difference', *Australian Art Collector*, issue 4, April–June 1998, p.37.
- <sup>14</sup> Margaretta Pos, 'Van Gogh record makes investors hungry for a share of art market', *Hobart Mercury*, 4 April 1987, no pagination.
- <sup>15</sup> Charles Nodrum, taped interview with the author, Melbourne, 24 October 2002 and Chris Deutscher, taped interview with the author, Melbourne, 3 October 2002.
- <sup>16</sup> Cochrane, 'Dueling Gavel's', p.66.
- <sup>17</sup> Robert Bleakley, taped interview with the author, Canberra, 28 November 2002.
- <sup>18</sup> Charles Nodrum, taped interview with the author, Melbourne, 24 October 2002.
- <sup>19</sup> Fran Hennon, 'Selling "snobbism" at Sotheby's', *Daily Telegraph*, 31 October 1987, p.31.
- <sup>20</sup> Charles Nodrum, taped interview with the author, Melbourne, 24 October 2002.
- <sup>21</sup> Bleakley in Cochrane, 'Dueling Gavel's', p.67.
- <sup>22</sup> Bleakley in Cochrane, 'Dueling Gavel's', p.66.
- <sup>23</sup> Bleakley in Cochrane, 'Dueling Gavel's', p.66.
- <sup>24</sup> Charles Nodrum, taped interview with the author, Melbourne, 24 October 2002 and Justin Miller, taped interview with the author, Sydney, 3 September 2002.
- <sup>25</sup> Mark Fraser, taped interview with the author, Melbourne, 21 October 2002 and Jane Clark, telephone conversation with the author, 2 August 2002.
- <sup>26</sup> The approximate reserve was obtained from Robert Bleakley, taped interview with the author, Canberra, 28 November 2002.
- <sup>27</sup> Terry Ingram, 'Art trade discovers life after Sotheby's', *Australian Financial Review*, 13 August 1987, p.32.
- <sup>28</sup> Marshall Wilson and Jamie Fawcett, 'Family Bond', *Courier Mail*, 25 March 2000, p.23.
- <sup>29</sup> Colleen Ryan and Kate McClymont, 'Bond's trail leads the art world to the first of our missing explorers', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 June 1994, p.34.
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- <sup>32</sup> Terry Ingram, '\$1.5m agreed for Cook portrait', *Australian Financial Review*, 3 August 1993, p.2.
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- <sup>46</sup> Peter Fish, 'Primitive Urges', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 October 1996, p.5.
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