

## **Four big tests for Indigenous art appeal; Aboriginal works**

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Many paintings and artefacts are going on offer

Almost 1000 Aboriginal paintings and artefacts valued at more than \$2 million are about to hit the market in the next few weeks, as four major sales test buyer enthusiasm in an area that has only recently begun to pick up from a prolonged downturn.

Enthusiasm for Aboriginal art enjoyed a lengthy boom in the 1990s that began to wane only from about 2009. The collapse reflected not only the global financial crisis, but the Labor government's introduction of the artist's resale royalty right - aimed at helping artists benefit from rising art prices as their work was on-sold - plus a strengthening Australian dollar that deterred previously strong foreign interest.

Strict new rules governing art purchased as a superannuation investment were also announced from June 2011, though earlier purchases were temporarily exempted.

The dollar has since fallen substantially, but the other factors remain a dampening influence. Indeed, the deadline of July this year is looming for art purchased before June 2011 to conform as a superannuation investment - meaning that to qualify it cannot be displayed in the home, and must be independently valued and insured.

So the coming sales will prove a test.

The offerings range from early bark paintings, tools and weaponry from up to 100 years ago to 1930s watercolours by Albert Namatjira, and early 1970s Papunya paintings through to the colourful modern near-abstracts of Sally Gabori and Daniel Walbidi.

Leonard Joel, Deutscher and Hackett, Mossgreen and Bonhams all have major art offerings, with Leonard Joel starting the rush with a sale this week.

Three of the sales are in Melbourne, but the last of this particular flurry, Bonhams sale on June 7, is in Sydney.

The Aboriginal desert art movement had its beginnings at Papunya in the early 1970s when, with encouragement from teacher Geoffrey Bardon, Aborigines were encouraged to paint their traditional stories for the first time, using acrylic paints and salvaged boards and panels.

One of these early works is included in the Deutscher and Hackett sale on May 25, Johnny Warangkula Tjupurrula's Mala (Rufous Hare Wallaby) Dreaming, which Bardon confirmed is Warangkula's first painting, dating from 1971. At only 23 by 34.5 centimetres it is a small but powerful image indicating the tracks of two of the hare-size wallabies flanking a group of figures. From a private Melbourne collection it carries a presale estimate of \$18,000 to \$25,000, in line with the \$22,800 it fetched at Sotheby's in 2004.

Other highlights of the D&H sale include a second tranche of works from the collection of gallerist/funds manager pair Gene and Brian Sherman as part of the continuing "editing" of their holdings, with major works by artists including Paddy Bedford, Emily Kngwarreye, Mick Tjapaltjarri and Prince of Wales. A substantial offering of artefacts includes a large painted north-east Queensland rainforest shield from the late 19th or early 20th century estimated at \$35,000 to \$40,000.

Mossgreen's sale on June 6 offers a work by another seminal figure from the desert art movement, Kaapa Tjampitjinpa, which is being offered for the first time. The catalogue says this untitled work was probably painted in 1972 at Papunya during a period "when the art blossomed without the influence of non-indigenous advisers". Estimate is \$15,000 to \$20,000.

Also interesting is an intriguing bark painting ascribed to the Port Keats area on the coast west of Darwin and from about the 1960s. It features a series of concentric dotted circles depicted on a piece of flattened eucalyptus bark, a technique introduced to the Wadeye region in the 1950s through the Christian mission there.

Mossgreen has a selection of works by Kitty Kantilla and other artists from the collection of Helen Read, who, as a trained nurse and midwife, became closely involved with central Australian communities and went on to foster interest in Indigenous art through her Palya Art tour group in Darwin.

The first off the mark is Leonard Joel's offering this week of about 300 lots of Aboriginal art and books from the collection of the late Canberra economist Alan Boxer. Largely unreserved, the collection includes paintings by Rover Thomas, Emily Kngwarreye and Tommy Watson among sculpture, pottery and weavings. Boxer was a passionate collector of both Western and Indigenous art who was a benefactor to the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra and served as a voluntary guide there in his later years.

Bonhams, the final of the four, offers Part II of the extensive collection of Netherlands department store heir Thomas Vroom. Part I last September saw dozens of works by Emily Kngwarreye sell on modest estimates. This offering is rich in the art of Utopia, Northern Territory, artist Kathleen Petyarre, with canvases including Thorny Devil Lizard Dreaming (Autumn) and Mountain Devil Lizard Dreaming (After Sandstorm) - both large, minutely dotted works estimated at \$10,000 to \$15,000.