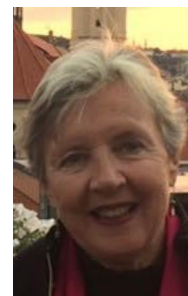

On Collections: Australian Art

By Janet Berry.



Continuing our focus on collections, HHA volunteer Janet Berry interviewed her husband Jim Berry on his lifelong interest in collecting Australian art.

Jim Berry's interest in collecting Australian art started while he was training as an accountant. One of his clients was an art dealer whose business was prospering and he invited Jim to work for him at his premises at Potts Point. This operation centred around art research which was an invaluable introduction to Jim's knowledge of Australian art. For most of the time he handled the accounts but he also used the huge library of books on Australian art to do limited amounts of art research. He soon realised which resources were the most useful in tracking down provenances of paintings which they wished to buy at auction. Under Frank's influence Jim developed an interest in Australian history and the art which recorded it. Jim's friend, Stephen Scheduling, a university student, was also employed as a casual compiler of Australian art auction records. He also became enthusiastic about Australian art.

Jim and Stephen decided to team up in order to invest in a joint art collection. They formed a cooperative group of friends to buy artworks. The members could then exhibit the works in their homes. However, the capital investment was quite modest. Jim and Stephen attended many auctions where they managed to find art works by minor Australian artists who were followers of the most avant garde trends of their era: artists such as Adelaide Perry, Tempe Manning, Ethel Carrick Fox and Harold Abbot.

At one auction they became interested in an unsigned work on canvas in the style of Russell Drysdale. There was another painting on the backing board. They bought it cheaply and took it to the restorer who thought she could split the canvas off the backing board, thus making two separate paintings. When she removed the canvas from the board there was another painting on the reverse signed by Drysdale: three for the price of one! They were examples of his early experimental modernist works which would have been done in 1934 or 1936. They were interesting examples of the development of Drysdale's work and they were later sold at a decent profit.

On one occasion the members of the art group were horrified when a very unprepossessing sculpture by Donald Friend was presented to them. No-one wanted to take it home. There was lively competition for the right to display the more attractive art works such as Petrouschka by Loudon Sainthill, a young Australian artist who was enchanted by the performances of the visiting ballet company, the Monte Carlo Russian Ballet. This painting is now part of the collection of the Art Gallery of Victoria.

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Jim and Stephen were quite adventurous in some of their acquisitions, typified by the time when they paid \$600 for a painting by Virgil Lo Schiavo. It was on a giant scale, a canvas eight metres long depicting Man emerging from antiquity. Another purchase that was not very popular with the art group! For a few years Jim had it hanging in the corridor outside his office at the Stock Exchange. He said "It was just like a baited fishing-line. Many fish swam past, sniffed at it and then swam on." After at least twenty unsuccessful attempts to sell it, it had to be stored for many years until it was donated to a charity to be auctioned.

One of the earliest art auction experiences was seeing an oil panel ten centimetres by sixteen centimetres of a beach and pier scene in an impressionist style. It was signed "To Smike from Chas." This caused much excitement as Jim and Stephen knew that Arthur Streeton's nickname was Smike and Charles Conder's was Chas. They thought it was by Conder but when it was examined later at home it was found that the paint was not quite dry. It was a forgery. After further study of Conder's works it was evident that it was a poor imitation. Soon after, a spate of similar panels appeared in small auctions. Will Blundell, an habitue of art auctions was interviewed by the press about these pictures and he described his works as "innuendoes" and said that he did not intend to fool anyone. Occasionally Jim would be asked to bid for an art work on behalf of someone who wanted to disguise their interest in the item.

In about 1980 he was asked to bid on behalf of the Powerhouse museum. A researcher that Jim had met while working at Potts Point was now a furniture curator at the Powerhouse museum. It was known that a Sydney family was putting two Regency chairs up for auction at a small Sydney auction house with an estimated price of \$500 for the pair. They were designed by Thomas Hope, a well-known English furniture designer, in the Egyptian Revival Style in 1807 (pictured below). The museum knew that a leading Queen Street dealer would want them and decided to put in an anonymous bidder in order to disguise their interest in the chairs and keep the price down. Jim was asked to bid on their behalf up to \$65 000. Bidding started at \$500, rising slowly to \$2000. The furniture dealer bid \$5 000 which Jim countered with \$10 000. The room went quiet. Bidding then went up in increments of \$10 000 to \$60 000. The dealer bid \$61 000 and they were then knocked down to Jim at \$62 000 to great applause. The Hope chairs were subsequently restored and valued at many times that figure. They can now be seen in the furniture collection of the Powerhouse museum.



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After a few years the art group was wound up, leaving its members with a greater appreciation of Australian art.

Jim and Stephen then decided to form a partnership in order to maintain their interest in collecting Australian art - - Scheduling-Berry Fine Art. They combined their limited capital so as to be able to purchase worthwhile works. They limited their interest from colonial to modernist works produced up until the 1940s. Not having much capital at their disposal, they did not collect works by major Australian artists but concentrated on works by lesser known but talented artists who followed the latest trends of their time. Occasionally they were lucky enough to acquire works by better known artists, for example, Bertram MacKenna and Margaret Preston.

They wanted to continue to collect art works because it was an interesting sideline to their day jobs and they had great fun doing it.

One of Jim's favourite artists was Loudon Sainthill. Sainthill had an interesting career. He lived in London where he exhibited at the Redfern Gallery. There he met Tatlock Miller, the director of the gallery and when he was only twenty-three Miller arranged for him to do portraits of all the chief ballet dancers in the Ballets Russes. He had seen some of their performances in Australia in 1937 when they caused an artistic sensation with their avant garde productions and vibrant costumes. He also designed stage sets and costumes. In the 1940s he became influenced by surrealism and this was reflected in many of his stage designs. Several of his paintings sold for \$30 000--\$40 000 in the 1980s. Currently they are often overlooked and sell for \$5000 or less. His works are strong and dramatic so Jim gradually acquired several.

Upon the death of Loudon Sainthill in 1972 the National Gallery of Australia was gifted more than a thousand of his works which complemented their extensive collection of costumes worn by the Ballets Russes.

Jim Berry's lifelong interest in collecting Australian art has broadened his horizons by learning about the life experiences of Australian artists and their varied interpretations of Australian history and culture. Jim has been heard to say: "art research leads you down many rabbit holes and sometimes you are rewarded by exciting discoveries."



*(left) Street Scene,
Northern Africa. E. Carrick
Fox*

*(right) Petrouschka by
Loudon Sainthill*

