

# YOUR MONEY

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COLLECTABLES MICHAEL HUTAK

## Art de triomphe

With Christie's showing the way, Aboriginal art is booming in France.

A select slice of Paris' collecting elite gathered at elegant rooms on Avenue Matignon last month for auction house Christie's first exhibition of Australian Aboriginal art. Thirty or so works on preview had been selected to tempt European tastes, pulled from 168 lots to be auctioned in Sydney on October 12. Last week another tranche of dots-and-dreaming lots from the sale went on view at Christie's New York. The Aboriginal art auction market has been virtually the personal fiefdom of Sotheby's Aboriginal art specialist Tim Klingender for almost a decade, but this year five different companies are conducting sales, with the French-owned Christie's expected to snare the biggest slice of market share from its arch rival.

Aboriginal art has been booming at home for more than five years, yet internationally the market remains underdeveloped. While European collectors such as Thomas Vroom or Karl-Heinz Essl still account for roughly a third of all auction sales at the top of the market (above \$150,000), less than a score

of such players operate at this level. Shaun Dennison, who joined Christie's in March to head its new Aboriginal art department, is instead hunting growth opportunities at a lower level. "We're looking to widen the market," says Dennison, "starting with diverting sales of non-indigenous Australian paintings to Aboriginal art."

In a sale with a total value of between \$2.5m and \$3.5m, about 40% of the lots are estimated under \$10,000, and just two above \$150,000 – the top lot being *Digging Stick Dreaming* by Maggie Watson Napangardi.

Dennison's sale is high on quality and he has framed it as "modern Aboriginal art", which he defines as being from 1971 to the present day. "It's from the time Geoffrey Bardon commissioned the Papunya boards to the present day and it's restricted to works on board, paper and canvas. We aren't offering any barks or artefacts or watercolours pre-1970, none of the Hermannsburg artists like Albert Namatjira."

Christie's catalogue raises the bar in providing detailed provenance for every lot, something never seen in the sector before – from Sotheby's or anyone else. "It worries me when an artist is painting for 10 or 20 different sources," says Dennison. "So I've also tried to restrict myself to artists who have shown a commitment to selling through one or two agencies – such as Maggie Watson Napangardi and Gallery Gondwana, or Ginger Riley and Alcaston Gallery. That's where the top quality emerges."

So who attended the Paris preview to savour the swag of Emily Kngwarreyes, Rover Thomases and others? A mostly ageing crew of permanent waves and intellectual beards: twinsets and pearls for *madame*; basic black wrapped-round gourmand waistlines for *monsieur*; Canapés and champagne downed to an ambient didgeridoo soundtrack

**RED CENTRE** Emily Kngwarreye's *Anooralya Awelye* had a well-heeled Paris audience



**DEEP ART** Helicopter Tjungurrayi's *Burrundjarri Rockhole in the Great Sandy Desert* is a value buy

rounded out the picture. Nary a black person to be seen – Aboriginal or otherwise.

Attitudes towards Aboriginal art in Europe remain diffuse, undermined by carpetbaggers selling sub-par art by the metre on the internet and held back by poor marketing and antiquated notions that contemporary art by indigenous Australians is only of "anthropological" interest. "It's so very far away, your country, so it's good that these works are shown here," offered the impeccably tailored Eric Agote, a Parisian insurance executive. Agote owns works by Balgo Hills artists Ningie Nangala and Greeny Purvis Petyarre, artists whose works wear the bold graphic designs and direct use of line and colour so favoured among European collectors.

"Collectors here love the line, they love structure and clarity," says art dealer Stephane Jacob, a former curator at the Louvre who has been selling Aboriginal art in Paris for more than eight years. "What flies in Australia can flop in Europe, and vice versa. You find that artists who paint very direct, clean and colourful works – like Linda Syddick Napaljarri or Dave Pwerle Ross – sell very well here but not so well in Australia. But good luck trying to sell a Eubena [Nampitjin] here ..."

Dennison agreed, nominating a work by Balgo Hills artist Helicopter Tjungurrayi, pegged at the \$4000 upper estimate, as "being very cheap for Europe".

