

For The Love Of Artefacts

By Adrian Newstead, on 10-Feb-2014

In his book *The Dealer is The Devil*, Adrian Newstead draws on his 30 years of consulting with Aboriginal artists all over Australia. Newstead has produced the definitive expose of "the first great art movement of the 21st century" which lifts the lid on what Robert Hughes once described as "the last great art movement of the 20th century." In this extract from the book, the author details the short history of the market for Aboriginal artefacts.



The first sale of Aboriginal artefacts was held by Sotheby's in Sydney in 1985 at the Blaxland Gallery in Grace Brothers department store. Few could have foreseen that quality pieces such as a bicornual basket similar to that illustrated above which sold for \$750, could sell for over \$40,000 just over 20 years later.

wheels, spinning through the night sky. After European settlement music hall performers used them to amaze their audiences with feats such as catching a thrown boomerang whilst blindfolded.

Some of the cream of Holt's vast and valuable collection, much of it originally acquired by Sydney tribal dealers Robert Ypes and Leo Fleischmann in the 1960s, was auctioned during Sotheby's first year in Sydney in 1983. In the catalogue essay Holt related two memorable anecdotes about the boomerang. The first was about the explorer Sir Thomas Mitchell, who was appointed as Assistant Surveyor General of New South Wales in 1827, and designed a prototype for the first ship's propeller based on the boomerang. The second was that, during World War I, a Mills bomb was strapped to the central section of a boomerang, thereby enabling it to be thrown a considerable distance. Unfortunately, after the pin was pulled and the boomerang was thrown, it quickly returned, exploded and necessitated 'quick ducking' by the troops.

The sale of this collection lifted the profile of these curious objects into the realm of 'collectable' tribal art. This was in part due to the personal charisma of a young man named Robert Bleakley. Bleakley's life-long fascination with tribal objects was inspired by the 19th-century novels set in exotic places that he read as a child. At 22, he cut short his studies at the University of New England in Armidale, New South Wales, and travelled to London, where he enrolled in Sotheby's Works of Art course. Within a year he was employed in its antiquities department, identifying and authenticating tribal objects from Africa, Oceania,

The Australian boomerang is a remarkable object, and worthy of its international fame. Despite the millions of cheap garishly decorated tourist boomerangs churned out every year, this elegant throwing stick has retained its mystique across two centuries. Captain Cook was of course the first recorded European to collect Aboriginal artefacts of this sort. Those that have survived from the period of first contact, when there must have been thousands of them in regular use, are nothing like the kitsch which became as ubiquitous as flying ducks in the 1950s. I've held the real thing in my hands hundreds of times over the years. Traditional boomerangs come in many shapes and sizes, and only a small number are designed to return. They belong to the Aboriginal hunter's classic arsenal, are beautifully weighted, and in some cases capable of travelling over 400 metres. The most beautiful have a ruby or honeyed patina attained through constant handling, and are often intricately incised.

One of the most famous early collections ever privately assembled in Australia belonged to Dr Gerald Holt. He was first exposed to Aboriginal culture on his father's cattle station in Queensland. His habit of trawling through shops that sold artefacts in the years prior to World War I became a life-long hobby. Fascinated by them since childhood, Holt discovered that boomerangs had many uses. They could be thrown above a flock of flying birds in a manner that resembled the movement of a hawk. This would send the birds diving toward the ground, where they were caught in nets or killed by missile clubs. Boomerangs were also thrown at fish, used for sport, as musical instruments when two were tapped together, and to start fires when rubbed briskly across beanwood shields. Some of the finest examples were never thrown but owned as prestige items by important men and sometimes traded over great distances.

Boomerangs are also unique as they were used both as sacred objects when painted for ceremonies, and as secular utilitarian hunting tools when the paint was washed off. Holt recorded seeing Aboriginal men use them to spectacular effect during corroborees. They would light both ends and then throw them like catherine

Australasia and the Americas.

Bleakley's name was made by a rather spectacular series of events. In 1978, the Red Brigade was wreaking havoc across Italy with bombings and assassinations, one of which resulted in the death of the intellectual former Italian Prime minister, Aldo Moro. The terrorists also kidnapped a five-year old girl from her family's turreted mansion in Switzerland. She happened to be the daughter of George Ortiz, the legendary art collector, and heir to a fortune made in Bolivian tin. Ortiz was a high flyer, whose parents collected silver and art. He had become fascinated at first with Greek antiquities, but later his interest expanded into African and Oceanic art. Forced to borrow the ransom money from his mother, he paid her back by putting some of this beloved tribal art collection up for sale through Sotheby's in London.

The auction, supervised by Bleakley, was held in June 1978, and smashed the record for any tribal art sale by generating US\$3 million. More than five pieces fetched prices over \$200,000 each, including a small dark wood statue from the Hawaiian Islands that was purchased by a Belgian count for over \$500,000. The price for that object in particular, and for the entire Ortiz collection sale, marked the coming of age of the tribal art market. Prominently reported in the international press, the sale made the cover of Newsweek, which noted the rising prices and the swing in market interest from French and Belgian collectors to Americans. The sale was so successful that Ortiz was even able to buy back some of the pieces which meant the most to him. They included the Hawaiian Aumakua, or personal God, reputedly collected by Captain Cook in 1779. Exuding refinement and quiet confidence, Bleakley became the youngest director in Sotheby's history, and head of its Primitive Art department in London. It was here he developed his own languid, even imperious, auction style. After spending more than a year researching the Australian market, Bleakley proposed to open a Sydney office. The Sotheby's Board twice rejected the idea. Finally, however, he gained approval and, by personally investing in the enterprise, equity in the Australian operation.

In 1982, Bleakley officially brought Sotheby's to Australia and opened a small office in York Street, Sydney. The inaugural Sotheby's sale was held on 23 March 1983. Its centrepiece was one of only five known surviving 18th century portraits of Captain James Cook RN - created in 1782. Painted by John Webber, the official painter on Cook's third and last voyage of 1776-1780, it was accompanied by an extensive three-page catalogue essay. The painting sold for \$506,000 against a reserve of around \$220,000, tripling the highest price ever paid at auction for an 'Australian' work. It was purchased by Lady Angela Nevill on behalf of notorious businessman Alan Bond. The South Australian Supreme Court ruled 17 years later that the Cook portrait was to be handed over to Bond's liquidator, although Bond claimed in July 1993 that he had never owned it. When resold in 2000, the painting was purchased by the National Portrait Gallery Canberra for \$5.13 million.

Bleakley rapidly became the walking embodiment of the Sotheby's Australian brand at a time when the local auction scene lacked sophistication and an aura of professionalism. Though international participation was yet to arrive, Bleakley's sale of the Holt collection six months later generated enough interest to indicate that an international market for Aboriginal art could be nurtured. His confidence and personal interest in tribal art ensured that tribal artefacts and antiquities were offered for sale every year thereafter.

In 1983, having just begun my engagement with Aboriginal art, I attended the Holt sale. I was looking for pieces to buy which I could resell through Coe-ee. From this time forward I started to mix with people who pointed out the technological sophistication of Aboriginal implements that were made prior to the introduction of metal tools. I began to look at early artefacts in a different way: to understand how the design and execution of Aboriginal weapons, utilitarian items and ceremonial regalia was an integral part of their culture, and perfectly suited to their nomadic lifestyle. Australian Aboriginals carried nothing extraneous as they adapted to a wide range of climates and conditions across the continent.

Sotheby's 1985 tribal art sale was staged in the Blaxland Gallery on the 6th floor of the Grace Brothers Department Store in Sydney. I remember the extraordinary events that accompanied it almost as if it were yesterday.

Some hours before the sale was due to start the gallery was already bristling with tribal art enthusiasts. I entered to find several large tables stretching the length of the room. Hundreds of artefacts made from wood, mud, bark and fibre were scattered across the starched white tablecloths, creating the impression of an inexhaustible supply. Having seen very few items of this sort before, I found the overall effect was quite overwhelming. Proceedings came to a sudden halt, however, when an injunction made by Gary Foley was announced.

Foley was a brilliant young firebrand. Many of the older Aboriginal activists had hoped that by installing him as the first Indigenous Director of the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council, he would eventually settle down and fulfil his destiny as a gifted advocate, working within the system. But, having accepted the position, Foley seemed even more motivated to take a conspicuous position. Now he did something that really had them shaking their heads: he slapped an injunction on 75 lots 'on behalf of the Aboriginal Lands Council [sic] ' thereby effectively withdrawing almost a third of the objects from the sale.

I can still see the astonished faces in the auction house crowd as the injunction was announced. Amongst the items withdrawn were an over modelled human skull from the New Hebrides and a wooden drum from New Guinea. It seemed a rather foolish act of defiance. What on earth was so special about any of these items, I thought, that could justify such an action? Like many others who were present, I had no idea that pieces of this quality were quite rare, and would escalate in value ten times over the following 20 years. A northeast Queensland bicornual basket in perfect condition, for instance, sold for just \$750; I would estimate its value today at no less than \$30,000.

While I had no idea of it at the time, in spite of the accidental inclusion of the Melanesian pieces, Gary Foley had actually made a valid point. From the moment Captain James Cook first encountered Aboriginal people in 1770, English officers and their troops had thought of these exquisite objects as mere curios. Many were stolen, or taken as war trophies from Aboriginals after violent conflicts known euphemistically as 'dispersals'. Others were offered in what the Aboriginals would have considered a ritual exchange. Within half a century, all of the south-eastern Aboriginal tribal lands had been occupied by white settlers and traditional life had ended. European museums were eager for any material from the Antipodes, before the Indigenous world was altered for all time.

Copies of *The Dealer is The Devil* are available in hardback, paperback and as an e-book, and can be ordered online from Coo-ee Aboriginal Art gallery at <http://book.cooeeart.com.au/>

About The Author

Adrian Newstead is an Aboriginal art specialist, dealer, and commentator, based in Bondi, New South Wales. He co-founded Coo-ee Aboriginal Art Gallery in 1981 and until 2002 worked closely with Aboriginal communities throughout Australia. In 2003 Adrian became the Head of Aboriginal Art for Lawson~Menzies, and in 2007, Managing Director of Menzies Art Brands. He resigned from this position at the end of 2008, to return to working once again with artists and art communities.

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