

A spectacular end to a memorable year in the saleroom

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The recognition of women artists, a return to the traditional and a growing interest in prints and multiples are among the trends of this stop-start and yet ultimately successful year in the art auction trade.

If there's one figure that speaks resoundingly of the market's strength, it's that 78 new artists' records were set (for works above \$20,000), more than double that of last year. Of those, 33 were for women, a reflection of a broad cultural shift and public institutions celebrating female artists. Even more remarkable, these records were set amid prolonged lockdowns in the two cities that make the art world tick – Sydney and Melbourne.



George Lambert's *Artist and His Batman, Light Horse Calvary, Jerusalem Heights*, 1920, which hammered at \$305,000, more than three times its low estimate, at Deutscher and Hackett last Wednesday night.

Major art auctions came to a standstill for five months during what is typically prime sales time, creating a flurry of activity at year's end. Despite the hiatus, the market finished stronger than last year, turning over \$120 million, a 10 per cent increase on 2020, when the industry first confronted the trials of a pandemic.

"That gap between April and November was finger-nail biting stuff," says Chris Deutscher, Melbourne executive director of Deutscher and Hackett. "It was a very challenging year, nothing was certain. We were just lucky that the market was so buoyant in early November and continued to be so into early December ... it was a year of building frustration that was spectacularly released in four weeks."

Deutscher and Hackett held its final sale of the year last week, adding another \$6.4 million to its coffers, taking the company to pole position for the second consecutive year. Of this year's records, 31 were made at Deutscher and Hackett, with two set last week, for George Lambert's *Artist and His Batman, Light Horse Calvary, Jerusalem Heights*, 1920, which hammered at \$305,000, more than three times its low estimate, and Benjamin Duterrau's *Self Portrait*, 1835, which sold for \$160,000 (hammer), \$60,000 above its low estimate.

In all, Deutscher and Hackett turned over \$32.4 million in sales this year, its second best result since the company started trading in 2007.

Second in line came Smith & Singer, which held just two major sales, not the usual three, but nonetheless pulled in a total turnover of \$25.4 million, an increase on 2020's \$21.5 million.

Company chairman Geoffrey Smith agreed that it was a year of challenges, but also of "opportunities and excellent results".

Benjamin Duterrau's *Self Portrait*, 1835, which sold for \$160,000 on the hammer, \$60,000 above its low estimate, at Deutscher and Hackett last Wednesday night.

While some companies are expanding their online presence, Smith & Singer's strategy is to hold high-value sales with fewer items.

A lifeline during last year's lockdowns, online sales are now routine on the auction calendar, but when it comes to high-end offerings, real-time viewings in both

Melbourne and Sydney are all-important.

“We continue to find that our major clients who come in to view in person respond more passionately when it comes to bidding,” says Smith.

Even so, the lessons of 2020 were bedded down, and the show went on in whatever form it could, with virtual viewings allowing many sales to plough ahead.

Menzies was the only auction house to post a significant fall in turnover, down by \$7.8 million from 2020 to make \$14.8 million this year. But the company was without a head of art for the first half of the year following the departure of Justin Turner.

Banksy screen print, *Love is in the Air*, 2003, sold for \$150,000 (hammer) at Smith & Singer. The vendor bought it in 2003 for less than \$300.

“We were trading in a difficult year in a period of transition,” says Menzies’ new head of art Brett Ballard, who joined in May after being poached from Smith & Singer.

In response to the times, Ballard launched the company’s inaugural prints and multiples sale in September, in an online-only auction. While the sale wasn’t a triumph, selling at just 30 per cent by value and 67 per cent by number, it achieved some high individual results for prints by the likes of Brett Whiteley and David Hockney.

When it came to prints, Banksy ruled supreme with his work *Love is in the Air* (edition 450 of 500) which set an Australian auction record for the artist, selling for \$150,000 (hammer) at a solo online auction at Smith & Singer. The vendor, who bought the work in 2003 for \$300 from the gift shop of Sydney’s Museum of Contemporary Art, could hardly have anticipated this future windfall.

Bonhams Australia, which kept running auctions throughout the lockdowns, as well as consigning works to its overseas offices, turned over \$4.2 million more than last year, to finish on \$11.9 million.

The 20.05 carat emerald-cut solitaire diamond ring that sold for an Australian auction record of \$1.3 million hammer, or \$1.625 million with buyer's premium, at Leonard Joel in Sydney.

"It's been our busiest year yet without doubt," said Bonhams Australia director Merryn Schriever. "The strength of the market globally has just been extraordinary. Every week we had stock in a sale somewhere around the world. It has not stopped."

Leonard Joel increased its takings by \$1.6 million from last year, to turnover \$8.7 million in art sales, and delivered Australia's first million-dollar diamond, only to beat its own record last week with a \$1.625 million sparkler (including buyer's costs).

The title of "artist of the year" must surely go to Clarice Beckett, whose records kept being broken, with the highest price set last month at Smith & Singer for *The Boat Sheds*, which sold for \$270,000 (hammer) against a low estimate of \$80,000. Her status was no doubt bolstered by the Art Gallery of South Australia's exhibition, *Clarice Beckett: The present moment*, which vindicated an artist who had been discouraged by family and dismissed by critics during her lifetime.

Bessie Davidson, Grace Cossington Smith, Margaret Preston, Del Kathryn Barton, Cressida Campbell, Mirka Mora and Margaret Olley were other high achievers at auction this year, with a raft of less familiar names also performing well. Emily Kame Kngwarreye remained the top traded female artist by value, with Bessie Davidson and Clarice Beckett occupying second and third spot respectively.

Clarice Beckett's *The Boat Sheds* sold for \$270,000 hammer on an estimate of \$80,000 to \$100,000, at Smith & Singer.

Australian Indigenous art specialist Tim Klingender quietly sold 10 paintings by Kngwarreye from the collection of Dutch department store heir Thomas Vroom, bought and repatriated by an Australian collector.

"Emily Kngwarreye's paintings are attracting more interest than ever, and prices for her well-provenanced paintings have doubled in value over the last two years,"

Klingender says.

Auctioneer Roger McIlroy sold Arthur Streeton's *The Grand Canal*, 1908, for \$2.5 million plus buyer's premium at Deutscher and Hackett, a new record for the artist. **Penny Stephens**

Despite these gains, women still lag men when it comes to high value works. The top ten prices this year belonged exclusively to male artists. Arthur Streeton's Venice painting, *The Grand Canal*, 1908, was the year's most expensive work, achieving \$3.068 million, including buyer's costs, against a pre-sale estimate of \$1.5 million to \$2 million. Streeton was the year's most traded artist, a position historically monopolised by Brett Whiteley.

If it was a year when women claimed space in a male-dominated field, it was also a year that saw a return to the traditional – landscapes by the likes of Streeton, Frederick McCubbin, Jan Scheltema, and Walter Withers were popular with collectors.

Ben Quilty's *Beast 2* (2005) set a new record for the artist, soaring almost five times above its high estimate to sell for \$220,000 (\$270,000 including buyer's premium). **Menzies**

On the contemporary side of things, Ben Quilty reinforced his position as a market favourite and set a record with *Beast 2*, 2005, a vigorous portrait of a brash

budgerigar that soared more than six times above its low estimate to sell for \$220,000 hammer.

The appeal of single-owner sales was also confirmed this year, with fierce competition for works in the collections of Sydney restaurateur Lucio, former freight boss Pat Corrigan, Melbourne businessman Harry Oviss, and last week's sale of the Gary and Genevieve Morgan collection of Australiana, which brought in \$1,207,762 (including buyer's premium) against a pre-sale estimate of \$867,300.

The final release of works from the estate of Gija artist Paddy Bedford is a near sell-out at Melbourne's new D'Lan Contemporary gallery, with a total of \$2.9 million in sales, in an exhibition that ends Thursday. One of those works was snapped by American actor Steve Martin, a devoted collector of Australian Indigenous art.

With results like these, it's no wonder that there's a general optimism among auctioneers as we head into 2022.

"There is momentum in the market, there is passion, there is interest ... so keep it coming," says Smith.

Not wanting to downplay this year's achievements amid the hurdles of a pandemic, they must be viewed in the context of a market that has hovered around the \$100 million mark for 15 years, with the exception of boom years 2007 and to a lesser extent 2017. In 2006, the industry's total turnover was \$104 million; adjusted for inflation the equivalent today would be around \$140 million. In real terms, the market has barely shifted.

But let's end on a high note and give the final word to American writer Edmund White who, in an essay about his friend, the artist Robert Mapplethorpe, wrote, "Oddly enough, passion, like art, is always irresponsible, useless, an end in itself, regulated by its own impulses and nothing else."

Useless and irresponsible. And yet who would live without passion and art?

Happy New Year.

Gabriella Coslovich is an arts journalist with more than 20 years' experience, including 15 at The Age, where she was a senior arts writer. Her book, Whiteley on Trial, on Australia's most audacious of alleged art fraud, won a Walkley in 2018.

