

Cartier 'mystery clock' from rural NSW sets world record at auction

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A rare, late 1920s Cartier "mystery clock" sourced from country New South Wales set a world auction record in Hong Kong last week, selling for \$HK6.8 million (\$1.2 million, including buyer's premium), more than four times its lower estimate of \$HK1.5 million.

The result is an unexpected windfall for NSW's Mulloon Institute, which was given the clock by its late founder, farmer and passionate environmentalist Tony Coote, with the express purpose of funding the not-for-profit organisation's work in sustainable agriculture and land regeneration.



A Cartier 'Model A' Mystery Clock c. 1928, sourced from country New South Wales, set a world auction record in Hong Kong last week, selling for HK\$6.8 million (AUD\$1.2 million, including buyer's premium), more than four times its lower estimate of HK\$1.5 million.

"It's a huge boost for us," the institute's chairman, Gary Nairn, the former Liberal member for Eden-Monaro, told Saleroom. "The institute has really grown over the last couple of years and Tony gave the clock to us with the intention to help expand the institute's work. There's a lot to be done across our degraded landscapes and this will help us tremendously in the operations of the institute."

Cartier's "mystery clocks" are so named because their bejewelled hands appear suspended in space, marking the hours in a transparent rock-crystal case, with no visible mechanism.

The first "mystery clock" was developed by the French illusionist, Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin during the *Belle Epoque*. The magician inspired jeweller Louis Cartier and clockmaker Maurice Coüet to design their own branded version, which they released in 1912 to a captivated world.

The trick to the mystery clock is that the hands of the clock are attached to two rock-crystal discs. The movement is housed in the clock base, so that the dial appears to be floating. In fact, it's not the hands of the clock that rotate at all, but the two crystal discs, moving at different speeds, one at the rate of minutes, the other of hours. Each mystery clock took several master craftspeople about a year to produce.

The sleight of hand continues to charm, and Bonhams Australia's jewellery specialist, Fiona Firth was stunned when the "mystery clock" was consigned to the company's Sydney office, enclosed in its original red leather and silk-lined box, dating it to circa 1928.



A Cartier 'Model A' Mystery Clock c. 1928.

"I got such a shock because you would not expect to see anything like that, ever, and it's such an amazing piece of engineering," Firth told Saleroom. "I have never seen one in Australia, but that doesn't mean that there's not another out there."

The “mystery clock” was given to Tony Coote by his grandfather, but the nature-loving Coote felt that the clock could be put to better use, donating it to the Mulloon Institute before he died. As his friend and colleague Nairn says, “Tony was a really practical person and he felt that you could have this lovely clock sitting on a mantelpiece or you could put it to work for the environment, which is far more important.”

Coote hailed from the well-known family of jewellers and was executive chairman of the jewellery chain Angus & Coote. He died of cancer in 2018, aged 79, and his wife Toni died just four months after him.

Bonhams Australia sent the clock to its Hong Kong branch as the market for all things Cartier is strongest in Asia. The Hong Kong saleroom has other benefits, including a buyer-friendly tax environment compared to the United Kingdom, which charges a 20 per cent sales tax on “non-antique” items, meaning objects less than 100-years-old.



A woodblock print in the intact album of 55 prints by Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858), sold for \$93,750 (including buyer's premium), at Leonard Joel's last week, against an estimate of \$25,000 to \$35,000.

It was a week of rare objects going off at auction, with Leonard Joel achieving a grand result for an intact album of Edo Period Japanese woodblock prints, which sold for \$93,759 (including buyer's premium) against an estimate of \$25,000 to \$35,000. The vendor had no idea that the album she kept as a “coffee table” book and loved to browse through with her great-grandchildren was so valuable.



The intact album of 55 prints by Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858).

When Leonard Joel's consultant on Japanese art, Trevor Fleming, first inspected it during last year's lockdowns, he immediately told the Sydney private collector "it's no longer a coffee table book," and advised her to store it carefully while she decided whether to consign it for sale.

"I said, 'don't handle it without gloves'. It's very rare to find a complete album, I've only seen two or three come up at auctions internationally in the last 20 years," Fleming said.

"Japanese antiques in the last 20 years have been overshadowed by Chinese objects, but this happens to be a bit of bright spot ... hopefully this coaxes some interesting pieces into the open again. Boomers were big collectors of Japanese antiques in the 1970s, '80s and '90s."



A print in Utagawa Hiroshige's album.

The album's complete set of 55 prints was created by master printmaker, Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858), who has influenced many contemporary artists, and documents his journey along the 514 km-long Tokaido Road which linked the shogun's capital of Edo (present day Tokyo) and the imperial capital of Kyoto.

The album was bought by an international Japanese collector who plans to keep the prints intact so that viewers can re-live Hiroshige's epic journey.



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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.