

Bedroom furniture set makes \$240,500, but at a cost

Gabriella Coslovich *Saleroom writer*



Aug 10, 2022 – 4.38pm

A rare six-piece bedroom suite made from blackwood and exuberantly carved with Australian motifs by master craftsman Robert Prenzel was the star of Leonard Joel's decorative arts auction on Monday.

The suite is one of just five created by Prenzel between 1905 and 1910, all commissioned by prominent members of Victoria's Western District.



A blackwood wardrobe by Robert Prenzel, part of a six-piece suite, sold for \$82,500 (hammer) this week.

The suite consigned to Leonard Joel was commissioned around 1908 by Margaret Laidlaw as a gift for her husband, Thomas Haliburton Laidlaw, a prosperous Western District auctioneer, station agent and pastoralist.

Comprising a chest of drawers, a dressing table, a wash stand, wardrobe, double bed and settle, the suite was installed in the couple's home, "Kilora", in Hamilton, Victoria, where it remained for two generations before being moved to another Laidlaw family property.

The Laidlaw suite is believed to be the last intact suite in private hands. But it is intact no longer, despite one Queensland bidder vying for all the pieces. The bidder succeeded only on the wardrobe, the auction's top lot, which sold for \$82,500 against an estimate of \$50,000 to \$70,000.

The six Prenzel lots sold to four different buyers for a total of \$240,500 (hammer), flying \$76,500 above their total high estimate of \$164,000. Bidding was particularly strong for the wash stand with marble top, which sold for \$50,000 (hammer) against an estimate of \$15,000 to \$20,000.

A combination of factors made the Laidlaw suite appealing to collectors, said Leonard Joel's head of decorative arts, David Parsons.



The Robert Prenzel marble-topped wash stand was particularly sought after. It sold for \$50,000 (hammer).

“It was being offered, intact, from the original family, and is the suite that is richest in Australian motifs,” Parson says. “All of these things came together to make it more special than any of the other suites.”

The Prussian-born Prenzel [<https://www.afr.com/life-and-luxury/arts-and-culture/dealer-clocks-up-last-laugh-in-bidding-war-20001123-k9s2p>] arrived in Melbourne in 1888 and became one of the colony's most important furniture-makers, admired for his

extraordinary Art Nouveau carvings featuring Australian fauna and flora. The Laidlaw suite is a stunning example, flourishing with native animals – cockatoos, rosellas, ibis, kookaburras, sugar gliders, ravens, koalas – as well as flowering wattle, fruiting foliage and eucalyptus saplings.

Parsons says the last comparable part-suite by Prenzel (three bedroom pieces) came to auction in 2011 at Sotheby's Australia, and failed to sell against an estimate of \$30,000 to \$50,000.

The only other known intact bedroom set by Prenzel, the six-piece Mathias suite [<https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/20639/>], created from 1906 to 1907, is in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria.



Robert Clinch's '24 variations on a theme by Paganini', 1991, sold for \$120,000 (hammer), against an estimate of \$25,000 to \$35,000.

Meanwhile, the appetite for the Cbus art collection [<https://www.afr.com/link/follow-20180101-p5b6ve>] shows no signs of abating. The first of three online-only auctions on Tuesday night posted another batch of respectable figures for the super fund. The 71-lot auction of modern and contemporary art made a total of \$779,500 (hammer), with 86 per cent of lots selling, and 122 per cent by value.

Bidding was fiercest for two paintings by contemporary realist painter Robert Clinch, with *24 variations on a theme by Paganini*, 1991, achieving the auction's highest price of \$120,000 (hammer) against an estimate of \$25,000 to \$35,000.

**RELATED****Gary Morgan is selling his collection of Australiana**

<https://www.afr.com/life-and-luxury/arts-and-culture/gary-morgan-is-selling-his-collection-of-australiana-20211126-p59cl4>

**RELATED****Nolan's product of love, lust and loss finally comes to market**

<https://www.afr.com/life-and-luxury/arts-and-culture/nolan-s-product-of-love-lust-and-loss-finally-comes-to-market-20220810-p5b8tp>

The auction's second-highest price was for Clinch's *Silent Protest*, 1991, which sold for \$70,000 against an estimate of \$10,000 to \$15,000.

A small, early Howard Arkley painting of a hyper-coloured, double-fronted suburban house, *Western Suburbs*, 1988, was also much desired, and sold for \$24,000 against an estimate of \$5000 to \$8000.

Bidding opens on Thursday for Cbus' traditional and modern art collection, in the second of three online-only sales.

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.