

COLLECT SPECIAL EDITION



Collect

JAMES COCKINGTON

Rarity has its own rewards

Antiques, art, stamps, coins and even taxidermy are fetching eye-popping amounts at auction.

Recession? What recession? That appears to be the attitude of those in the business of buying and selling Australian antiques, collectables and fine art. If there was a downturn in the industry, it was brief and relatively minor. All the major players have healthy report cards, with results ranging from steady to the occasionally spectacular. The main problem is keeping up the supply of quality merchandise.

The most spectacular event in recent times was the Owston collection, conducted by Bonhams Australia at the end of June. "The sale of the year, perhaps the decade," wrote an auction expert, Peter Fish, in *World of Antiques and Art* magazine.

The auction was so large it had to be held over two days at Sydney's Overseas Passenger Terminal at Circular Quay. Six auctioneers were required to go

through the 1321 lots and only two lots remained unsold at the end of proceedings. The total result was a startling \$13.1 million.

Perhaps the only one not happy was Warren Anderson, the property developer who accumulated the Owston collection, named after his family company, over a lifetime. It was a forced sale through receivers KordaMentha, the result of Anderson's messy

divorce proceedings with wife Cheryl. The 1321 lots included much that is no longer considered fashionable in antiques circles, such as giant bookcases, heavyweight chests of drawers and dining tables large enough to host the Last Supper.

Dealers have been claiming for years that nobody wants these monumental objects in their modern downsized homes. Yet antique English furniture was the big seller over the two days.

Top price was \$300,000 for a set of 12 George II collector's cabinets once owned by Sir Joseph Banks. A Regency mahogany pedestal dining table sold for \$288,000. A George IV library showcase that looks larger than some delivery vans sold for \$192,000.

According to the chief executive of Bonhams, James Hendy, 83 per cent of the winning bids came from Australian buyers.

If furniture surprised, enthusiasm for Anderson's taxidermy and animal artefacts section was even more unexpected. A pair of African bull elephant tusks sold for \$96,000 and a rare rhino horn went for \$90,000, both above estimate. Top result was for the Javan rhinoceros trophy head, which sold for \$108,000.

A second instalment of the Onslow collection will go on sale in November as part of Bonhams spring auction series Moore Park (see cover image).

This auction includes five paintings by Norman Lindsay and nine by convict artist Richard Browne, a pair of 19th-



Top lots . . . Brett Whiteley's *Shao* (above), as sold by Sotheby's; the proof 1930 penny (right) sold by Coinworks; a Kangaroo stamp (left) to be sold by Prestige Philately.

century Russian amethyst cut glass and ormolu vases, a monumental silver centrepiece and a travelling drinking glass formerly the property of Empress Marie Louise, wife of Napoleon I.

And according to Hendy, there will be a lot more taxidermy. Following the success of Anderson's stuffed stuff, several more Australian collectors have decided now is the perfect time to sell. There's even another polar bear.

Sotheby's Australia is also travelling well. Its August 31 sale of Important

Australian Art in Sydney exceeded \$4.72 million, selling 64 per cent by lot and 77 per cent by value.

Top result was for Brett Whiteley's *Shao* (*Rain Slanted by Wind*), which fetched \$696,000, within the estimates of \$600,000 to \$800,000.

Other strong results included Jeffrey Smart's *The Steps* (sold for \$486,000, upper estimate \$350,000), Charles Blackman's *The White Tablecloth* (\$648,000, upper estimate \$750,000) and Sidney Nolan's *Ned Kelly 1957* (\$72,000,



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