

Institutional collectors pluck trophy paintings from a market overshadowed by wealthy private collectors

By Terry Ingram, on 10-Mar-2017

The Australian art market has lost two exemplary works, presumably for good, to the public sector following perceptive intervention in the secondary market by museum collections.

This is never welcome news to dealers as they are unlikely ever to secure a second bite at them. But if private collectors zero in on trophy works, deft funding utilisation is called for if public collections are to grow.

The works are *Meditating on Good Friday* 1961 a triptych, oil on board by Stanislaus Rapotec, 183 x 412 cm and *Ruby Plains Massacre 1*, 1985, natural earth pigments and bush gum on canvas, 90 x 180 cm by Rover Thomas.



The Australian War Memorial has announced the acquisition of 'Ruby Plains Massacre 1', 1985 by Rover Thomas which the AWM said was acquired from 'an auction' but declined to give any more information on the grounds of 'commercial-in-confidence.' However, at **Deutscher and Hackett's sale of Aboriginal Art from the Luczo Family Collection of the USA**, in Melbourne last August a work of this title, and of the same size, made \$365,000 IBP.

The Rapotec was acquired by the Art Gallery of NSW from Melbourne dealer Charles Nodrum who has owned it for 20 years. Nodrum decided to offer the work for sale as the market was finally adjusting to the importance of abstract painting in Sydney in the early 1960s.

Nodrum has cut a previously far from fully rewarding niche in the market for classic abstract art which tended to sell for large discounts compared with figurative art worldwide until the **National Gallery of Australia paid \$1.2 million for Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles*** in 1973 - – and was still mostly on the back burner for most collectors for many years afterwards.

The sale of the Rapotec is believed to have been around \$200,000 and was made with funds from the Gleeson O'Keefe Foundation.

The Rover Thomas relates to the massacres of Aboriginal people that occurred in the eastern Kimberley region in the quarter of a century before his birth. The massacres were the result of conflict between the local peoples and the recently arrived cattle station owners who were striving to settle and farm the area.

The Rover Thomas was **acquired from “an auction” by the Australian War Memorial which declined to give any more information on the grounds of “commercial-in-confidence.”**

The acquisition is hanging in the AWM’s exhibition *For Country For Nation* which is a look at the Aboriginal diggers on the front in WW1.

However, the last auction at which a work of this title, and of the same size, made \$365,000 IBP **at Deutscher and Hackett’s sale of Aboriginal Art from the Luczo Family Collection, USA, in Melbourne last August.**

Asked if the painting was secured with museum acquisition funds, the AWM said, mysteriously, **that this information was covered by the same “commercial-in-confidence” ruling.**

The museum also did not provide a provenance. If it was the Deutscher and Hackett work, it was once held in two good collections, the Luczo and the Janet Holmes a Court collection.

Both the work by Rapotec (1913-97) and that by Thomas (c 1913-1997) are on the large size but easily hung in the McMansions belonging to the band of wealthy **individuals’** economists tell us are increasingly widening the inequality gap in society in their favour. In terms of international values the prices, while records for the artists, are very modest.

Rapotec’s controversial Blake Prize for religious art win, *Meditating on Good Friday* 1961 is therefore the curatorial coup of the two but the AWM’s purchase is more adventurous and culturally significant while being in keeping with the institution’s progressive agenda in art collecting.

The award to the Rapotec work was the first entirely non-figurative work to win the Blake Prize, with some taking offence at the absence of religious iconography.

The award furthered the debate surrounding the place of abstraction in representing ecclesiastical themes, and invigorating the possibilities of representing notions of the religious and a modern sense of spirituality.

That people from extremely wealthy occupations are now buying trophy paintings in Australia was underlined when a hedge fund dealer was last year disclosed as being the buyer of *The Snack Bar* by Edward Badham for \$465,000. This was a war time home front painting that might also have been at home in the AWM.

The AWM of late also came into possession of a Changi document sold at Michael Treloar’s Auctions in Melbourne with a reported bid price of \$20,000.

About the Author

Terry Ingram inaugurated the weekly Saleroom column for the Australian Financial Review in 1969 and continued writing it for nearly 40 years. His scoops include the Whitlam Government’s purchase of Blue Poles in 1973 and repeated fake scandals (from contemporary art to antique silver) and auction finds. He has closely followed the international art, collectors and antique markets to this day. Terry has also written two books on the subjects