

# 'Strange' church offering stands out in smaller Indigenous auction

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The Anglican Diocese of the Northern Territory could be \$120,000 richer when it sells a large painting given to it almost 30 years ago by acclaimed Indigenous artist Ginger Riley Munduwalawala.

The sale of the work, *Christmas at Old Roper River Mission*, 1995-96, was described as "strange" by Beverly Knight, executor of Riley's estate and founding director of Melbourne's well-known Alcaston Gallery where the artist exhibited.

"I was surprised they (the church) were selling it, but who knows why," Ms Knight said. Saleroom reached out to the diocese but no comment was forthcoming by deadline.



Detail from *Christmas at Old Roper River Mission* by colour master Ginger Riley Munduwalawala, lot 12 in Deutscher and Hackett's March 26, 2024 Melbourne auction of Important Australian Indigenous Art.

The Archbishop of Melbourne, Philip Freier, was NT Bishop from 1999 until 2006 and remembers that ball games played in the church hall necessitated the painting being moved into a diocesan meeting room, where it still hung when he left Darwin.

"I know the work well and have many happy memories of looking at that," Archbishop Freier said. He also met Riley on country. "He was a dear old gentleman."

Riley was born around 1937 in the NT's Limmen Bight and died in 2002.

He painted *Christmas at Old Roper River Mission* under commission from the diocese in the mid 1990s, when Richard Appleby was NT bishop.

The diocese was keen to increase awareness of Indigenous people and culture among the wider congregation of Christ Church Cathedral in Darwin, according to the catalogue for Deutscher and Hackett's March 26 auction in Melbourne.

Ms Knight was involved in the commission from the start, and it was she who flew in a single-engine plane to Riley's remote outstation of Wamangu, slightly inland from the Gulf of Carpentaria in the Northern Territory, to collect the painting when it was finished.

The painting, measuring a large 129 centimetres x 257.5 centimetres, would have quickly succumbed to white ants had it been left at Wamangu, Ms Knight said.

She added that, because of his fondness for the church, Riley didn't wish to be paid for *Christmas at Old Roper River Mission*. "He wanted them (the church) to have it," she said.

While Riley remained emphatically a traditional Marra man, he did absorb the church's teachings.

His beliefs on spirituality, whether Indigenous or western, were "very basic and pure", Ms Knight said. "It was about being good."

*Christmas at Old Roper River Mission* depicts the contrasting ways of life that ran side by side at the former mission, known since 1968 as Ngukurr.

At the bottom right of the canvas, a small church shelters 12 Indigenous people and bathes them in a scattering of celestial light.

Outside the church, 12 Indigenous people sit on the ground, overshadowed by Riley's customary totems – Ngak Ngak, the sentinel sea eagle, and the land formation known as the Four Archers, where he believed creation had begun.

The pre-sale estimate on *Christmas at Old Roper River Mission* is \$80,000 to \$120,000, according to the catalogue for the sale, Important Australian Indigenous Art.

The highest estimate in the Deutscher and Hackett sale (\$150,000 to \$250,000) is carried by Emily Kame Ngwarreye's *Untitled (Endunga)*, 1990.



Detail from Emily Kame Kngwarreye's *Untitled (Endunga)*, 1990, the "cover lot" in Deutscher and Hackett's March 26, 2024 Melbourne auction.

D+H head of Aboriginal art, Crispin Gutteridge, said *Untitled (Endunga)* was among a relatively small group of early Kngwarreye paintings that were closely related to the artist's preceding batik works.

"It's a very attractive painting, but importantly it's that next stage of her production moving on from the batiks into the canvases," Mr Gutteridge said.

Almost none of the works in the D+H sale have been to auction before, making them especially attractive to collectors who tend to like works "fresh to market".

Several of the works include the well-known collection of American collector Richard Kelton as part of their provenance.

Mr Gutteridge said Indigenous art was "a growing market" with continuing local and overseas interest that he expected to see expressed on auction night.

D+H holds one dedicated Indigenous art auction a year.

Its 2023 Indigenous sale carried a pre-sale estimate of \$1.58 million to \$2.25 million.

The final result, including 25 per cent buyer's premium, was just over \$3.32 million. There were 73 lots.



This year's sale is slightly smaller with 66 lots and estimates of \$1.465 million to \$2.093 million.

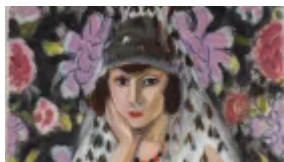


Tethered pony, by French painter Rosa Bonheur (1822-1899).

Turning to Leonard Joel's March 19 auction of fine art, it contains two irresistible horse paintings by the celebrated French artist Rosa Bonheur (1822-1899).

One of them is Bonheur's *Tethered pony*, which fetched £22,100 at Christie's in London in 2008. Now, Leonard Joel has applied a significantly lower estimate of \$18,000 to \$22,000 to the painting.

As everyone knows, it's risky to bet on horses – even ones painted by a prodigious talent like Bonheur.



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