

Saleroom

Canada's art market undergoes a revival

Canadians are once again teaching Australians how to pay for their heritage, reports **Terry Ingram** from Toronto.

Reports that the cranes — of the construction rather than the flying variety — are returning to Montreal is having a curiously oblique fallout for Australiana.

They had become extinct, as money, worried by talk of provincial separation, fled to Toronto.

Montreal is not a Shanghai in the 1980s or an east Berlin in the 1990s, with soaring new blocks of offices and apartments calling for new art "wallpaper" delivered by flash new galleries.

Canada's federal election on June 26 gave new power to the Quebec block as a minority party that could unsettle government.

But the confidence resulting from the diminished separatist issue — and seen in many new construction projects — coupled with a strong national economy, is partly helping fuel a revival in the Canadian art market, according to David Silcox, who heads Sotheby's Canada.

Australians looking for comfort about the values they attach to Australian art and antiques from another parallel colonial culture can now console themselves with the high prices for Canadiana.

These prices had been unattainable since the 1960s and 1970s when Canada pioneered legislation and support for the arts, such as a movable heritage protection act and the launch of the Canada Council. These developments were the inspiration for similar institutions in Australia.

The top price for a Canadian

painting now comfortably exceeds that for an Australian painting, and in a competitive and increasingly proactive auction industry, sales totals are creeping up to match those grossed by Australian art sales. That is as much as \$C6 million (\$6.25 million) each.

Toronto is revitalising its art and heritage institutions with massive capital projects for the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Royal Ontario Museum — as well as its performing arts by building a new opera house.

The ROM — which the former director of Sydney's Powerhouse Museum, Lindsay Sharp, directed controversially in the 1990s — is close to completing the raising of \$C200 million for a redevelopment that should provide a more respectable home for its holdings of Canadiana — as well as its stuffed crocodiles. The AGO is spending \$C500 million on a building designed by art museum builder Frank Gehry.

An aggressive Vancouver-based auction house, Heffels, has bought a new building in Montreal and has

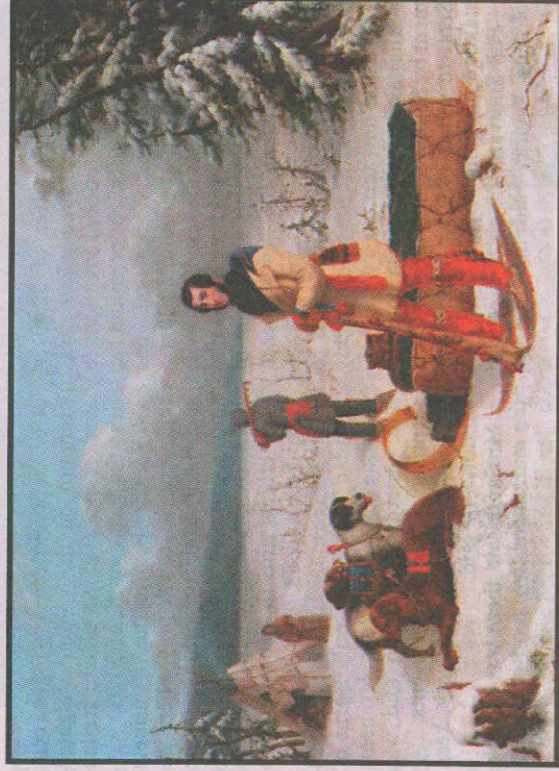
Paul Kane's paintings opened the door to 19th century Canadian history.

launched seemingly prosperous online auctions of lower-priced material to support its major art sales. "The biggest city in French-speaking Canada is where the paintings are," says David Heffel of the Vancouver auction firm.

The first auctions held by the multinationals in Canada were by Christie's in Montreal in the 1970s. The firm now maintains an office in Toronto and holds no Canadian sales.

Two of the biggest auction houses, Sotheby's Canada and Joyners, have launched alliances with local firms Ritchie's and old established Waddingtons (the "Sydney Lawsons" of Toronto) respectively; and Sotheby's, under the leadership of art historian, former arts administrator and arts networker Silcox has returned to leadership of the market with tight \$C6 million Canadian art sales.

Arts coverage has even improved, with James Addams at Toronto's *Globe and Mail* covering art sales with an insight previously unknown.



Paul Kane's *Scene in the Northwest* — *Portrait*, oil on canvas, sold for \$C5,062,500 by Ritchie's in Toronto to Ken Thomson in 2002, made more than double the top price for any Australian painting at auction, a work by Frederick McCubbin.

Painting 150 years ago, Kane opened the door to 19th century Canadian and North American history and its Aboriginal foundations.

The painting would appeal to Australian buyers of the last boom when J.A. Turner, J.H. Carse and J.W. Curtis were fetching big money, and to New Zealanders, as there is a bit of "Goldie" in it.

The Canadian resale market is very different from Australia's in not being highly modern and very definitely not contemporary.

"I look at the auction crowd and usually there are only two or three serious parties for recent material," says Silcox, "and that is even when there are some very desirable items."

While the Australian art market is based largely on 20 modern and contemporary artists, the Canadian market, according to Don Lake, a Toronto antiquarian bookseller, is the Group of Seven.

In 1920, after a trip to Algoma, seven artists, who for several years had shared "a like vision" concerning art in Canada, represented a belief that Canadian art must be truly inspired by Canada itself.

They were a later, post-Impressionist equivalent for Australia's Heidelberg School.

Another reason for the lack of interest in the modern, however, may be that the loft apartment living that has given contemporary art a lift in Australia and the US appears less pronounced in Canada. Toronto is a city of old townhouses and new apartment blocks — and possibly the decorators have less clout.

The Canadian art market is also more international. New York, with its big international dealers and

museums filled with the world's greatest art treasures, is a short flight away from several of Canada's leading population centres. So there are fewer queries as to why seemingly major international art works are offered there, unlike Australia.

There are also places like the Metropolitan Art Museum, where visiting Canadians can compare their New York purchases.

But art buffs like David Melvish, the theatrical entrepreneur, and the Tannenbaums, who are helping fund the new AGO building, feature among the world's top 200 collectors of contemporary and modern art.

At a lower level, this market has been shaken by a valuation controversy involving admittedly mostly low-priced multiples, such as prints, as a result of which many valuers and donors lost out in the courts to Revenue Canada.

The strong present Canadian art market is being made partly by (Lord) Ken Thomson who owns a chunk of the *Globe and Mail*, Toronto's major morning newspaper, and Paul Desmaires, of the big utility company Power Corporation, which has interests in Australia. Thomson bought the Kane and is presenting it to the AGO.

This means that, given that Desmaires' holdings are largely held in the corporate vehicle, Australian money is helping set the boundaries for Canadian art.

Lake suggests that Canada, with its larger population, has more super-rich people than Australia, so the disparity between the most and less desirable material is much bigger.

There is more Australian money for the middle range. The Canadian market is a quarter of the size of the Australian market with Sotheby's at \$C11 million, Joyners at \$C9.6 million and Heffels at \$C17.23 million.

Prices: thanks for the memory

Many new buyers and leading operators in the Australian art market are stymied by their lack of memory.

They don't have the benefit of experience of the last big Australian art boom in the 1980s and, perhaps more importantly, its aftermath. They find it hard to appreciate the prices that traditional and early modern art fetched at that time and that what goes up can also come down.

This was clear when Christie's Australia last month announced — but later withdrew — the claim

that its sale of a work by the modernist Margaret Preston for \$118,000 was an auction record. It had, after all, checked the price with Australian Art Sales Digest.

But John Furphy's very useful website and hard-cover annual AASD publications on art prices go back only to the early 1990s.

For a \$120 annual subscription to Edward Craig's www.artrecord.com, a search of an artist's saleroom history will bring up a biography and pages of the artist's prices covering the two great art booms and stretching

back to 1974. The record for Preston comes up as \$340,000 paid in 1989 — one of 383 prices recorded.

Craig is one of the saleroom's great survivors. His records include many works sold at his own Sydney auctions.

These have always included a high percentage of works by David Boyd and Hugh Sawrey, which, coincidentally, have become hot on the market at recent sales.

Terry Ingram

Turning tables on Venice selectors

Stelarc (a performance artist whose work extends the concept of the body and its relationship with technology), photographer Tracey Moffatt and Robert MacPherson (who hangs paint brushes) were leading contenders for selection as Australia's representative for the Venice Biennale last year.

Moffatt was reportedly not interested, but none made the short list because there was — unusually and possibly unprecedented — no short list.

There were 76 expressions of interest received but the selection panel agreed that only one application was outstanding.

That was Ricky Swallow's, and it is expected to include the table reported to have been bought by the Art Gallery of NSW for about \$200,000 (Oddlots, April 22).

The table is carved with plates of lobster, mussel, bream, snapper and other fish.

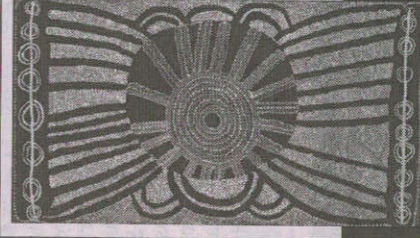
Swallow's work relates to Britain's Gavin Turk (simulated

garbage bags) and Australia's Ron Mueck, whose work has made big impacts on previous biennales, albeit not as national representatives.

It also relates to Australia's last national exhibitor, Patricia Piccinni, in being "representational" sculpture.

Swallow's ties to the Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York and exhibitions in his favourite city, Los Angeles, have already made him an international commodity.

Terry Ingram



Aboriginal Art

On View

Sydney - Highlights Sotheby's - 118-122 Queen Street, Woollahra Friday 16 - Sunday 18 July 2004, 11am to 6pm

Melbourne Sotheby's - 926 High Street, Armadale Friday 23 - Sunday 25 July 2004, 11am to 6pm

Auction Melbourne Monday 26 - Tuesday 27 July 2004, 6.30pm

For catalogues and enquiries, please contact

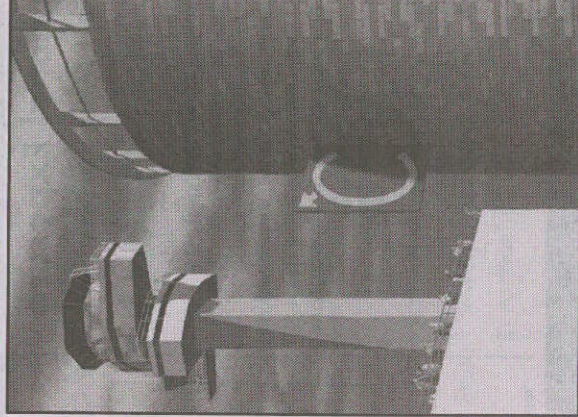
Sydney 02 9362 1000 Melbourne 03 9509 2900

Charlie Taranu *Tjunguravi, The Trial 1972, 76 by 49.5 cm*

Auction estimates: AUD\$70,000-100,000

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