

For the Third and...



Lee Suckling grabs a hammer and learns the tricks of the saleroom with Roger McIlroy, known as Australia's most popular art auctioneer

Not many men can say they can work a room like Roger Mclroy can.

Raised in Palm Beach, Mclroy's interest in art began at his North Sydney school with his art teacher.

"I told him I might want to be a graphic artist," says Mclroy, noting that he had also shown interest in the commercial side of the art world. His teacher candidly relayed to Mclroy, "You will never be a great artist yourself, but you should look into the business of handling other people's art".

A quick year studying art history at UNSW followed a stint with James R. Lawson, Sydney as a porter, where eventually he worked his way up to running the 'junk auctions' and fearing he'd lose his voice with all the enthusiastic effort involved.

In 1977 Mclroy moved to London, and began what would be a 29-year long career with a world-renowned auction house, Christie's.

"The auction scene in London in the late 1970s was very different than today," Mclroy proclaims. "It's was a trader's place; 70 per cent of buyers were in the trade themselves – art or antique dealers. Not much care or diligence was placed with each auction, it was a simple 'sell and move to the next' arena."

Over the course of the 1980s (and through to today) burgeoned the trend of the private buyer. Mclroy now estimates only 30 per cent of buyers to be from the trade. "The private buyer's presence in the auction house completely changed the way things were done," he says, noting how he came in to his own with the hammer. "The saleroom became a theatre."

Mclroy's father always told him he went into auctioneering because he liked the sound of his own voice. "It's like being in a one-man play, only with somewhat boring lines," Mclroy explains. "It's seductive; the people, the atmosphere, the art, the money. Being up there and running it all is definitely quite intoxicating."

A combination of attributes makes a great auctioneer, Mclroy points out. "One needs a real interest in what one is selling, and a real interest in the people one is selling to – and their desires.

"It's all about helping these people get what they want while making sure the vendor gets the best price."

Bad auctioneers, on the other hand, "have no interest in the bids and simply want to get to the reserve and move on", Mclroy comments. "They're not looking for opportunities, and they're not reading the audience."

Picking up on the body language of the potential bidders is a skill Mclroy has developed over his three decade-strong career behind the stand. "Most people in the room are only interested in one lot, and as it comes up, you can watch their body language change immediately, and gauge their interest," he says.

An auctioneer's job is to play on people's competitiveness, Mclroy confirms. "You have to watch the room to see who's interested, and let each know who they're up against. You need to get a feel for who is a participant, and who is not.

"You then exercise their emotions as much as you can to get the bids higher. You let each bidder feel like the bid is something physical, something they can grab."

Whilst working the hammer in London throughout the 1980s, Mclroy developed a niche. "I had to specialise in something," he says. "One of my early influencers George Dowling, an antique dealer on the North Shore, was particularly fond of ceramics and I always thought those incredibly interesting," he continues.

"Continental ceramics became my speciality, largely those from Hong Kong and Continental Europe circa 1400-1820."

Mclroy established himself as quite the authority on the subject, writing two books on ceramics and "making lots of fabulous sales", he says, understating the value of his auctions - which often amassed millions of pounds. He was made Director of Christie's London and also had a stint as Managing Director of Christie's Scotland, which was a "nice change, as the primary source of revenue up there was brilliant, colour paintings". He later returned to the London branch and held the role of Chief Executive.

Mclroy's self-confirmed career peak in ceramics was in 1987, with the sale of 17 pieces of Meissen porcelain from 1723, discovered in a Copenhagen bank vault. He continued in the Chief Executive role until 1989.

It was then Mclroy was asked to herald a brand new division of Christie's; this time Down Under. "And so Christie's Australia was born," he says. "We had to decide where to establish the new branch, I would have preferred Sydney but because Sotheby's was already well-established there, we decided on Melbourne.

"In retrospect, we made a smart decision. We got to the underbelly of Australian art culture, and art does fit very naturally with Melbourne. Perhaps it's all the indoor living; it's all very cohesive."

Christie's Australia had "one really good year; 1990", Mclroy confirms, before the market began to hurt in 1991. "It was a fabulous year,

though; we managed to half Sotheby's turnover."

The Australian company ploughed on throughout the 1990s, enjoying several accolades such as attaining the highest price for a car sold at auction in Australia (a Ferrari) and putting Ned Kelly's armour up for sale.

In the early 2000s, as the rest of the art world was "on fire", particularly with emerging markets such as China and Dubai, Australia was looking "fairly pedestrian" in comparison, Mclroy acknowledges, and Christie's decided to call it quits. "We weren't selling many Gucci handbags in Australia in contrast with what was going on in the rest of the world," he quips, "so head office pulled the plug on Christie's; it wasn't seen as a forerunner in luxury at that time.

"They were still making \$1.5 to \$2 million in profit but compared to the international houses, that wasn't enough."

Since then, Mclroy has been dealing in private art at the top end of the market, both as a dealer under his own name and as a partner at Nevill Keating Mclroy Limited.

While sales aren't quite as big as they were a decade ago, the art industry in Australia is still healthy at the top end, as "even in the worst of times, there's always someone doing really well.

"Collectors will always go for the best, even when times are tough."

Earlier in 2012, Mclroy decided it was time to go back to his true passion. "I missed the theatre and the life of the auction house," he explains. "It started to seem a shame that I wasn't utilising my core skill anymore."

Melbourne-based auction house Deutscher and Hackett got Mclroy on the right day at the right time and he was offered the role of Head Auctioneer. He completed his first auction for the firm in April.

"It's nice to be doing just the job I've been appointed for; I'm there to add the percentages to the outcome and get the best price for each piece," he says with glee. "I'm not on the board, I'm not management, I'm purely the auctioneer and that's what I love doing." ■

