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Robert Dickerson's 'Lost' Masterpiece Repatriated by Sotheby's Australia



Robert Dickerson, born 1928, *The Bottle* (1954). Estimate \$80,000-100,000

One of Robert Dickerson's early masterpieces has been re-discovered in a private collection in New Zealand and has returned to Australia after an absence of almost 60 years. **With great excitement the artist will inspect this work for the first time since it was sold all those years ago on Wednesday 20 August at 9.30am.** *The Bottle* (1954) depicts Trafalgar Street, Annandale, the Sydney working-class suburb where Dickerson grew up and where he was living when he gave up labouring for painting. The large-scale composition depicts a jumble of multistorey buildings that cast ominous shadows in a street empty save the presence a barefoot little girl carrying a big beer bottle. The painting will be offered for sale by Sotheby's Australia in Sydney on 26 August 2014 as part of the Important Australian & International Art sale.

The snapshot vision of a child running an errand was based on direct experiences. In late 1953 Dickerson wrote to his Melbourne patron John Reed ‘The street I live in ... is full of poetry,’ and several months later described the origins of the present work: ‘I have just spent Sunday wandering around the streets on a bleak dull day; it is strange how lonely they are. One street in particular empty but for a tiny child with an empty bottle nearly as big as herself wandering along the road.’

The image evidently made a great impression on the artist, and generated two paintings: the present work and *The Wall* (1953, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney). Both pictures demonstrate Dickerson’s poetic-social-realist methodology, in which ‘a visual experience ... goes into my mind and emerges, maybe months or years later, perhaps as an entirely different thing.’ Here, the strangeness of the thing seen, and the pathos, the abjection, the possible tragedy of the story behind the motif, give the work a particular, haunting power.

Given to John and Sunday Reed by the artist, *The Bottle* was last exhibited at the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Melbourne in 1956. It was subsequently acquired and taken to New Zealand, where it has been held ever since. Its repatriation and sale provides a rare opportunity to acquire a distinctive early piece of Dickerson’s ‘idiosyncratic and alarming world.’

‘Robert Dickerson’s *The Bottle* is the most important painting by the artist ever to appear at auction,’ said Geoffrey Smith, Chairman of Sotheby’s Australia. ‘It certainly has the potential to achieve a new world auction record for the artist, who having recently celebrated his 90th birthday, remains one of Australia’s most significant and acclaimed artists.’

AT A GLANCE

ROBERT DICKERSON, BORN 1928

The Bottle (1954)

enamel paint on composition board

136.5 x 152 cm

Estimate \$80,000-100,000

Important Australian & International Art
Auction in Sydney 26 August 2014

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