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The Hunt Returns: Sidney Nolan's Australian Masterpiece Comes Home

Sidney Nolan – *The Emu Hunt* 1949 for auction

Important Australian Art, Auction in Sydney, 25 August 2015



SIDNEY NOLAN 1917-1992, *The Emu Hunt* 1949. Estimate \$600,000-800,000

Never previously exhibited in Australia, *The Emu Hunt* makes its debut at Sotheby's Australia with an auction estimate of \$600,000-800,000. Almost seventy years after it was created, and over sixty years since it left Australia, Sidney Nolan's iconic *The Emu Hunt* 1949 returns home to be auctioned on 25 August 2015 at the InterContinental Sydney.

Geoffrey Smith, Chairman of Sotheby's Australia commented: 'The painting exemplifies Nolan's ability to combine the past with the present and the mythic with the everyday. In works such as *The Emu Hunt* and the earlier Ned Kelly series, Nolan changed the course of Australian painting and became Australia's most successful and revered artist.'

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The Emu Hunt is one of Sidney Nolan's most remarkable compositions. Created soon after his most famous series of the Australian outlaw Ned Kelly, *The Emu Hunt* was inspired by his nomadic wanderings through central and northern Queensland. During these expeditions Nolan discovered new landscapes and felt the wonderment of an explorer. In Brisbane's John Oxley Library, Nolan researched Australian history, where his fascination extended beyond the narrative of Ned Kelly, to include Burke and Wills, Eliza Fraser and, in particular, the complex encounters between white Europeans and Indigenous Australians. It was Nolan's paintings of Queensland outback subjects launched his national and international reputation.

When Nolan's exhibition of Queensland subjects opened in March 1949 at the David Jones' Art Gallery, the feeling that an Australian artist had created something truly remarkable was palpable. 'Amazing Impact by Australian artist' was the headline of the *Sydney Sun*, and its reviewer Harry Tatlock Miller enthused:

'Sidney Nolan tells us of Australia as no other artist has done before him, and entirely after his own fashion. His first exhibition of Queensland outback paintings makes an amazing impact and leaves an indelible impression. They fill the David Jones art gallery ... with a sense of vast space – still, silent and everlasting. Time itself is arrested. A strange bird stands poised in the pink sky. A convict, escaping into desolation, pauses, listens. An old man sits in the sun. These pictures remain in the mind, persistently flavoring the following hours, as a night's dream will haunt and colour the ordinary day. I can remember no other exhibition by a contemporary Australian which, with such seemingly disarming innocence of eye and hand, reveals so much individuality of vision. He gives us the sensation of seeing and knowing our own country, both its landscape and its legend, for the first time.' (1)

Cynthia Nolan also recorded the public's response to the exhibition in detail:

'I never felt an atmosphere like this at an opening. Excitement. Quite a crowd and in spite of the rain that has been going on like any old thing for a week. To our stunned amazement the Sydney gallery bought two paintings right off. Others followed ... Because there is an average of 600 people a day and out of them at least 550 are breathlessly excited, there's quite a hum about the place, and no one has told them that these are paintings they should like ... Old ladies from central Queensland carrying their string bags come up with tears in their eyes and say it's so true, it's so real. Continentals say it's the first painting they've seen since they came to Australia and press forward to wring Sidney's hand. Students came and sit and gaze. Rich collectors say if you want to make money buy the whole show and sit on it.' (2)

Three days prior to the show's opening and therefore too late for its inclusion, Nolan commenced *The Emu Hunt*. The painting was then given to his daughter Jinx Nolan, who lent the painting on two occasions for international survey exhibitions of Nolan's work in 1957 and in 1961.

In 2010, Sidney Nolan's *First-class Marksman* achieved the world record for an Australian painting at auction selling for \$5.4 million.

(1) Harry Tatlock Miller, 'Amazing Impact by Australian Artist', *The Sun*, Sydney, 8 March 1949, p. 8

(2) Letter, Cynthia Nolan to Margaret Reed, postmarked 21 March 1949, in Geoffrey Smith, *Sidney Nolan: Desert and Drought*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 2003, p. 15

AT A GLANCE

SIDNEY NOLAN 1917-1949

The Emu Hunt 1949

enamel paint on composition board

91.1 x 121.4 cm

Estimate \$600,000-800,000

Important Australian Art

Auction at InterContinental Sydney, 117 Macquarie Street, Sydney, 25 August 2015, 6.30 pm

Exhibition in Melbourne, 41 Exhibition Street, Melbourne, 13-16 August, 10 am to 5 pm

Exhibition in Sydney, 30 Queen Street, Woollahra, 20-25 August, 10 am to 5 pm

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