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# On the Beach: Early Masterpiece by Australia's Original Impressionist Emerges for Auction

Important Australian Art, Auction in Sydney, 25 August 2015



JOHN RUSSELL 1858-1930, *Ariadne* 1883. Estimate \$600,000-800,000

A painting by Australia's original Impressionist will be offered for auction by Sotheby's Australia on 25 August at the InterContinental Sydney. *Ariadne* was painted in 1883, a year after Russell's return from London's Slade School of Art. While the Naturalism of the Heidelberg School of painters has been recently redesignated 'Australian Impressionism', in strict art-historical and technical terms, there is only one Australian Impressionist painter, John Russell.

Geoffrey Smith, Chairman of Sotheby's Australia commented: 'Confidante of Vincent van Gogh and friend of Claude Monet, John Russell became Australia's most internationally accomplished contemporary artist. *Ariadne* 1883 is the artist's most ambitious and celebrated formative subject, bearing the hallmarks of the Neo-classical ideal of the late nineteenth century and the influence of Frederic Leighton, one of its most renowned exponents. With *Ariadne*, Russell's audacious subject and strident palette proved contentious to less progressive Australian audiences when initially shown.'

*Ariadne* was first exhibited at the Art Society of New South Wales in March 1883. For many years the painting was known as *A Balneatrix* (which was also included in the exhibition), however was more recently identified by Paula Dredge and Ann Galbally as *Ariadne*. At the time *The Sydney Morning Herald* described the work as 'crude' and 'unfinished'. Russell's earlier experiences in

Europe provided him with an avant-garde vision that was at odds with Australia's more conservative and parochial preferences.

Ariadne was the daughter of King Minos of Crete. Every nine years a tribute of fourteen young Athenians was brought to Crete to be sacrificed to the Minotaur, a beast that was kept in a labyrinth. When Theseus arrived in Crete as part of this group, Ariadne fell in love with him and offered assistance if he promised to take her away with him. Ariadne provided a ball of golden thread, which unwound as Theseus penetrated the maze. After slaying the Minotaur, Theseus fulfilled his promise and took Ariadne with him, only to leave her abandoned on a neighbouring island, Naxos.

In this work, Ariadne is depicted solitary, recumbent on the sandy foreshore, swathed in drapery and propped against animal skins. Ann Galbally has noted, 'The cheetah skin is traditionally associated with the classical god Bacchus. It was he who rescued Ariadne from her exile.'

After *Ariadne* was exhibited, Russell departed Sydney for England in May 1883 and was not to return for forty years. He was to become a friend and colleague of Vincent Van Gogh, whose portrait Russell painted, an admirer and associate of Claude Monet and Auguste Rodin, as well as a mentor to the young Henri Matisse. Russell formed an integral part of the milieu of progressive painting practice in the 1880s and 1890s.

The original owner of *Ariadne* was Edward Combes, engineer, politician, pastoralist and artist who was a family friend and early mentor of John Russell. Combes was appointed as one of the first trustees of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Russell included a portrait of Combes alongside *Ariadne* in the Art Society of New South Wales exhibition. *Ariadne* is Russell's largest composition and has remained in a private Melbourne collection since 1973.

## AT A GLANCE

JOHN RUSSELL 1858-1930

*Ariadne* 1883

oil on canvas on board

109.5 x 292.3 cm

Estimate \$600,000-800,000

Important Australian Art

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

Total auction estimate \$5,865,500-8,167,500 | 116 lots

Exhibition in Melbourne, 41 Exhibition Street, Melbourne, 14-16 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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