

# Smith&Singer

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## MASTERPIECE OF AUSTRALIAN IMPRESSIONISM TO MAKE AUCTION DEBUT AT SMITH & SINGER

*Frederick McCubbin's Rare and Evocative Depiction of the Australian Bush  
Presented for Public Sale for the First Time in More Than a Century  
Offered from the Renowned Collection of the Late Mr Graham Joel,  
Doyenne of the Australian Art World*



FREDERICK MCCUBBIN 1855-1917

**What the Little Girl Saw in the Bush** 1904

oil on canvas, 96.5 x 66 cm

Estimate \$1,200,000–1,600,000

**MELBOURNE, 5 March 2021** – Frederick McCubbin's *What the Little Girl Saw in the Bush* 1904 – long considered one of the artist's masterpieces and most highly original Australian subjects – emerges for public sale at Smith & Singer for the first time in more than one hundred years. A key work in McCubbin's *oeuvre*, the painting provides a definitive example of the artist's subtle synthesis of the European masters with the distinctive character of the Australian experience and the Antipodean light, together with the poetry and spirituality, he found in the landscape he cherished. Following almost 60 years in the revered collection of Mr Graham Joel, Smith & Singer are honoured to present this masterpiece at auction in Sydney this April.

## FROM A TRAGEDY THAT CAPTURED AUSTRALIA'S IMAGINATION TO THE WALLS OF THE NGV

Commencing in 1886, McCubbin produced a sequence of dramatic scenes showing isolated children enveloped within the endless and fearful monotony of the Australian bush. Each child assumes the archetypal symbol for vulnerability and anxiety, as they remain paralysed in their claustrophobic state. The first of these, *Lost* (1886, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne), is considered McCubbin's 'first great painting' (1). Its subject – the distressing account of the three Duff children rescued after nine days in the bush in 1864 – had by this time become an established literary and artistic tradition in Australia having been depicted by Nicholas Chevalier, S.T. Gill, and William Strutt, and further immortalised in verse and in the theatre in the following years.



FREDERICK MCCUBBIN 1855-1917

**Lost** 1907

oil on canvas, 134.6 x 199 cm

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Felton Bequest, 1941

By the turn of the century, and with the advent of Australian Federation, the subject of the lost child assumed proportions of national legend within popular culture and, in 1901, following the purchase of the property *Fontainebleau*, on the slopes of Mount Macedon, McCubbin immersed himself in the surrounding landscape and returned to the theme of children in the bush. Between 1904 and 1907 the artist executed three remarkable compositions, *What the Little Girl Saw in the Bush* (1904, the present work), *Childhood Fancies* (1905, Private Collection), and *Lost* (1907, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne), that allowed him to extend his deep connection to the Australian landscape and explore his reverence for the spirit of the bush.

Seen together, these paintings form an extraordinary trifecta in their exploration of the complex and various emotions engendered by place and country.

## CELEBRATED HISTORY OF EXHIBITION & LITERATURE

From its creation in 1904, *What the Little Girl Saw in the Bush* has been featured in numerous publications and exhibitions. It was first mentioned in *The Age*, *The Argus* and *The Leader*, when it made its public debut and subsequently featured in a series of high-profile publications, including *The Art of Frederick McCubbin* by James MacDonald, Ann Galbally's *Frederick McCubbin*, *City Bushman: The Heidelberg School and the Rural Mythology* by Leigh Astbury, *Frederick McCubbin 1855-1917: 'The Proff' and His Art* by Andrew Mackenzie, Bridget Whitelaw's *The Art of Frederick McCubbin* for the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, the Art Gallery of South Australia's *Our Country: Australian Federation*

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*Landscapes 1900-1914* by Ron Radford, *McCubbin: Last Impressions 1907-17* by Anne Gray for the National Gallery of Australia, and more recently Geoffrey Smith and David Hansen's *A Distinguished Private Collection of Australian Art*, Sotheby's Australia (now trading as Smith & Singer), Melbourne, in 2013.

Equally as impressive are the exhibitions and institutions in which it has been featured. *What the Little Girl Saw in the Bush* was included the first and most comprehensive solo exhibition of McCubbin's career and hung alongside his greatest masterpiece, *The Pioneer* (1904, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne). Comprising thirty subjects, *Mr. Fred McCubbin's Exhibition of Paintings* opened at the Athenaeum Upper Hall in Collins Street, Melbourne, on 22 April 1904. Since that time, it has been exhibited in at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, Bendigo Art Gallery, Bendigo, and within *A Distinguished Private Collection of Australian Art*, at Sotheby's Australia (now trading as Smith & Singer) in 2013, amongst others.

## A PROVENANCE AS INTRIGUING AS IT IS REVERED

Until now, the early provenance of the present work remained obscure. However, from a contemporary newspaper reference, Smith & Singer can reveal that the painting was acquired from McCubbin's exhibition in 1904:

'There are several delightful landscapes, and one charming little idyll entitled "What the Little Girl Saw in the Bush." It's a picture to make you feel young, again, and somebody has certainly shown wisdom by placing it among the pictures already sold.' (2)

Recent research has also suggested that *What the Little Girl Saw in the Bush* was subsequently in the collection of Sidney Dark, proprietor of Decoration Company Galleries, in Melbourne. For the past sixty years, the painting has resided in the distinguished collection of Graham Joel. Doyenne of the Australian art world, his dry sense of humour and assiduous stewardship of the company his father established – Leonard Joel – had a significant effect on the development of the Australian art market. The late Graham Joel's remarkable collection spans over several generations of his family, and the present work by McCubbin demonstrates an exceptional eye for quality and provenance. The painting formed a cornerstone of The Graham Joel Collection and was included in numerous major exhibitions and publications during his ownership.

*Geoffrey Smith, Chairman of Smith & Singer commented: 'We are particularly honoured to offer What the Little Girl Saw in the Bush at auction this April. Presented for public sale for the first time in more than a century, it is a composition that extols the finest qualities of one of the nation's most revered and beloved Australian Impressionists, Frederick McCubbin, whose refined, sensitive, and luminous compositions continue to challenge, enthrall and inspire. Furthermore, to be entrusted with this inimitable work from the collection of the late, great, Graham Joel, is a particular pleasure. A leader in our industry and a personal and professional mentor, I look forward to honouring his renowned discernment and experience when we welcome members of the public to our galleries in Melbourne and Sydney this April.'*



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## EXCEPTIONAL RESULTS FOR FREDERICK MCCUBBIN AT SMITH & SINGER



FREDERICK MCCUBBIN 1855-1917

### **The Bathers** 1906

oil on canvas, 51 x 76.5 cm

Private Collection

Sold Smith & Singer, 24 June 2020 for \$441,818



FREDERICK MCCUBBIN 1855-1917

### **An Old Politician** 1879

oil on paper on board, 53.7 x 38.3 cm

Private Collection

Sold Sotheby's Australia (now trading as Smith & Singer), 27 August 2019

for \$585,600



FREDERICK MCCUBBIN 1855-1917

### **Whisperings in Wattle Boughs** 1886

oil on canvas, 25.5 x 46.7 cm

Private Collection

Sold Sotheby's Australia (now trading as Smith & Singer),

8 May 2012 for \$1,200,000

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(1) Bridget Whitelaw, *The Art of Frederick McCubbin*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1991, p. 40  
(2) 'Social Circle', *The Leader*, Melbourne, 14 May 1904, p. 37

## AT A GLANCE

FREDERICK MCCUBBIN 1855-1917

*What the Little Girl Saw in the Bush* 1904

oil on canvas

96.5 x 66 cm

Estimate \$1,200,000–1,600,000

Important Australian & International Art

Auction, Sydney, 20 April 2021, 6.30 pm

National Council of Jewish Women of Australia, 111 Queen Street, Woollahra NSW 2025

**The health of our clients, employees and community is of paramount importance. We have implemented stringent protocols within our premises, including social distancing, frequent hand and area sanitising, and a maximum number of clients in each exhibition at any time. Full details are available upon request.**

**Viewings in Melbourne** 7-11 April 2021, 10 am to 5 pm

14-16 Collins Street, Melbourne

**Viewings in Sydney** 14-20 April, 10 am to 5 pm

30 Queen Street, Woollahra

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