

# a mania for collecting

In late February part of an unrivalled private collection of rare Australian books and manuscripts went under the hammer in a Melbourne hotel. The sale was the second of four planned for a collection that was painstakingly compiled over more than fifty-five years by the bibliophile Rodney Davidson.

The auction – arguably the most important book sale in this country for decades – appealed for its historical interest and to those who simply like beautiful things. Many of the books were historical rarities and works of art. Take Joseph Lycett's illustrations of New South Wales in the age of the enigmatic Lachlan Macquarie. Published in 1825, *Views in Australia Et...* is a beautiful, desirable work. It would make a collector of anyone, even those who have never bought a book for more than \$24.99.

Lycett was a skilled portraitist and miniaturist and, luckily for Australian art, a forger. He was also a recidivist – a year or so after he was transported to New South Wales, Lycett found himself again on the wrong side of the law. Sent to Newcastle for secondary punishment, the convict artist benefited from the friendship and patronage of the commandant James Wallis, winning a conditional pardon in 1819. Two years later, Lycett was granted an absolute pardon by Macquarie and returned to England to finish his volume.

The Lycett book is beautiful and an historical treasure. But for its sheer fascination, historical interest and monetary value, the first unpublished printing of William Hovell and Hamilton Hume's *Journey of Discovery to Port Phillip*, is unmatched. Produced as a preliminary printing before the first properly published edition, the volume has extensive notes from its editor William Bland, and marginalia by its owner, the French navigator Louis de Freycinet. In 1832, Bland sent the copy to de Freycinet, whom he had met during the *Uranie's* voyage to Australia in 1819.

Davidson considered the book the most important in his collection: 'It took me years to find out who that collector was, when one day in 1992 the phone rang in my office in the city ... I was speechless for a while once I had heard the price, but was able to point out that I did not have that sort of cash.' He did, however, ring his bank and arrange a special overdraft to secure the volume.

Collecting, it seems, is an obsession that can make you do strange things. It starts out slowly, almost as an afterthought in many cases. 'Jackdaw collecting' is how Davidson, a retired commercial lawyer and stalwart of the National Trust in Victoria, describes his first tentative efforts in the 1950s. But as the collection grows, so does a collector's expertise and

fascination with his subject. The hunt begins for examples that are rare and valuable, that will help complete a 'set'.

This kind of passion has little to do with a collection's dollar value. My partner remembers searching everywhere for a lithograph worth a few hundred dollars, once she realised that the two she had were not a pair, but part of a trio. She couldn't rest till she had them all. In the preface to the catalogue for the Melbourne sale, Davidson wrote of his 'great pleasure – and not a little awe – in seeing my Australiana collection complete within its original terms of reference'.

The success of the National Museum's current exhibition, *Captivating and Curious*, is proof of the fascination that people have with collections and collecting. The show gives visitors a sense of the breadth and interests of the National Historical Collection, created by an Act of Parliament just twenty-five years ago. People have been streaming through the doors since it opened in December, drawn by the texture and diversity of the collections on display.

Inside is a trove of Aussie icons – among them a rare preserved specimen of a thylacine, a Percival Gull plane designed by Albury-born Edgar Percival, Robert Menzies' home movie camera, and a Waterside Workers' trade union banner. The material culture of Indigenous Australia is well-represented, as well as artefacts of the nation's nineteenth-century history, such as the stream anchor from Flinders' ship, *Investigator*, and the water bottle of explorer Robert O'Hara Burke. The exhibition also has a section on personal collections and the collecting bug that can bite us all.

The success of ABC TV's *The Collectors* is another sign of our shared obsessions to save and hoard. It is no accident that the program has moved to a later prime-time slot, after building an audience in the pre-evening news graveyard. It is full of ordinary people collecting surprising things. Later this year, one of these collections will be brought to Canberra for a special showing in the Museum's main hall, a compliment to the collecting impulses of people across the country.

All good collections have a central premise. Davidson reflects that he concentrated on major themes from the Foundation of European Australia to Burke and Wills in compiling his peerless collection of books and Australiana. Often, a collection is determined by a specific type of material, or the class of object it includes. Yet every collection – including the Museum's National Historical Collection – reveals as much about the collector as it does about the things collected.

*Matt Trinca, Senior Curator  
Collections and Gallery Development*



Matt Trinca photo: George Serrus