

BONNARD AND ACQUISITION POLICY.

Ian Milliss

(CAS Broadsheet, April 1972)

The art gallery of New South Wales until its closure over two years ago held annually an exhibition of recent acquisitions. This exhibition has never of course been very exciting, but in recent years it declined even further. When the gallery reopens we will doubtless see all the works acquired in the meantime, but already certain trends in collecting policy are all too evident.

As early as 1966 the Trustees had begun to reject all purchases of contemporary Australian work. This was presumably but obviously, because they did not approve of the avant-garde nature of the majority of good works being produced then. It happened therefore that when in 1968/69 it became definite that the building was to be renovated the Trustees decided to save all their allocations for the purchase of a few "old masters". The allocation at the time was a paltry \$40 000, which had to cover all purchases, exhibitions, books for the library etc. It has now apparently been slightly increased to \$60,000, although I couldn't confirm this. The "old masters" which this money was used to purchase were mostly English Eighteenth Century work, a Wilson landscape and works by Westall Hamilton and West. They also purchased their first work by the Australian, Von Guérard and a Renaissance Florentine relief of the Madonna and Child. All of the above, while undoubtedly good things to have are minor works, and none of them will ever play any part in the future history of Australian art, nor do they shed much light on the past history of Australian art. They are merely cultural status symbols.

And here of course we come to the Bonnard. At a time when for six years the Gallery has not only been refusing to buy contemporary art - but even refusing to accept it as a gift (eg. the Christo tree), they have purchased a very good, but totally irrelevant painting at such an exorbitant price (approx. \$225 000) that they will be unable to purchase any thing at all for a total of four years. In other words the Bonnard will not be paid for until 1975 and the Gallery will have missed out on one of the most crucial ten years in Australian art history. The purchase was engineered by the incoming Director, Peter Laverty and the new Minister for Tourism and Cultural Activities, George Freudenstein both eager to gather good publicity for themselves in their new posts. Now that the publicity has died down it has been discovered that the only contribution the State Government has made was to guarantee not to reduce the Gallery's allocation until the Bonnard is paid for. In the meantime, the National Gallery in Canberra is buying works rejected by the N.S.W. Trustees, such as a very good Dick Watkins and the gap in the collection is only very slowly being filled by the occasional donation of contemporary works such as a \$20 000 collection given anonymously and a Brett Whiteley drawing of Ravi Shankar.

Since the Art Gallery of New South Wales is the only public building constructed almost entirely on donations, and since less than half a dozen of known purchases in the last couple of years have been works under twenty years old and since nothing can

be purchased for the next three years, it is highly unlikely anything will change very soon.

ADDENDUM.

The C.A.S. attempted to obtain an interview with Peter Lavery for inclusion in this broadsheet, but he informed us that this was not possible at the present time. Other staff at the Art Gallery were also unavailable.

Source: (Contemporary Art Society of Australia NSW Broadsheet, April 1972 p7-8)