**LWAGTalks**

**A podcast by Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery**

**Art Aside 2: The Case of the Backyard Pollock’s**

Published on 26 June 2020

Transcript of the second episode of *Art Aside*, a series on the *LWAGTalks* podcast of short episodes exploring unique, interesting stories in the history of art.

[music from Methyl Ethel’s song UBU fades in]

**TED SNELL:**

Welcome to Art Aside, a podcast about a parallel history of art. I’m Ted Snell.

[music from Methyl Ethel’s song UBU fades out]

I’d like to tell you a story. It’s not directly related to the main topic of discussion about Art with a capital A, it is peripheral, but no less informative of the role of art in our lives. It goes to the core of what it means to be human and it shows us how an artist can capture that sense of our humanity. I hope you enjoy it and pass it on to your friends, then smile knowingly when you hear it back from someone else.

My story today is titled: *The case of the backyard Pollock’s!*

When he was elected Prime Minister in 1972, Gough Whitlam announced his plan: ‘... to help develop a national identity through artistic expression and project Australia's image in other countries by means of the arts’. It would be '... the dawn of a new government led (and funded) renaissance' announced *The Weekend Australian*. Australia would finally register on the international seismic art charts and secure a role as a player in the global cultural market place. We would become a destination for something more than sun, sand and char-grilled prawns.

The man who would secure this dream was James Mollison, newly appointed Director of the Australian National Gallery, with a brief to build a collection of 'masterpieces'.

The public were wary from the start they had their doubts about Whitlam’s trendy profligacy and the impact it was likely to have on the country. Needless to say, Mollison’s early purchases were not well received. When Allan Jones’ ‘Girl Table’, a mannequin, clad only in stiletto boots and sexy underwear, on her hands and knees with a sheet of glass on her back was acquired *The Australian*,[[1]](#footnote-1) warned that ‘A Women’s Lib Blitzkrieg’ was about to be unleased’. It followed Mollison’s purchase of Constantin Brancusi's 'Bird in Space 1&11', which had also grabbed headlines around the country “We paid $1.3 million for a brace of birds’[[2]](#footnote-2). However, it was the shockwaves round the purchase of Jackson Pollock's 'Blue Poles' on the 19th September 1973 that caused a Tsunami of outrage.

‘Drunks did it’[[3]](#footnote-3) the papers screamed, ‘Painting produced in a drunken orgy’[[4]](#footnote-4)$1.34 million for a couple of cans of Dulux and a few metres of canvas? Outrageous!

‘Blue Poles’ immediately became a symbol of Labor's excess, linking Pollock and Whitlam together in an unholy alliance – though it was a pairing the Prime Minister encouraged by choosing the painting to grace his Christmas card that year. Although pilloried, some people supported it, including a Perth art dealer Bohdan Ledwij, who was reported as saying ‘It put Australian art on the international map, started collectors and art patrons everywhere thinking about Australia’.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Looking back what seems more outrageous is that A$1.34 million was worth US$2million, how times have changed. In retrospect, Mollison and Whitlam were proved right, the painting is now worth twenty to thirty times what we paid for it a half-century ago, but it did have an impact on the electorate, as Paul Rigby, in one of his quintessential cartoons for *The Daily News*, documented. He showed Whitlam knocked out by the ballot box after being felled, initially, by Pollock’s masterpiece.

Malcolm Fraser, a more astute judge of the public, if not of art, wasn’t about to make the same mistake and refused permission for Mollison to buy Georges Braque’s 'Grand Nu', one of the major works of early European modernism. He may not have been an astute judge of art, but Fraser stayed on as Prime Minister for a further seven years.

The Pollock controversy polarised attitudes and five years later it was still much discussed when Bohdan Ledwij, that same Perth art dealer who celebrated the purchase of Blue Poles, announced that an exhibition of nine previously unknown Pollocks would open at his Fine Arts Gallery in Adelaide Terrace, in March 1978. Sourced from a probate case and two divorces the works were all for sale and valued between $350,000 and more than a million dollars. They were all done in the ‘random paint dribbling style of Blue Poles’, he confided to *The Woman’s Weekly[[6]](#footnote-6)*.

Ledwig featured the works in volume one number one of his own, rather unfortunately named magazine, *WAARTS* or WA Arts (the Western Australian Journal of Arts and Culture), while the *Weekly* reproduced six of the paintings in a full colour spread. They looked about right, the same swirly drips of paint and a similar palette, though of course they were much smaller, and they were only studies, which Pollock never did, and then there was the name, ‘Blue Polls’ not ‘Poles’[[7]](#footnote-7), and, what about the surfaces, not raw canvas but Masonite board?

Elwyn Lynn, Chairman of the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council and National Art Reviewer for *The Australian* was flown over to open the exhibition and he praised the paintings in a review he wrote for the paper. That was when the proverbial hit the fan. The famous American art critic Clement Greenberg proclaimed them categorically ‘fakes’, Robert Hughes, art critic for *Time* Magazine agreed ‘They are as fake as a two-bob watch’ but Eugene V Thaw, author of the Yale catalogue of Pollock’s work was even more blunt:

‘I’m surprised it’s gotten this far. Maybe you Australians should examine your provinciality. They wouldn’t have lasted then minutes on the streets of New York.’[[8]](#footnote-8) Ouch!

Even Elwyn Lynn had to acknowledge that some 'were certainly open to investigation' and soon everyone had their doubts.

Yes, they were fakes all right, whipped up in a suburban garage, with a few sheets of Masonite and a couple of cans of house paint, showing anyone could do it, and fool the critics, well some of them anyway.

Unsurprisingly, Ledwig ended up in jail, though it wasn't for the Pollocks but for another fake, a painting by the 17th century Flemish painter Anthony Van Dyke, which he’d convinced the Art Gallery of Western Australia to store for him. And what happened to those dodgy Pollocks? Well, mercifully, they disappeared from sight, though you never know, they might turn up somewhere someday, so keep your eyes out.

*This episode of Art Aside was written and produced by me, Ted Snell.*

*Our music is by kind permission of Methyl Ethel. The song is UBU, from their album Everything is Forgotten, released on 4AD.*

1. Lindsay Barrett, *The Prime Minister’s Christmas card: Blue Poles and cultural politics in the Whitlam Era*, Power Publications Sydney, 2001, P25 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. James Mollison and Laura Murray (Eds) *Australian National Gallery: An Introduction*, Australian National Gallery, Canberra 1982, P34 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Ibid* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Ibid* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *The Australian Women’s Weekly*, April 19, 1978, p2 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Ibid* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *wa.arts: Western Australian Journal of Arts and Culture*, Volume 1, Number 1, April 1978, cover [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Jenny Gregory, *City of Lights: A History of Perth since the 1950’s*, City of Perth 2004, p178 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)