

Auctions are more than just a place to hammer out a great bargain. **Clare Press** finds a world of adrenalin rushes, Ming bowls and men in search of plumed helmets.

Photography
Amanda Prior

Illustration
John Shakespeare

Hair and make-up
Diane Dusting

Was I lost in a Monty Python sketch

as a lanky, fair-haired gentleman inquired of a bespectacled pen-pusher: "Ave you got a Roman centurion costume then?" No, I was at the front desk of Lawsons auction house in Annandale.

On the day in question, 20,000 metres of shiny fabric and 60,000 metres of braid, scores of spaceman outfits and showgirl headdresses, and one faux-leather Roman centurion costume were all being flogged off to an audience agog. There were more sequins in that room than in *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. Actually, these were the sequins left over from *Priscilla* – for this was the collected craziness of costume designer Cliff Brunton's 30-year reign at the Costume Design Centre in Chippendale. He came, he saw, he conquered our stages – then went to auction with his spoils.

Forget *Underbelly*; this is my favourite Sydney underworld, one ruled by its own codes (give up your weekends for viewings, don't look adversaries in the eye, highest bidder wins) and peopled by its own roster of colourful gamblers and dealers. Okay, so their currency is *objets d'art* and restorable furniture rather than drugs but that's much nicer, isn't it? The intrigue is still there, as are the big bucks. The following week at Bonhams & Goodman (where the staff spend their Sundays in slick suits and silk ties), I watched an art deco sofa change hands for a cool five grand. So that's glamour covered. As for the violence, perhaps not. I did ask one auctioneer for tales of fisticuffs over lost lots but he reckons your average auction crowd is a nice sort.

Take John Quirk, for example. A painter who specialises in tromp l'oeil finishes (you can see his art on the glorious painted panelling in Paspaley Pearls' flagship Martin Place store), he has snapped up stacks of treasures at auction houses over the years. Thanks to his impeccable eye, he has secured Ming bowls, Chinese screens, 18th-century French miniatures, enamelled cigar cases and a rare rosewood-bark box – all for about half the price he'd have paid in antique shops. →



1. Natalie Beak
production designer
Age 25
From Surry Hills
Item 1960s kitchen scales
Bought at Mitchell Road Auction Centre
Cost \$10

She says "I am always on the hunt for props and set dressings. You never know what will turn up. Sometimes things follow me home. I actually haven't used the scales yet – I'm not much of a baker. But they take pride of place on a '70s sideboard in my home."

2. Kelly Doust
crafts writer
From Dulwich Hill
Age 32
Item Circa 1920s Bakelite phone
Bought at Lewisham Auction House
Cost \$60
She says "I was hunting for vintage linen and damask tablecloths when I found this old phone. It had been passed in at auction so I bought it at the reserve price. It works, too – I love the sound the old bell makes when it rings. It echoes through the entire house – you can hear it halfway up the street."

3. Myles du Chateau
real estate agent and gallery co-owner
Age 23
From Bondi
Item Circa 1920s vintage horse sculpture
Bought at Mitchell Road Auction Centre
Cost \$25

He says "I've got an obsession with horses – I love the scene in *The Godfather* with the horse's head and I'm a huge fan of a disco group from London called Horse Meat Disco. I bought this for my girlfriend."

4. Georgie Stuart
sponsorship co-ordinator
Age 26
From Surry Hills
Item Vintage chaise
Bought at Lawsons
Cost \$85

She says "My grandma has an antiques shop, so I've been going to auctions for ages. I turned up at Lawsons for the costume auction and bought a box of vintage trims, then spotted this chair and fell in love. It was just a case of right place, right time."

5. Angus Wray
producer
Age 36
From Bronte
Item Acoustic guitar with mother-of-pearl inlay on the neck
Bought at Lawsons
Cost \$140

He says "Auctions are great because you're bidding against people who are buying for their shops. I bought this guitar for my girlfriend and paid over the odds because it was the one I wanted. Bidding actually started at \$70, which is what my price limit was."

of luck

AUCTION HOUSE DIRECTORY

Bonhams & Goodman

Pricey newer furniture, rugs, *objets*, antiques, jewellery and art. In August, the house is running auctions for fine jewellery, antiques and interiors, books, maps and prints, fine art and an auction of the estate of the late surrealist painter James Gleeson (August 26).
224 Young Street, Waterloo.
7 Anderson Street, Double Bay.
Phone: 9327 9900;
bonhamsandgoodman.com.au.

John Williams Antique & Fine Art

Auctions are held on the last full weekend of each month – except December – and lots include Georgian silver, furs, glass, paintings, bronzes and retro furniture. Australian and cedar is also popular.
6 Ralph Street, Alexandria. Phone: 9700 9855; johnwilliamsauctions.com.

Lawsons

Offers everything from expensive antiques to general estate furniture. Has a weekly general sale on Fridays plus a specific Friday auction that cycles through jewellery, books, wine, fine art, antiques and decorative arts from the first week of the month to the last.
1a The Crescent, Annandale.
Phone: 9566 2377; lawsons.com.au.

Lewisham Auctions

Every Sunday, Lewisham runs auctions featuring bargain second-hand furniture and affordable oddities, plus *objets d'art* and some 20th-century design.
1/118 Old Canterbury Road, Lewisham.
Phone: 9518 3131;
lewishamauctions.com.au.

Mitchell Road Auction Centre

Auctions are held every Monday of the year – even Christmas Day – and lots range from Georgian-style furniture and bordello chairs to quirkier odds and ends.
76 Mitchell Road, Alexandria.
Phone: 9310 7200;
mitchellroadauctions.com.

Raffan & Kelaher

Monday's bric-a-brac auction suits rummagers looking for a box of rare books, posh silverware or a retro lamp. Tuesdays are for those looking for vintage and reproduction furniture. Look out for less regular sales of colonial cedar furniture.
42 John Street, Leichhardt. Phone: 9552 1899; rafkelauctions.com.au.

Shapiro

This high-end Woollahra house holds art and design auctions every three to six weeks, covering Australian and international art and design as well as indigenous pieces. Expect big names – Adam Cullen, Donald Friend, Garry Shead, Brett Whiteley and Rover Thomas to name just a few.
162 Queen Street, Woollahra.
Phone: 9326 1588;
shapiroauctioneers.com.au.

Vickers & Hoad

Monthly weekend auctions offer modern and vintage ceramics, glass, silverware and antique French furniture, plus a multitude of other bits and bobs.
89 Anzac Parade, Kensington.
Phone: 9663 2889; vickhoad.com.

"Pretty much everything you see here is a result of my auction addiction," says Quirk, showing me around his delectably decorated Redfern home. "It's exciting when something you've been looking for turns up in a catalogue. If you really want it, you may pay over the odds but some things go for a song."

As Quirk well understands, the thrill is in the chase. That really might be a Chippendale chair under all that paint. And you really might be the only person who noticed. Is that the final football card you need to complete your collection? Or the Bakelite phone of your dreams? But while it's fun to look, it's a trip to

bid – the adrenalin, win or not, is intoxicating. While researching this story, I was hanging around Mitchell Road auction rooms, where I'm a registered bidder, and found myself waving at the auctioneer on impulse. Me! Pick me! I came home with a giant cast-iron plant stand. Who knew I even wanted it? Actually, I didn't – but that's the risk of being swept up in the moment.

Happily, I also came home with Natalie Beak's promise to pose for this piece. This Surry Hills-based production designer regularly combs the city's auctions in search of the bold and not necessarily beautiful. "It's my job to find quirky things for the films and television sets I work on. I love that you don't know what's going to turn up on a particular day in these places. I've bought things I'd never have known where to find in the shops."

I quizzed our Roman centurion wannabe; he was a member of a local theatre group, strangely reluctant to be photographed by this magazine. "I tried Target but they couldn't help me," he deadpanned. Where else would a man track down his plumed helmet and panelled skirt? (s)

6.

Lyn Donovan
real estate receptionist
Age Fiftysomething
From Narrabeen
Item 1920s silk piano shawl
Bought at Lawsons
Cost \$70
She says "I've got a bit of a love affair with the '20s and '30s and old clothing like that so I'm going to wear it. It's waiting for a special outing. My elder daughter is getting married in the Florida Quays later this year so it will feature prominently then."



7.

Ann Wilkins
theatre manager
Age Sixtysomething
From Cremorne
Item Chinchilla coat
Bought at Vickers & Hoad
Cost \$800

She says "I go to two auctions a week and I always go to the furs – at this same auction I bought a mink coat for \$600. I had never seen chinchilla before and this was retro in style; I love the '30s deco style. I haven't worn it yet but I will wear it to the theatre on Friday to give it some validity!"



Beginners' luck – tips for the uninitiated

To beat the dealers at their game, all you have to do is turn up and register to bid. Bring your ID, fill out a form and you'll get a bidder's number. Some auction houses allot you this number for a specific week or even for life.

To bid, wave your numbered card at the auctioneer. He or she quotes the price as it rises in increments. For example – "Ten dollars with the lady on my left, 12 with the man on my right, do I have 15?" At any point you can yell, "300!" and knock out the competition. Once the hammer is down and the auctioneer calls "Sold!", it's over.

Management decides how much bids must leap after a certain amount has been reached – for example, jumps of \$5 up to \$50, jumps of \$10 until it hits \$100 and, at some point, jumps of \$50 or more per bid.

An average auctioneer might get through about 100 lot numbers an hour. Staff should be able to give you a rough idea of what time the items you are interested in will come up. Houses make lot number lists available and the more upmarket ones offer detailed catalogues, including estimates.

When it comes time to pay for your purchase, be aware that some auction houses will slug you with credit card fees, while all add a "buyer's premium" of between 15 and 20 per cent on top of the hammer price.

Seasoned auction-goers will have done their research so they don't get carried away and pay more than they can afford for an item. They also know how to put on a great poker face.

8.

John Quirk
decorative painter and restorer
Age 69
From Redfern
Item Sculpted limestone Tang-dynasty Buddha head
Bought at John Williams
Cost \$230

He says "I collect Chinese porcelain objects and antiques. Buying at auction is a way of making collecting antiques more affordable. I'm always combing the auction houses looking for old and interesting pieces."