

Art Gallery of SA unveils record \$4.6 million Pissarro painting purchase *Prairie a Eragny*



Art Gallery of SA's European curator Jane Messenger with it's \$4.6 million acquisition, Pissarro's *Prairie a Eragny*, held by installation officers Richard King and Ken Orchard.

The most expensive acquisition in the Art Gallery of South Australia's 133-year history, French Impressionist painter Camille Pissarro's *Prairie a Eragny*, finally has arrived at its new home.

After paying \$4.6 million, including buyer's fee, at auction in New York last November, the Gallery will officially unveil the landscape tonight before it goes on public display in the Melrose Wing from Saturday.

It has been a long journey for both the painting and the Gallery's curator of European and North American art, Jane Messenger, who had to fly to New York to check its condition, oversee the packing and accompany it back to Australia.

"Now that it's here in its final resting place, it's really quite a moving experience to see it up on the wall," she said.

The painting had to be placed in a plywood box, where it was suspended by custom foam supports. This box was then packed into a larger crate, which was lined with shock-absorbing foam.

"The idea is that we create a microclimate in which the work sits and is buffered against external variations in temperature.

"The reinforced padding, if there's bumps or movement, absorbs any shocks so none of that is transferred to the painting."

Ms Messenger then accompanied it to the airport freight terminal, where she oversaw the crate being placed inside its metal transport can. A specialist art handler took the can across the tarmac to the plane, where its position in the cargo hold was reported back to Messenger.

That process was repeated in Hong Kong, where the painting had to change planes, which Ms Messenger observed from a viewing deck.

“Again, it had a security detail at that point — as did I, for some reason,” she said.

It also was Ms Messenger’s responsibility to bid by phone at the Sotheby’s auction last November, but the search to buy a major work actually began three years ago.

The purchase was made possible through the Gallery Foundation Masterwork Appeal, which had raised \$2 million prior to the auction and has subsequently found all but \$70,000 of the final price.

“It’s the most ambitious acquisition that the Art Gallery has ever made, and the largest fundraising campaign we’ve ever launched,” Ms Messenger said.

“An iconic Impressionist painting was something that was missing from the European collection — almost embarrassingly so.”

Prairie a Eragny was painted in 1886 and was among first works that Pissarro’s dealer sent to New York for sale the following year. Before last November’s auction, it had been held for many years in a private London collection.

“There is an intense luminosity to the painting ... it’s almost shimmering with this sense of light,” Ms Messenger said.

“The other thing I find so remarkable and beautiful about this painting is this incredible sense of stillness and calm.

“It’s this overriding harmony that Pissarro, more so than the other Impressionists, wanted to achieve.”