



ANZAAB Aspects of Book Collecting

Collecting Rare Australian Art Books

Douglas Stewart Fine Books

Background: Books are visual creations, so it stands to reason that artists and publishers will be interested in making them beautiful, interesting and exciting objects. All books have some level of ‘art’ in them, but collectors will look to the identity of the artist, and the skill of the artwork, in judging their desirability. Books are another medium for an artist to express their ideas—this may be through reproductions or original artworks. The best Australian Art books are both beautiful publications and artworks in the one volume.

Range: Rare Australian Art books fall into two broad categories: monographs and catalogues published *about* an artist, and special editions created *by or with* an artist’s involvement. Both are collected, largely driven by the identity of the artist. Early exhibition catalogues and monographs (books about one artist) are important as they document the beginnings of an artist’s career. A good example is the 1948 catalogue for Sidney Nolan’s first solo exhibition; the Ned Kelly series became Nolan’s most famous and important. It is a thin, plain and unassuming booklet but a desirable rarity. Special editions and artists’ books tend to be more lavish affairs, often with deluxe bindings and original graphics. A highlight would be the Beagle Press’ *Songs of the Vagabond Scholars* (1982) magnificently bound in leather with its fourteen original lithographs created by artist Donald Friend.

Availability: There are many Australian art books around, and it is not necessary to spend a fortune to buy a beautiful book on a favourite artist. Collectors in this field should look for books and catalogues produced early in an artist’s career, and books with some level of original contribution by the artist. This might be an etching, a special binding, or simply a signed copy. Most booksellers carry an art section, while specialist dealers will be able to help source rare and collectable titles.

Price-range: Standard Australian Art books and exhibition catalogues generally cost \$10 - \$500, with a few rarer works creeping over \$1000. Deluxe editions and artists’ books will be priced to a certain extent depending on the value of the artworks; for more minor artists this might start at a couple of hundred dollars. Notable works by famous artists can easily cost \$2000–\$20,000, while important manuscripts with extensive original artwork will be priced in the hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Footnote: While some deluxe books might seem expensive, they are usually a very affordable way for a collector to acquire original artworks compared to framed works on the wall. A fine art book should be valued for what it is—a beautiful and engaging publication intended to be enjoyed in bound form. Australia has a long history of publishing very fine and deluxe art books, a tradition which is continuing with private press publishers today.