



## The last word Spring cleaning

WHEN ONE SCHOOL PRINCIPAL FINDS VALUABLE ABORIGINAL PAINTINGS IN A STORE CUPBOARD, YOU CAN EXPECT ANY AMOUNT OF RUMMAGING THROUGH THE REST OF THE NATION'S SCHOOLS, SAYS **STEVE HOLDEN**.

The principal of Dickson College in Canberra found a 'treasure trove' of 'extremely valuable,' indeed 'priceless,' Aboriginal bark paintings 'languishing' in a store cupboard when they undertook a clean-out last month in preparation for renovations.

Dickson College has had the paintings valued – how much they're worth is a secret – but principal Beth Mitchell says the school is not selling and will do 'everything in our power' to keep the art. 'To me it's priceless,' Mitchell told Jessica Nairn, who reported the story for *ABC News* in the Australian Capital Territory. 'This collection's not for sale,' Mitchell said. 'This collection is for public education.'

The school was a pioneer in offering Aboriginal Studies in the 1970s and bought the 12 paintings, some by well-known Indigenous artists from Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory, in the '70s or '80s for use in Aboriginal Studies classes.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art specialist and Adjunct Reader in Art History at Australian National University Wally Caruana described the collection as a significant learning resource. 'It's valu-

able as a record of things that were happening 20 to 30 years ago in central and western Arnhem Land, which is where all the paintings come from,' he told *ABC News*. 'You've got to hand it to the college that they had a lot of foresight, especially in those days, to actually take students up to Arnhem Land.'

Devoted fans of the ABC's *The Collectors* will know that this is a story all about four things. The first is provenance, and the Dickson College paintings have bucketloads of this. Dr Michael Pickering, Director of the National Museum of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Program, has identified the paintings as genuine.

As well, as Mitchell explained, 'Dickson College in the '70s and '80s was the only college that had Aboriginal Studies as a major. They travelled up there (to Arnhem Land) and recognised the significance of these paintings, and bought paintings at a time when nobody else was doing this.'

The second is condition, and the Dickson College paintings have this in bucketloads, too. The 12 bark paintings have been well preserved in the dark and dry conditions

of the store cupboard and are in 'pristine condition,' according to Nairn.

The third is collectibility. Staff at Bonga Binga Small Good School unearthed a 'treasure trove' of unfired dinosaur figures made by the Year 3s in 1951 'languishing' in a store cupboard when they likewise undertook a clean-out last month in preparation for renovations. Principal Fergus McNikkle-Nakkle says he is keen to sell and the school will do 'everything in our power' to offload the art, but has received zero bids so far on eBay.

And the fourth? Well, as devoted fans of *The Collectors* – McNikkle-Nakkle included – will know, Dickson College is living the trash-and-treasure dream, where some trash you weren't aware had any value turns out to be treasure. In the case of the 12 bark paintings, though, Dickson College wasn't even aware of the paintings.

A staple segment in *The Collectors* shows ordinary folk eager to find out whether stuff like a collection of unfired dinosaur figures made by Year 3 students in 1951 is worth anything. It's not, and there are still zero bids on eBay.

The most amazing thing, according to Nairn's *ABC News* report, is that Dickson College principal Beth Mitchell actually did the clean-out herself – and *ABC News* has the footage to prove it.

Is it worth checking on the whereabouts of our school principals?

Yes.

Is it likely our principals will emerge from a store cupboard with long-lost stuff that's been 'languishing' in there?

Absolutely.

And if by the remotest chance it turns out there is a 'treasure trove' 'languishing' in a store cupboard in your school, be prepared to be told it's not for sale. **T**

*This month's Last Word was written by Steve Holden, Editor of Teacher, and last year's highly commended winner in the Best Columnist category of the Melbourne Press Club Quill Awards for the Last Word.*