



Barry Humphries: A Life in Comedy, Art and Satire



Barry leaning on lot 5, *A view of Wilpena* painted by Barry himself sold for £21,420 versus an estimate of £3k-£5k

Early Life and Education

John Barry Humphries was born on February 17 1934, in Melbourne, Australia. Raised in a comfortable suburban home, he developed a love for theatre, literature, and surreal humour from an early age. He was also a budding artist - as a young child his father would encourage him by drawing head studies and he would do the bodies. Then as a teenager he became a junior pupil in the life class at Melbourne's George Bell painting school and he continued to paint throughout his life.

Career Beginnings and Move to London

Humphries first made a mark in the Melbourne theatre scene in the 1950s, performing in satirical revues. During this time, he created Dame Edna Everage, originally as a parody of an Australian suburban housewife. In 1959, he moved to London, where he became involved in the vibrant theatre and comedy world. He worked with comedy

legends such as Peter Cook and Dudley Moore and became part of the satire boom that influenced British comedy for decades to follow.



Barry with Peter Cooke, (left) Jand Dudley Moore in the early 1960's

Rise to Fame: The Evolution of Dame Edna

Barry's best known and perhaps best loved character, Dame Edna Everage had transformed over the years from a meek Melbourne housewife in the 50's into an extravagant, purple-haired "megastar" known for her razor-sharp wit, oversized glasses, and love of gladioli. She hosted TV talk shows such as *The Dame Edna Experience*; and also live stage shows in London's West End, such as *Edna-The Spectacle* where she humorously and often ruthlessly insulted members of the audience.

I was an audience member at one of these shows in the early 90's. Our seats were fairly near the front of the stalls, and as I was sitting in the aisle unwittingly I became a prime target for Dame Edna's audience spotters, who picked me out to come up on stage along with a dozen other people. We were all lined up across the right hand side of the stage, standing rather awkwardly waiting for what was to come. I got off quite lightly, for women Dame Edna made a thorough search through their handbags looking for anything suitably embarrassing and for men it was down to their 'pocket litter' and wallets. Somehow I had managed to lose my wallet or at least misplace it in between leaving the car and arriving at the theatre so I just



A montage of the Edna Everage glasses in the auction which all sold for 10-20 times their £1-2,000 average estimate

got a severe teasing for having done so.....

Other Iconic Characters

Humphries was a master of character comedy and created several other satirical figures, including:

- **Sir Les Patterson** – A vulgar, drunken Australian politician who with his heavily food stained tie and suit lapels unashamedly mocked all and every cultural stereotype.
- **Sandy Stone** – A melancholic elderly man reminiscing about a lost Australia.
- **Barry McKenzie** – A beer-loving Australian expatriate, featured in comic strips and films.



Dame Edna wearing lot 17 the 'royal variety dress' which made £21,420 vs £1.5-£2k estimate

Film, TV, and Literary Work

Humphries enjoyed success in various mediums:

- Voiced Bruce the Shark in *Finding Nemo* (2003).
- Appeared in *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* (2012).
- Wrote novels, memoirs (*More Please, My Life as Me*), and satirical essays.
- Starred in numerous stage productions, including one-man shows combining comedy, improv, and audience interaction.

Later Life and Legacy

Despite announcing his retirement several times, Humphries continued performing well into his 80s. He received numerous honours, including a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) and an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO).

Barry Humphries was not only a brilliant comedian and satirist but also a passionate art collector. Over his lifetime, he built an impressive collection of



A trick colour shot of Barry sitting next to Dame Edna. On a love seat the dress she is wearing was lot 240 which sold for £29,160 vs an estimated £1,500-2,000

paintings, drawings, and sculptures, particularly focusing on Australian modernist and surrealist art.

Humphries' Love of Fine Art

Through his appreciation for modernist and avant-garde art in his youth, Barry was also influenced by movements such as Dadaism and Surrealism. Barry

further developed an extraordinarily good 'eye' for Fine Art and objects. This innate ability later led to an almost obsessive desire to acquire art and objects he lusted for.

Later during his time in London, Barry mingled with artists and intellectuals, which only deepened this already very strong interest in collecting.

I first came across Barry in the early 1980's when I was a picture specialist at Christie's in South Kensington. We held regular sales of Australian and decorative International Fine Art and objects and Barry was a regular attendee at many of these sales. I met him viewing in person at our auction previews on many occasions over the years. He cut a very striking figure in his broad brimmed black velvet hat, usually pulled down low over his eyes and an equally black stylish cape, this gave him an air of mystery always caused a buzz in the sale room. It was always exciting whenever a celebrity came to view one of our auctions, however Barry was different in that he was not only very knowledgeable, he was also very happy to spend time talking about what interested him and why and he was happy to share his knowledge ... in his purchasing he showed all the classic hallmarks of the truly dedicated collector, I remember him declaring that he was constantly stretching his finances to buy the best and rarest pieces and then worrying about where the money was going to come from afterwards.....!

Artistic Influence on His Comedy

His love of surrealism and modernist art influenced his comedic style, seen in the absurdity of his characters and his sharp satire. His appreciation for visual aesthetics was also evident in the flamboyant costumes and theatricality of Dame Edna Everage.

Barry Humphries' art collection is a true reflection of his intellectual curiosity, humour, and love for the avant-garde, making him not just a performer but also a serious connoisseur of fine art.

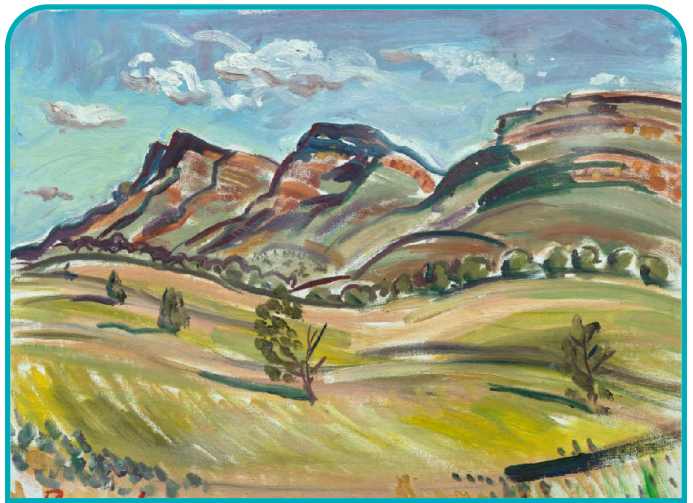
Barry died on April 22, 2023, at the age of 89, a significant number of works from his collection along with pieces from his work as an entertainer such as Dame Edna's flamboyant glasses were included in the first of a series of auctions, this first auction took place in London on February 13th and is called '**Barry Humphries, the personal collection**', unsurprisingly the printed catalogue has completely sold out, however it's still possible to view the [auction online](#) and I have highlighted the results for a few pieces from this remarkable very personal collection, which includes numerous pairs of Dame Edna's trademark glasses along with Fine objects, original paintings and prints by various artists, plus a number of fine original paintings by Barry himself!



Lot 13 the Sydney opera house glasses, sold for £25,200 estimated at £1k-£1.5k



Lot 15 red glasses, sold for £15,120 estimated at £1k-£1.5k



Lot 5 a view of Wilpena painted by Barry himself sold for £21,420 versus an estimate of £3k-£5k



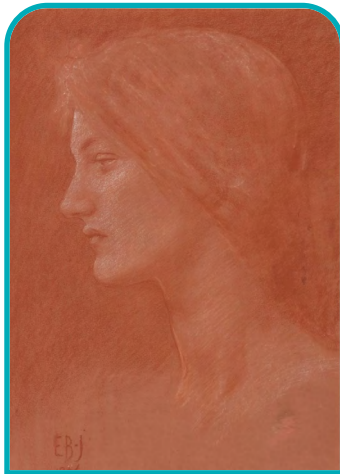
Lot 24 'Possum spectacles' £37,800 estimated at £1k-£1.5k



Lot 228 under the sea dress, Sold £13,860 estimated at £1.5k-£2.5k



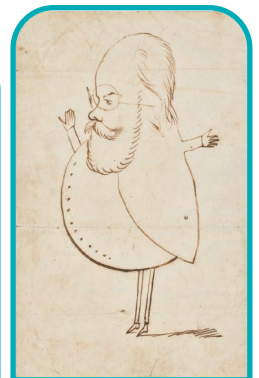
Lot 17 the 'royal variety dress' which made £21,420 vs £1.5k - £2k estimate



Burne Jones young girl sold £195,300 estimated at £30k - £50k



Lot 37 by Max Beerbohm sold £37,800 estimated at £8k-£12k



Lot 224 Edward Lear by himself sold £10,710 estimated at £2k-£3k



Lot 84 self portrait by Aubrey Beardsley sold £32,760 estimated at £20k-£30k



Lot 35 by Charles Conder sold £113,400 estimated at £100k-£150k



A page from the auction catalogue showing a room interior with lot 42 above the fireplace which was the top lot of the sale selling at £239,400 est £200k-£300k

Barry really was a man of many talents and interests and he leaves behind a much larger legacy as one of the greatest satirists and entertainers of his time. While his humour, characters, and sharp social commentary remain an enduring part of comedy history; his contribution as an avid, determined and hugely knowledgeable art collector adds significantly to his much more widely known legacy as an entertainer.



CHARLES CONDER (1868-1909) Sand dunes, Ambletuse. Price realised GBP 239,400 Estimate £200k-£300k.

Post auction insurance values

A very recent auction such as this one has arguably established a market or auction value represented by the prices achieved, however they do not represent a value for insurance purposes, they are only the price achieved on the day and on another day at another time the price may well be quite different. Therefore, it is important to have any new purchases valued for insurance and added to your policy schedule as soon as possible and from then on, have them re-valued on a regular basis, ideally every four years also with the rest of your collection. Looking at the results of the sale, I'd say there were two distinct groups of buyers. Generally, prices for the traditional art, sculpture, and paintings were closer to their estimates than those for the Dame Edna souvenirs, dresses, glasses, and so on.

Barry Humphries was, as I saw him, a very serious collector who made significant financial sacrifices to amass such a fine 'private collection', as the auction title suggests. Strong prices were achieved for the

traditional art, sculpture, and paintings, which sold much closer to their estimates. The more 'frivolous' Dame Edna souvenirs, strictly speaking not collected by Barry but 'acquired' over the years, were less predictable.

The top lot of the sale, Sand Dunes by Charles Conder, sold for £239,400 against an estimate of £200K to £300K, so spot on. I imagine the buyers of dresses and glasses had little or no interest in this painting or any of the other serious artworks. Quite understandably, they just wanted to own something as a memory of a celebrity they loved and weren't too concerned about what they should pay.

I don't envy the person who had to estimate the value of Edna's glasses or stage costumes. Perhaps the estimates were perfectly reasonable if people hadn't loved Dame Edna so much. In hindsight, they might appear cautious, but I think they were fair to begin with. After that, it simply became a matter of passion and a hugely enjoyable bidding war to determine the winners.

By contrast, prices for the paintings were more predictable as there were comparable results from past auctions, many likely bought by Barry himself. On average, these works sold closer to their estimates, though some did exceed expectations. That happens even in single-owner sales of non-famous people's collections, where prices almost always exceed expectations. I once worked it out and found that, on average, the final total for a single-owner sale was 2.4 times the pre-sale low estimate.

As they say in football, this was a game of two halves. Fans of Dame Edna were on one side and, on the other, serious collectors of late 19th- and 20th-century British illustrators, Australian artists, and admirers of Oscar Wilde and his followers. It made for a truly memorable auction and great entertainment. The final sale total was £4,627,224.

Barry would have loved it!



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jonathan Horwich

Jonathan began his art career at Thomas Agnew before spending 25+ years at Christie's and Bonhams, holding senior roles in British, Impressionist, and Contemporary art. An expert in 19th and 20th-century art, he is widely recognised for his knowledge of L.S. Lowry.