



Fired up: Top art auctioneer Mark Fraser has been appointed chairman of Bonhams in Australia.

PICTURE: PAUL ROVERE

## Auctioneer keen to make his mark at Bonhams

By GABRIELLA COSLOVICH

THE battle for business in the struggling art auction market is set to intensify with the appointment of one of the country's best auctioneers, Mark Fraser, as the new chairman of the Australian arm of UK firm Bonhams.

Mr Fraser begins as chairman on Monday and yesterday vowed to make Bonhams the number one auction house in Australia.

"Without question, I am confident it can be. I am very fired up after time spent in London at Bonhams' head office," he said.

With Fraser in tow, Bonhams

will go head to head with local players Sotheby's Australia, Deutscher and Hackett, and current market leader, Menzies Art Brands, in what promises to be a tough and competitive auction year. Formidable businessman Rod Menzies, who owns Menzies Art Brands, had also tried to entice Fraser to join his firm, without success.

Bonhams' appeal was its intelligent and refined approach — it didn't simply treat art as a commodity, Fraser said. Its London specialists, and UK chairman Rupert Brooks, showed true passion for art objects and collectibles.

"It was so encouraging walk-

ing around from department to department [in London] and meeting people who are really excited by the objects they are handling . . . We are not there simply to churn the market, we are there to develop long-term collectors and connoisseurship, and that's something I have missed as an auctioneer."

He said Bonhams was now Australia's only "truly international auction house". (Sotheby's Australia is a local franchise, which bought the licence to trade as "Sotheby's" from its former international parent in late 2009.)

The London-born Fraser has had a long and distinguished

career in the auction world. He spent 19 years with Sotheby's Australia, six as managing director, and left on a high in 2007, a boom year in which the company turned over a record \$51.4 million in sales. In 2007, he joined maverick Tasmanian art collector and professional gambler David Walsh and helped him create the astonishing and provocative Museum of Old and New Art, which opened in Hobart in January. Fraser said it was a difficult decision to leave MONA. "It was an incredibly addictive world that David Walsh created . . . I loved MONA, a baby I helped bring into the world. I miss it."

He predicts that the coming year will continue to provide bargains for Australian art collectors. "The Australian market maybe grew a little too fast from 2005 to 2007 and there is certainly a return to reality and stability," Fraser said.

■ The Queensland Art Gallery will host a major exhibition next year, featuring more than 70 masterpieces from Spain's national art museum, the Prado, in Madrid. It holds one of the most significant collections of European painting in the world. *Portrait of Spain: Masterpieces from the Prado*, will be at the Brisbane gallery from July 21 to November 4, 2012.