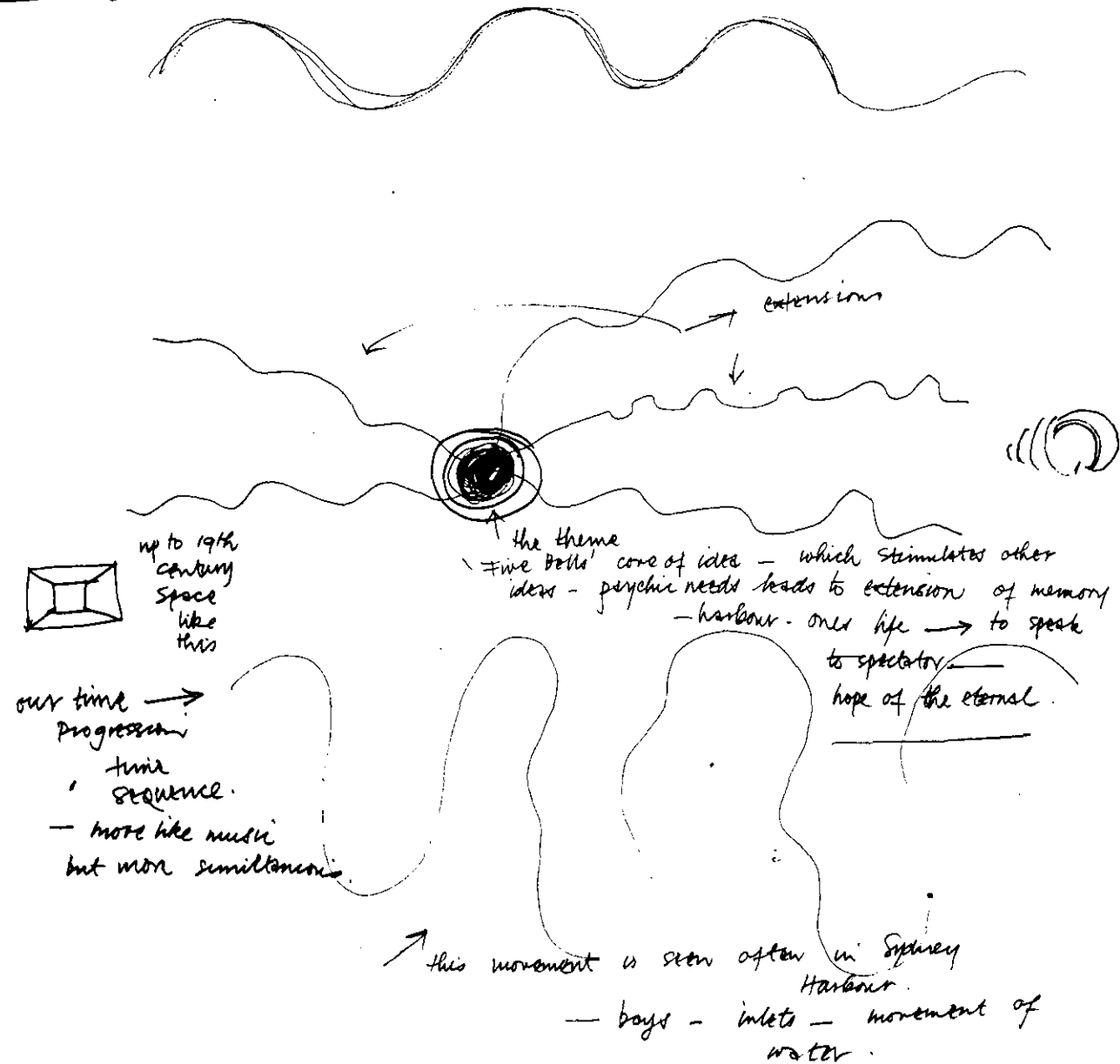


Sydney the true aquasana city - air & water



Auction: Tuesday 3 August commencing at 6 p.m. at The Australian Jockey Club Tea Rooms, Royal Randwick.
Viewing: Saturday 17 July to Wednesday 28 July at The Sydney Customs House, Circular Quay, Sydney
 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. every day; Friday 30 July to Tuesday 3 August, in The Australian Jockey Club Tea Rooms, Royal Randwick, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily and 9 a.m. to Noon on Sale Day.

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3 AUGUST 1999
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John Olsen

John Henry Olsen (b 1928)

Five Bells

Signed and dated lower right *John Olsen '63*
Oil on board, 267.5 x 275.5 cm. (105 x 108 in.)

Provenance:

Commissioned 1963 by George and Eva Clarke

Exhibited:

Five Bells, The Sydney Customs House, Circular Quay,
17 to 28 July 1999.

Literature and Television Documentaries:

ABC TV Documentary *Not a job for boys* 1973, *Five Bells & Salute to Five Bells*, illus.;
John Olsen, *Salute to Five Bells, John Olsen's Opera House Journal*, A & R 1973; pp. 5-12;
Sandra McGrath & Robert Walker, *Sydney Harbour Paintings since 1794*, Jacaranda Press 1979;
Introduction by John Olsen; & pp. 86-87 illus.;
Deborah Hart, *John Olsen*, Craftsman House 1991; pp. 77-79, 113-114 illus.;
Ben Holgate, "Olsen's seminal harbour scene comes into view" *The Australian* 6 July 1999, p 5 illus.;
Melissa Hoyer, "Sensitive guys at art" *Sunday Telegraph* 11 July 1999, p 201 illus.;
Anabel Dean, "Water of life" *The Bulletin* 13 July 1999, p. 116 illus.;
ABC TV *Arts Show Report* (in production), July 1999, illus.;
Dick Collingridge Video Documentary *John Olsen and Five Bells 1963-1999* (in production) July 1999,
(for deposit in the Australian National Film and Sound Archive).

References:

Kenneth Slessor, *Five Bells*, 1939;
Robert Hughes, "Irrational Imagery in Australian Painting" & John Olsen, "Sir Arthur Streeton" in *ART and Australia*, November 1963;
Kenneth Slessor, "A Portrait of Sydney" & "Background of Five Bells" in *Bread and Wine - Selected Prose*,
A & R 1970;
Laurie Thomas, "Foreword" & Douglas Stewart, "Kenneth Slessor" in *Salute to Five Bells, John Olsen's Opera House Journal*, 1973 op cit;
ABC TV Documentary *John Olsen - A Life*; with Peter Ross, May 1995.

On July 2, 1999, John Olsen re-visited *Five Bells*. He later said:

"I was stunned to see it again. I'd forgotten how good it is. I'm delighted to see it in such great shape. The oil paint is as fresh as the day I finished it, even better. I feel it's one of my four or five best paintings. It was the genesis of many of my later works.

"*Five Bells* was my first commission to paint *in situ* to cover a wall. The freedom, scale and scope of the commission challenged me to dare to try for a masterpiece. I didn't hesitate. I brushed a line around the core theme, the seed-burst, the life-burst, the sea-harbour, the source of life. Inside and around this core, I painted images drawn from metaphors and similes in Slessor's poem of our harbour-city, and from my own emotional and physical involvement with the harbour, and with my young family in Watsons Bay, my 'Milkwood' fishing village. I wanted to show the Harbour as a movement, a sea suck, and the sound of the water as though I am part of the sea. Water is so wonderful, why did our species ever leave it?



"This painting says directly what I wanted it to say: 'I am in the sea-harbour, and the sea-harbour is in me'... So too is much of Slessor's poem of 'one life, of Joe, long dead, who lives between five bells'. Joe, 'long sucked away in mud', has become part of the harbour where 'the sea pinks bend like lilies'. Among the crabs, anemones, sea urchins, squid, mussels, and seaweeds of the rockpools and the harbour bottom, one can believe one sees a dead friend's 'gaunt chin and pricked eye' 'squeezing your face in agonies of speech on speechless panes'.

"*Five Bells* shows the sea harbour by sunlight. Slessor's 'deep and dissolving verticals of light' at the top of the 1963 painting are Sydney sunshine. The white background with flutters of blue in the sky, bring the Harbour to life. Ten years later in 1973, in *Salute to Five Bells* in the Sydney Opera House, I painted an elegy of the Harbour by moonlight.

"Life is change. New generations reinvent Sydney. Streeton and Roberts saw foreground, middle distance and background, in a particular mood at a particular moment. For me, painting became intrinsically more poetic and 'all-at-once'. I paint multiple images, aerial and underwater, metaphors of emotions, not photo images. Each of us who knows the Harbour is moved by the endless magnetic power and mystery of the experience of being on, in, under, over and around this beautiful blue bitch goddess and her siren city."

Other documentation of the historic importance of this painting includes: -

"Irrational imagery in Australian art really begins with Nolan... The renewed interest is largely due to John Olsen's return from Europe and the impact of his new work. Olsen presents experience as flux... his manipulation of space catches us up in a web of linear energy, along which figurative incidents occur. Gaudi's architecture has deeply influenced Olsen's art since Olsen visited Barcelona with Corneille in 1957." (Robert Hughes, 1963)

In (Streeton's) *Circular Quay*, the dancing calligraphy plunges deeply and dramatically into the picture plane, the brush moves with hasty, joyous delight, punctuating empty space with accent, full stop, movement and nuance, exploiting everything Streeton had learnt of Whistler." (John Olsen, 1963)

"Olsen has created Sydney – its harbour, life, vulgarity, beauty, movement – in the way that Drysdale created the outback. His landscape teems with... everything, seen not from one point of view but from all points of view and as though everything from morning til night were happening at once. He lets the deep wells of his involvement with it all flood through his hand. A spontaneous image begets another, suggests another, becomes ambiguous, loaded with associations, complexities." (Laurie Thomas, 1973)

"Sydney the true aquarian city - air and water... the light of Sydney Harbour – the way the hills cradle light into the water... beautiful floppy basin, the suck and pull of light, tide and rocks... the harbour in the afternoon where it all turns coppery... the harbour in the evening where lights sparkle and dance, the loves of the seaport and the delights of the seaport, deaths in the seaport.... The sea is like the earth breathing.... I like to paint spontaneously, directly... I like paintings that are as light as a whisper and as fragile as a morning breeze. We want to say the most with the least... (I like to) probe deeper into the hidden world... the rhythms in living in a big city such as Sydney" (John Olsen, 1973)

"Among all the painters who have been challenged or captivated by the harbour, it is perhaps in the work of John Olsen that we find the most complex, multidimensional, mysterious and provocative of images. Olsen found in thriving scenes of harbour life a rich bristling energy... a miraculously textured visual feast" (Sandra McGrath, 1979)

"The 1963 painting is full of youthful vigour and ebullience.... The incisively drawn, probing lines moving out from the circle, and the accentuation of the edge, foreshadow (work) of the following decade". (Deborah Hart, 1991)