

George Clarke was a "a young Bohemian visionary" eager to "transform the world and revolutionise Australian culture" when he asked his friend John Olsen to transform the living room of his Vaucluse home in the eastern suburbs of Sydney.

"I said: 'There's your wall, John. Paint it!' He said: 'I'm thinking of a Spanish bullfight thing' and I said: 'Oh yeah, that's interesting'. I was just being polite," Clarke says, laughing. "A week later, we were drinking wine on the terrace overlooking the harbour and I asked John: 'Why do you like Spanish culture so much? I've never been able to cope with it - blood and death, red and black - how about Sydney Harbour?' And he said: 'Yes. Yes. *Five Bells!*'"

It was 1963, and the struggling utopian artist John Olsen was about to create the first of several works based on Kenneth Slessor's poem *Five Bells*, the subject of his later and best-known public commission at

Water of life

A long-hidden painting on a Sydney wall anticipated one of John Olsen's finest works.

the Sydney Opera House. Olsen had been inspired by the poet's lyrical invocations of the sea, the tale of a drowning man, and the notion that the whole span of a human life could be imagined - even vicariously experienced - in a flash of thought as brief as the interval between the strokes of a bell. The man whose life was lived "between the double and single bell" was Joe Lynch, a journalist of the '20s who disappeared from the lower deck of a harbour ferry, clad in a tattered raincoat and heavily laden down with bottles of beer.

Olsen's mural - painted on board and

screwed into a wall bounded by cedar panelling - remained hidden from public view for 37 years. Now it is up for sale. "I've had what the English poets call 'intimations of mortality'," explains Clarke. "It's not a death sentence but the doctors say that I have a certain incurable condition and it's jolted me to attend to unfinished business." Anyway, he says, the painting needs a new life and he feels a moral responsibility for this "great and historic" piece of Australian art. "It's a great story by a great Australian poet [whose first poem was published in *The Bulletin* while still a schoolboy] about the great Sydney Harbour by one of the greatest Australian painter's now living."

The painting celebrates the raucous energy of the harbour, the noisy ebb and flow of the city with its tributaries and Tank Stream, a luminescent rockpool crowded with encrustations and animal life.

Olsen described the inspiration in his book *Salute to Five Bells*: "I've always thought that the formation of Sydney's landforms [is] like a bitch goddess and frankly at times it frightens me. The breasty contours of its hills and when your [sic] sailing through the heads, you feel as though your [sic] sailing through her arms, and when you are coming into ... her you feel you are going deeper and you are caught in her spidery net." That was certainly so for the drowned journalist. "And there," says Clarke emphatically, pointing to a small pale blob midstream, "is the eye or the downward pointing head of Joe Lynch!"

The painting, which has been insured for \$300,000, will be auctioned on August 2. - ANABEL DEAN **15**

Olsen's Sydney Harbour mural ... celebrating the raucous energy of the harbour, the noisy ebb and flow of the city

