

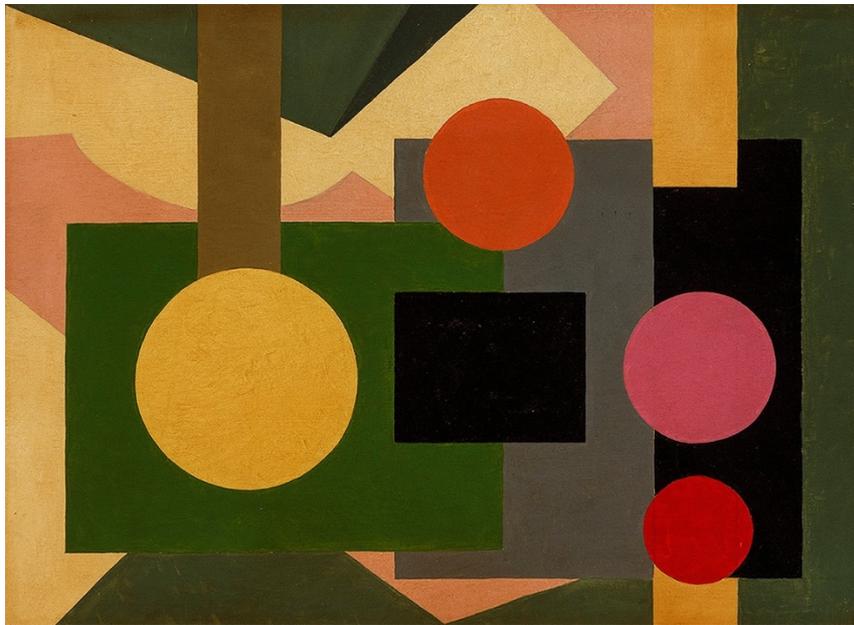
# Smith&Singer

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MASTERPIECE BY AUSTRALIAN PIONEER OF ABSTRACTION TO BE OFFERED  
AT SMITH & SINGER THIS AUGUST

*Ralph Balson's 'Painting No. 13' was Included in Australia's First Entirely  
Non-Figurative Exhibition in 1941*

*Repatriated from the United Kingdom, Work Reflects the Origins &  
Appreciation of Abstract Art in Australia*



RALPH BALSON 1890-1964

**Painting No. 13** 1941

oil on cardboard, 39.5 x 54.5 cm

Estimate \$100,000–150,000

**MELBOURNE, 11 June 2021** – This August, one of Ralph Balson's history-making 1941 compositions will be offered at Smith & Singer. Balson (1890-1964) was among the most progressive Australian artists of his generation. His dynamic yet measured approach to abstraction was at the fine edge of the avant-garde in Australian art and, in 1941, he made history by holding the first entirely non-figurative exhibition of art in Australia. The trail-blazing show – which included the present work, *Painting No. 13* 1941 – was held at Anthony Hordern's Fine Art Galleries, Sydney, and is seen as a watershed moment in Australian art. A window into the past, this composition captures the fervent ambition of the Sydney art scene in the 1930s and 1940s and illustrates the nation's proud history on the international stage of abstraction. Smith & Singer are honoured to be offering it for sale this August and welcome visitors to its exhibition in Melbourne and Sydney.

## BOTHENHAMPTON TO BONDI

A shy and reticent person, Balson was first apprenticed to a plumber and housepainter in Bothenhampton, Dorset and, upon emigrating to Sydney in 1913 at the age of 23, he continued this trade in Australia. While supporting his family as a decorator, he took up fine art night classes in the early 1920s; first studying at Julian Ashton's Sydney Art School, then at Dorrit Black's Modern Art Centre and finally at the progressive Crowley-Fizelle School. For over two decades Balson calmly developed his style in the nascent yet burgeoning Sydney art scene. Throughout that time, and until his death, his closest ally was his friend and former teacher Grace Crowley. Both born in 1890, Balson would share a studio in Sydney with Crowley and, much later, at her country house in High Hill, at Mittagong.

## A MOMENT THAT CHANGED AUSTRALIAN ART: RALPH BALSON AT ANTHONY HORDERN'S FINE ART GALLERIES, SYDNEY, 1941

It was after 28 years in Australia that Balson would leave his greatest mark on the progression of art in his adopted nation.

The 1941 trailblazing exhibition of Balson's work showcased the artist's bold style and was the first entirely non-figurative exhibition held in Australia. From his George Street studio, he combined the late Cubist theory of rotational movement in composition favoured by Crowley, with uncompromising, geometric subjects. While non-figurative, a sense of depth was essential to his work, and the complex overlapping of shapes at contravening vectors allowed him to simulate the essentially figurative trick of perspective, while maintaining a gentle palette of primaries and complimentary hues. In *Painting No. 13* 1941, we see four circles and a black, central rectangle playing the roles of leading figures, with a receding and overlapping construction of shapes behind them completing the shallow picture plane.

'Mr. Ralph Balson's exhibition of paintings now on view at Anthony Horderns' Art Gallery, is the only show of "abstract" paintings yet produced in Australia.

This type of art belongs to the art of our modern age, the age of motor car and machine, the age of the immense factory, the towering architecture of public buildings, the beautiful simplicity of modern homes.

It is a type of art that depends only on painting, and not upon anything else, for expression; and it illustrates the purely constructive in painting.' (*'Art Exhibition', Truth, Sydney, 3 August 1941, p. 32*)

*Geoffrey Smith, Chairman of Smith & Singer commented: 'We are delighted to be offering this recently repatriated masterpiece of Australian art for auction this August. Following its 1941 exhibition in Balson's precedent-setting abstract show, the work was lost from the public eye, and indeed to Australia. Eighty years later, Painting No. 13 emerged in a regional auction house in the United*

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Kingdom, unknown and catalogued as “R. Balson (20<sup>th</sup> Century) *An abstract composition*”. It is with immense pleasure that Smith & Singer present this key example within the history and development of Australian art to the Australian public for the first time since its initial display, and we look forward to welcoming visitors to our exhibitions in Melbourne and Sydney before its sale on 18 August.’

## NOTABLE INSTITUTIONAL ACQUISITIONS & RECENT SALES OF 1941 BALSON COMPOSITIONS



RALPH BALSON 1890-1964  
**Painting No. 14** 1941  
oil on cardboard, 47.3 x 78.8 cm  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne  
Loti & Victor Smorgon Fund, 2012



RALPH BALSON 1890-1964  
**Painting No. 8** 1941  
oil on cardboard, 78.7 x 63.5 cm  
Art Gallery of New South Wales,  
Sydney, Purchased, 1965

RALPH BALSON 1890-1964  
**Untitled** 1941  
oil and metallic paint on cardboard, 70.5 x 56 cm  
Sold Bonhams, Sydney,  
14 November 2018 for \$402,600



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## AT A GLANCE

RALPH BALSON 1890-1964

*Painting No. 13* 1941

oil on cardboard

39.5 x 54.5 cm

Estimate \$100,000–150,000

Important Australian & International Art

Auction, Sydney, 18 August, 6.30 pm

National Council of Jewish Women of Australia, 111 Queen Street, Woollahra NSW 2025

The health of our clients, employees and community is of paramount importance. We have implemented stringent protocols within our premises, including social distancing, frequent hand and area sanitising, and a maximum number of clients in each exhibition at any time. Full details are available upon request.

**Viewings in Melbourne** 4-8 August 2021, 10 am to 5 pm

14-16 Collins Street, Melbourne

**Viewings in Sydney** 11-18 August, 10 am to 5 pm

30 Queen Street, Woollahra

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