

# Smith&Singer

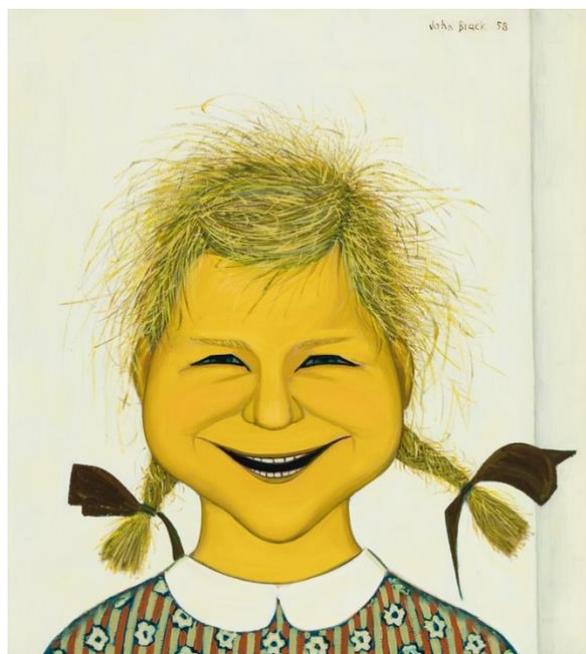
Melbourne | +61 (0)3 9508 9900 | Thomas Austin | [Thomas.Austin@smithandsinger.com.au](mailto:Thomas.Austin@smithandsinger.com.au)

HIDDEN MASTERPIECE BY JOHN BRACK EMERGES FOR AUCTION IN JUNE AT  
SMITH & SINGER

*Presented for Public Sale for the First Time since its Creation 62 Years Ago and  
Never Previously Reproduced in Colour*

*A Key Work within the Highly Revered Cannon of One of Australia's Rarest and  
Most Highly Regarded Artists*

*'Laughing Child' 1958 Captures the Love and Humour of Brack's Relationship  
with his Youngest Daughter, Charlotte*



JOHN BRACK 1920-1999

**Laughing Child** 1958

oil on canvas, 45.8 x 40.8 cm

Estimate \$400,000–600,000

© Helen Brack

**MELBOURNE, 29 May 2020** – In June 2020, Smith & Singer will have the honour of offering a rare and deeply personal masterpiece by John Brack in our upcoming *Important Australian & International Art* auction. The work – which has never been reproduced in colour before – remained ‘lost’ to art historians and scholars, having disappeared into a private collection following its inaugural and brief exhibition in 1958, and recently ‘re-discovered’ by Smith & Singer. The composition emerges for sale from the descendants of Miss Cara I. Black and will be publically exhibited and offered at auction for the first time since its creation 62 years ago.

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## JOHN BRACK 1920-1999, *LAUGHING CHILD* 1958 (PICTURED TOP)

Wildly gleeful and imbued with the humour and insight only the parent of this jovial girl could portray, *Laughing Child* is one of Brack's finest paintings of his daughters, and is the first, and most significant, painting of his second series of familial scenes.

The highly perceptive and analytical style for which Brack is best known is slightly softened in his domestic portraits, perhaps most notably in a series of works on paper and paintings from 1954-1955 that included depictions of his wife and four daughters. *First Daughter* 1955 (pictured right), *Second Daughter*, *Third Daughter* and *Fourth Daughter*. In this suite of compositions, we see the eldest of John and Helen Brack's children, five-year old Clara, on the floor on elbows and knees, drawing; Vicky in profile on tiptoes cleaning her teeth at the bathroom basin; Freda standing frontally, fists clenched and mouth pouting in a 'terrible twos' sulk; and Charlotte the baby in nappies, lying on her back kicking puppy fat legs. They are charming, even tender images. As Deborah Clark has observed, 'Brack's images of children have a fierce individuality which separates them from most of the adults in his *oeuvre*. They are the most expressive of his human creations, having a kind of wildness contained below the surface of his austere compositions.' (1)



JOHN BRACK 1920-1999  
**First Daughter** 1955  
oil on canvas on composition  
board, 75.5 x 55.4 cm  
Private Collection  
Sold Sotheby's Australia (now  
trading as Smith & Singer),  
28 April 2015 for \$884,500  
© Helen Brack

Several years later, Brack returned to the theme of children most notably in the present *Laughing Child* 1958, an extraordinary depiction of his youngest daughter, Charlotte, who has emerged from her nappies of four years previously. Here, the precision, stillness and formality of the composition is broken by the eruption of laughter from the subject that sends ripples across the entire painted surface of the picture: the mouth, eyes, plaits and shoulders reverberate with movement. The child's hair, each strand beautifully and delicately composed, resembles a bird's nest, and reminds one of *Der Struwwelpeter* ("shock-headed Peter") from the famous 1845 German children's book that demonstrates the disastrous consequences of misbehaviour.

*Laughing Child* was included in Australian Galleries *Second Anniversary Exhibition* in Melbourne in June 1958 and acquired by Miss Cara Isabella Black. Cara Black, descended from the Scottish pastoralist Neil Black of Glenormiston, assembled an important collection of Australian modernism, including major works by John Brack, Sidney Nolan, and John Perceval, which was largely dispersed in 1988.

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## THE OUTSIDER-MODERNIST OF AUSTRALIAN 20<sup>th</sup>-CENTURY PAINTING

John Brack is a central figure in Australian modernist painting. His *Collins St., 5p.m.* 1955 (National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne) is among the most widely recognised paintings in the entire history of Australian art. Brack has been the subject of two monographs (by Ronald Millar and Sasha Grishin), three public gallery retrospectives (by the Australian National University, Canberra, and the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne) and various survey exhibitions covering particular periods, media and themes.

Yet he is also something of an outsider, an isolate. He is resolutely figurative, but not in the expressive, rhetorical manner of his Antipodean contemporaries; his figures are stiff, flat, banal. To take the opposite perspective, while his paintings are high modernist abstractions, structured with the geometrical precision of an architect's blueprint, they never cease to represent the recognisably real, whether people, places or things. He has an unerring eye for the ritual pleasures of Australian suburban society, and his sardonic images of jockeys, brides, schoolchildren, ballroom dancers, gymnasts and nudes, are a form of social realism without the left wing politics.



JOHN BRACK 1920-1999

**Two Running Girls** 1959

oil on composition board, 104.5 x 96.5 cm

Private Collection

Sold Sotheby's Australia (now trading as Smith & Singer), 11 May 2016 for \$1,647,000

© Helen Brack

*Geoffrey Smith, Chairman of Smith & Singer commented: 'Intelligent, wry, humanist, humorous, and incisive, Laughing Child 1958 is an astonishing portrait of Brack's youngest daughter, Charlotte. Reproduced in colour for the first time and hidden from public view since its creation more than sixty years ago, Laughing Child re-emerges to assume its rightful position as both a major addition in John Brack's oeuvre and as one of the most compelling and unique representations of childhood within the history and development of Australian art.'*

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(1) Deborah Clark, John Brack: inside and outside, Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 1999, n.p.

## AT A GLANCE

Lot 6

JOHN BRACK 1920-1999

*Laughing Child* 1958

oil on canvas, 45.8 x 40.8 cm

Estimate \$400,000–600,000

Important Australian & International Art

Estimate: \$5,962,000–8,310,000, 59 lots

Auction, Sydney, 24 June 2020, 6.30 pm

National Council of Jewish Women of Australia , 111 Queen St, 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 disinfecting, and a maximum number of clients in each exhibition at any time. Full details are available upon request.**

**Viewings in Melbourne** 8-14 June, 10 am to 5 pm

14-16 Collins Street, Melbourne

**Viewings in Sydney** 17-24 June 2020, 10 am to 5 pm

30 & 34 Queen Street, Woollahra

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