



Charles Hewitt's customers ranged from top artists to white-collar crims. And he has stories about all of them.

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For more than 50 years, Charles Hewitt was the framer of choice to a pantheon of our most famous artists: Brett Whiteley, Russell Drysdale, Sidney Nolan, Arthur Boyd, Jeffrey Smart and John Olsen. He's provided frames for up to 400 works in the National Gallery of Australia — including the controversial Blue Poles. He's framed works for prime ministers and some of our more notorious white-collar criminals. So, in this illustrious career, what's the strangest thing he's ever been asked to frame?

"A lock of a woman's pubic hair," laughs Hewitt, 75. "She was a very well-known society 'matron', as they were called in those days. And she wanted to give her very wealthy, and very important, lover a very special present for his birthday." Any other weird requests? Well, a very battered, smashed-in car door for ad man John Singleton. "Singo had been into stock car racing in his hoon days. He said, 'Mate, that f. king door saved my life. So make sure it gets a good frame.'"

Behind every great painting is a great framer, but last month Hewitt drove from his Sydney base to Melbourne and handed over his amazing collection of antique and modern casts — used to make many of the period frames in the National Gallery — to a young framer who has started his own collection of casts.

Hewitt closed his framing and furniture business in Sydney's Marrickville last year and the passing of the baton was a bittersweet moment. He'd hoped to sell the business he founded in a tin shed in Woollahra in 1964 as a going concern with the team he'd assembled over 51 years — people with under-threat skills: framers, carpenters, cabinet makers, spray painters, wood machinists, gilders and people able to make compo (the hardened plaster used to decorate frames). But tastes have changed; commissions have dried up. "Young people don't even want antique furniture these days. You can't give it away," Hewitt says. "So they don't buy ornate frames for their paintings."



It was so different when Hewitt began. His career reflects both the giddy rise of Australian art on the world stage and a coming-of-age of the typical Australian art collector. In the early '60s, when he set up his business, new galleries were opening in Sydney and Melbourne, so in 1966 he took on a new partner, John Webber, who provided much-needed capital to expand.

The business moved to a closed pub in Albion Street, Surry Hills. One morning, soon after the Albion Street factory opened, there was an important visitor. "Brett Whiteley, who had just come back from London, knocked on my door because we were already starting to do interesting frames," Hewitt remembers. "In London, Brett had a framer who had made these cushion frames. They're now the classic Whiteley frame: rounded, gilded and burnished. He asked if I could do the same frame."

Of all the artists Hewitt made frames for, Whiteley was his best customer, "Tas" Drysdale a close second. "I did three exhibitions for Tas. One went to London and the Queen bought some of those. I also did an exhibition for Sid [Nolan] at the Clune Galleries, which later became the Yellow House. Arthur [Boyd] also came to Albion Street, and Jeffrey [Smart]. And I did all of Lloyd Rees's framing right to his death, designing the special frames he wanted."

Hewitt's next big break came in the late 1970s when he bought a collection of about 200 casts of High Victorian English framing motifs dating back to around 1810. Hewitt says the situation for art collectors in the 1980s was diametrically opposed to what it is now. In the 1930s and '40s, families inheriting Victorian-era paintings had often thrown away the ornate frames and replaced them with modern, Art Deco frames. But four or five decades later, their grandchildren wanted a frame in the same style and era as the painting. That's why Hewitt bought the High Victorian English casts. And each time "a particularly pretty frame" came in to be repaired, Hewitt asked his wood carver to make a cast of each detail. Usually that involved a drawing and a reverse carving in hard wood so the detail could be replicated later in compo. That accounts for the other 200 casts in his collection.

Hewitt's third big break came in 1980, when John "Sam" Jones, a curator of Australian art at the National Gallery of Australia, rang to ask if he could reframe various works from the Commonwealth Collection that would be going into the NGA when it opened in 1982.

Hewitt doesn't regard Blue Poles as the most important work he did for the NGA. "That baguette-style frame was a very simple wooden strip with a gilded edge, which was a well-known style for modern art in America," he says. "The grandest frame I've ever made for the NGA was for George Lambert's 1908 painting Portrait Group, of a woman in a beautiful hat with two small children. This frame was carved in New York by Abe Munn, probably America's greatest frame manufacturer at that point. The NGA wanted a classic Louis XV frame. So I had it hand carved and we gilded it here in Sydney."

The prime ministers? "Gough and Margaret [Whitlam] asked me to frame some private works, but I've done a lot of work for Paul [Keating]." That was mainly architectural engravings, Hewitt says. The white-collar "identities"? "I did a lot of work for Rene [Rivkin, the disgraced former stockbroker]. We made masses of furniture for his houses in Bellevue Hill, and I hung his collection of Chinese silk robes in his office in the city."

But let's not forget Nati Stoliar, the former Sydney property developer now doing a two-year stretch in a US prison for a \$40 million fraud. "I did around \$300,000 worth of furniture for Nati," Hewitt says. "He had bulldozed down three of the best houses in Point Piper [Sydney's most expensive peninsula] and built this house of staggering vulgarity. Then he filled it with ugly furniture. He was a gorgeous man. I loved him. Both he and his wife were so very funny."

As for Hewitt, he's as passionate as ever. Still working, still hanging, still advising on frames. And still reflecting on his position as a unique eyewitness to five decades of Australian art.