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National

## Christie's taken to court over claims of Albert Tucker fake

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Anne Davies

Sydney barrister Louise McBride is taking on one of the world's most prestigious auction houses, Christie's, over an allegedly fake Albert Tucker work she bought in 2000.

The question of whether the painting is fake or not is still to be determined, but Sotheby's has said it has been unable to find the work in the late Albert Tucker's index card records and that his widow, Barbara, does not recall it.

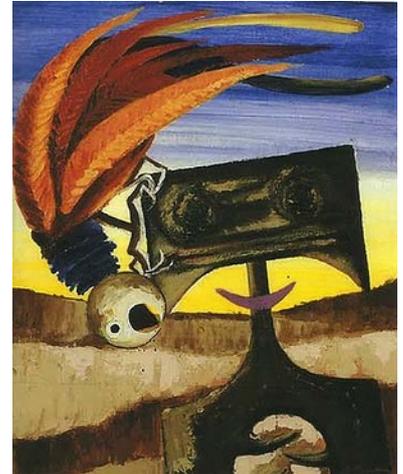
Ms McBride is convinced her painting (Faun and Parrot; circa 1976) is not the real thing.

As she has tried to untangle the provenance of her painting, Ms McBride has discovered a web of associations that sound more like a whodunnit thriller than real life.

Some of the same names that have featured in other cases involving allegations of fake artworks have been linked to her painting.

The story begins in 2000, when Ms McBride's art consultant and friend, Vivienne Sharpe, phoned her in London, suggesting she make an offer on a Tucker work that had been passed in at auction at Christie's in May 2000.

The allegedly fake version of Albert Tucker's Faun and Parrot.



Ms McBride paid \$86,000 for the painting, purchased via Ms Sharpe, even though it had been passed in at \$50,000. She says she was reassured by the Christie's catalogue, which stated the work was signed by Albert Tucker and had been exhibited at the Tolarno Gallery in Melbourne in 1969-70.

But since doubts were raised about the painting, Ms McBride has discovered that Christie's had two different letters on file about its provenance, that the Tolarno Gallery did not operate until 1978, and that Christie's had consulted Melbourne University art experts in August 2000 about her painting and another.

The man selling the painting was car dealer and art collector Alex Holland, who acquired it in late 1999 from his father's Ivan Holland Galleries. Before that, it was with Irascible Galleries, owned by the now bankrupt Peter Gant. The original owner was said to be Barry O'Sullivan, whose father bought it either from Tolarno or Dominion galleries about 1970.

In her Supreme Court action, Ms McBride alleges Christie's knew the work was a fake, or was negligent in not properly researching its provenance. She is also alleging misleading and deceptive conduct.

Her action against her former friend Ms Sharpe claims Ms Sharpe, an art expert, failed to undertake due diligence and that she took secret commissions in relation to this and two other works. Alex Holland is named as an alleged party to the misleading and deceptive conduct.



Christie's Australian representative Ronan Sulich said he was unable to comment because the matter was before the courts. However, the auction house is expected to question whether the painting is fake and to raise the statute of limitations. Ms Sharpe was unable to be contacted.

Several cases of alleged mistaken artistic identity have grabbed headlines in Australia. In 2010, three forged Robert Dickerson and Charles Blackman drawings were destroyed by the artists after Justice Peter Vickery deemed them to be forgeries. Mr Gant, the dealer who provided the valuations for the forged artworks, was found in breach of the Fair Trading Act in light of his misattribution of the works.

Last year, banker Andrew Pridham sued Melbourne dealer Anita Archer for selling him a painting titled Big Blue Lavender Bay for \$2.5 million. The parties settled, but the dubious painting was also linked to Mr Gant.

Ms McBride said the litigation might well cost more than the painting itself. "Millions of dollars change hands each week in the art market and corporates and self-managed super funds have been encouraged to consider art as a serious investment," she said. "But if art is to be considered a serious asset class, then it needs to be regulated. There is nobody you can complain to and people don't get struck off if there is negligence or worse."

The case is due in court on Monday for directions.