

# Art scammers get crafty online, customers warned

» ANDREW TAYLOR

Consumers are at risk of being ripped off by a website selling artworks and prints at more than 10 times their market value, a leading art expert has warned.

David Hulme said art collectors should avoid making purchases from Chartfords, an online gallery that operates in Britain with a head office in Canada.

"I'm concerned, not just due to the high prices of the art in relation to their real value, but the way that people are being encouraged to invest - potentially - very substantial sums of money on art that has very little commercial value," Mr Hulme said.

An approved valuer for the federal government's Cultural Gifts Program, Mr Hulme said he had been approached by two clients in



**Art buyers beware: David Hulme warns.** Photo: Dean Sewell

the past month about buying works from the online art gallery, including a 19th-century painting by British painter David Fulton that was advertised for \$CAD12,500 (\$12,157).

"I found this exact painting had been purchased for a little over £400 [\$620] in December 2013 at

a local auctioneer in Sussex in the UK," he said. "I simply phoned the client and advised him that this would be a very poor investment under the circumstances."

Yet, a promotional video claims that "huge savings can be made" because "we bypass most of the supply chain, eliminating most of these traditional costs".

Fairfax Media sought comment from one of the founders of Chartfords, Jack Charters, but he had yet to respond at time of publication.

Mr Hulme uncovered other examples of overpriced art on the Chartfords site. A painting titled *Two Snakes Dreaming* by Australian artist Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri was apparently sold for \$CAD29,000, yet Mr Hulme

said it appeared to have been purchased for about £1300 at an auction in February in Kent.

"So it does seem there is a pattern of placing very high prices on artworks, although this in itself is not illegal," Mr Hulme said.

"Unethical, yes. Illegal, no," said Tom Godfrey, head of media at Choice. "Merchants are free to charge whatever people are willing to pay."

But Mr Godfrey said people buying art online should seek an independent valuation and Chartfords had to comply with local consumer law regarding product liability, guarantees and misleading and deceptive conduct when supplying to Australian consumers. "Of course, enforcement is another matter," he said.