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‘High drama and ... comedy’

Developing the cultural collections of the University of Melbourne

Ray Marginson, interviewed by Robyn Sloggett

Dr Ray Marginson AM was the University of Melbourne’s first Vice-Principal, taking up the position in February 1966 and retiring in 1988. During that time he was instrumental in focussing attention on the cultural collections of the University, and in developing strategies and programs that would not only provide the necessary policies and procedures for their continued development and care, but also ensuring that there was very practical financial support for these purposes.

In this interview with Associate Professor Robyn Sloggett, Director of the Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation, Ray Marginson outlines the excitement of his years at the University, provides insights into the guile and diplomacy he drew on to build the collections and the programs that sustain them, and discusses the battles he won and lost along the way.

Robyn Sloggett: *Can you give us a brief overview of the state of the cultural collections at the University when you began work here in 1966? Further, was there any budget dedicated to the development or care of the cultural collections and if so how was this delivered and managed?*

Ray Marginson: Council appointed me as the Vice-Principal in late 1965

and I took up duty early in the new year. The background to the review of the administration is set out very well in Poynter and Rasmussen’s 1996 history *A place apart*.¹ My initial focus was very much on reviewing and reorganising the administration and assisting in dealing with the difficult financial situations of the University. However it was clear that, in addition to the major financial problems there were many aspects of the University’s assets that demanded attention. First of these was the condition of the grounds, and the haphazard placement of new buildings that we were planning to erect to cope with the snowballing growth in student numbers. My duty statement was refreshingly simple: ‘To advise the Council on its finances and property’; a marked contrast to the conventions of today. This long-winded preamble is necessary to emphasise the significant pressures facing us in the sixties and what were our first priorities. However an interest in art and friendship with many artists led me to look at this particular area as part of our holdings. These were considerable, dating from the 19th century, back to Sir Redmond Barry, and added to many times through generous gifts and interest shown by many including Dr Samuel Ewing, Sir John Medley, Dr Orde Poynton,

Colonel Aubrey Gibson, Professor Joseph Burke and the Society of Collectors, and countless others. Of course some important portraits were lost in the Old Wilson Hall fire but the collection was still very substantial.

Who had responsibility for the care and development of the University’s artwork at this time?

Many of the works of art were securely located, such as the Ewing Gift in the University Union, but even it could not be seen as truly secure. It was in a remote unsupervised space. The situation of many other works was even more seriously insecure. Moreover a casual examination of the records showed missing items and the condition, particularly of works on paper as well as many of the oils, left much to be desired. For instance the portrait of Professor Giblin by Dobell had substantial surface cracking, that eventually had to have inpainting.²

Some time in 1966 I put it to the Council that I felt the term ‘property’ in their remit to me should include all works of art. They agreed.

At this time we were examining the regulations governing the many trust funds that held gifts to the University, supporting a wide range of purposes, such as chairs, scholarships,

Arthur Boyd, *Untitled (Woman in cornfield)*, (1961), charcoal on paper, sight: 145.0 x 171.0 cm. Accession no. 1971.0072, University of Melbourne Art Collection. Purchased 1971. Reproduced with the permission of the Bundanon Trust.



prizes and the like. In the course of this we noted the C.D. Lloyd Trust that had as its purpose 'the advancement and encouragement of learning in such manner as the Council shall determine'. The application of these funds to works of art needed some explanation and broad commitment to the objectives we had. With the support of the (then) Professorial Board and Council the funds were applied initially to attack the problem of the condition of the cultural collections. In establishing this use of the C.D. Lloyd Trust I had great support particularly from Roy (later Sir Douglas) Wright, who subsequently became our Chancellor, and of Sir Joseph Burke.

Professor Burke and I had discussed the position and this urgent need for conservation. He was most helpful. We decided to set up formal machinery and a Works of Art Committee which, in addition to the usual *ex-officio* members, would include significant external art figures: Colonel Gibson, Dr Ursula Hoff, Eric Westbrook (then director of the National Gallery of Victoria [NGV]) with Sir Daryl Lindsay as a consultant. I assumed the chairmanship and took the project as one within the Vice-Principal's Division. In the light of the limited resources from the C.D. Lloyd Trust the

committee agreed to give its first priority to a policy of recovery, identification and restoration. It saw its urgent initial task as one of conservation. The planned program for this was made possible by Eric Westbrook's unstinting support. This was expressed by his making available the skilled services of NGV conservators Harley Griffiths and David Lawrence. We were even then casting a shadow forward; today we have the fully-fledged academic department of the Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation. So the first limited resources were applied to conservation and assessing our holdings.

How did you determine what art the University owned?

The other issue was, as you imply in your question, what should we still have? So Joe Burke 'lent' me a postgraduate student in fine arts, Robert Gaston, for him to review the records and the available material and to compile a list of what should still be in the holdings. In 1967 a very preliminary and rudimentary catalogue was submitted to the Council and the Board. We were well and truly launched. Circulation of this list to all departments resulted in some unexpected surfacing of works that had 'disappeared'.

Well this process involved moments of high drama and also of comedy. Not the least of these centred around my invaluable and resourceful administrative secretary, Mrs Robyn Patton. Whenever she had an infrequent (in light of her workload) free moment, she would don a pair of overalls and go looking for something we knew we should have. This, like so much of our involvement in the art area was, in effect, some light relief from the major problems in the University operations with which we all were faced in the late 1960s. One great find were the two Leonard French designs submitted (unsuccessfully) for the Baillieu Library competition in 1958, for a mural in its entry. The competition winner, by Norma Redpath, can be seen today. Robyn found the Leonard French works in the library boiler room. Another was the result of Robyn innocently asking the maintenance officer, 'Where would things be put if the porters didn't know what to do with them, for instance, a painting?' The reply was 'on the rock shelf in the Wilson Hall basement'! Sure enough there were on the shelf several 18th century mezzotints and three etchings of the University by John Shirlow, including one looking up the old centre drive from Grattan Street. For many years

John Perceval, Untitled (Angel playing the lute),
1958, stoneware with *sang de boeuf* glaze,
31.0 x 26.0 x 24.0 cm. Accession no. 1960.0013,
University of Melbourne Art Collection.
Gift of Professor Joseph Burke, 1960,
through the Society of Collectors.
© John de Burgh Perceval.
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these hung in the old ninth floor conference room in the Raymond Priestley Building. We started, therefore, with very few resources, a great deal of enthusiasm and help from many people outside the University, as well as within it.

Could you outline the beginnings of the University Gallery?

By the end of 1968, using the C.D. Lloyd funds, we appointed a curator, Mrs Betty Swan, for a couple of days a week. She worked tirelessly for very little pay and continued the listing and checking, but in 1969 she went back to England. We still had little money but we constantly sought to enlarge the works of art fund with some success. It was not until 1970 that, with our hearts in our mouths, the Committee appointed another part-time curator, Mrs Betty Clarke, initially two days a week, and later three, but still poorly paid. Betty Clarke had been a student at the Gallery School and further developed the listing, but it became clear that her absolute objective, and ours, was to issue a formal catalogue.

In the early 1970s I was building Arts South (later called the John Medley Building) with Roy Grounds as architect. It was a mixed success as a building; Roy was a bit distracted as he was also designing the Arts Centre



Ray Marginson with Sir John Rothenstein CBE, art historian and former Director of the Tate Gallery, discussing a painting by Rupert Bunny at the 1975 opening of the University Art Gallery in the Old Physics Building. Private collection.



at the same time. We also had terrible trouble with siting the building. A view strongly held by some was to have it further to the north, which would have stymied the subsequent work on the south lawn and the underground car park. In one Buildings Committee meeting, in desperation, I suggested perhaps they would like it on rollers, to move it up and down the south lawn.

However the two towers were built on my preferred site. Our great good fortune was to have a Dean very sympathetic to the arts, Professor Harry Simon of oriental studies. He not only let us have the fourth floor in the east tower for a gallery, but also, a singular and inspired act, took \$100,000 out of his building budget (no small sum in the 1970s) which, after talking to us, he gave to Patrick McCaughey, then a fellow in fine arts, to buy works from Australian artists to house in the building. Patrick was at the time *The Age* art critic. This brought us, among many significant works, Laycock's *The Mercurions*³ and a monumental 1961 charcoal drawing, a nude in a cornfield by Arthur Boyd.⁴ Also of course many New York School type abstracts which were Patrick's focus at the time.

All through this period, as I have said, we had great support from

Professor Joe Burke. But he had no interest in adding to his substantial workload by the responsibility of an art gallery and the conservation and management of the University collection. From the start of the Herald Chair he operated on the basis of the original Sir Keith Murdoch concept. This was to build Australia's finest and, I think, first school of fine art which by this point he had done with great success; and to be an authoritative voice in the community to enlarge its understanding of art. All of which, by public lectures and statements, by his membership of the National Gallery Trustees, and the Felton Bequest and by the stream of talented graduates moving to significant roles in the Australian art and academic world he had achieved over the almost 20 years to the point when we opened our first gallery. He was also a generous supporter of the University itself by gifts to the collection, often purchased with payments he received in lecturing down town.

It was fortunate for me that Professor Burke took this view, because I had formed a strong opinion, whilst in America, of the need to have any future University gallery embedded in the general administration. I saw several examples of fine museums initiated within a

department that fell on hard times when the founding head of department retired or died. Successors had different priorities, and funds to maintain the museum vanished. Our collection was too important to risk this possible outcome. An example close to home that emphasised the point was the then parlous state of the Grainger Museum. Even today, it is still a work in progress.

At a later stage I conveyed those views to Leon Paroissien, formerly of the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council, who, with Bernice Murphy, was attempting to solve similar problems in relation to the Power Bequest as they moved to establish a contemporary art museum in Sydney. We sent him all the papers setting out how we went about the establishment of the Works of Art Committee and the Gallery. I hope they helped. Today the Museum of Contemporary Art at Circular Quay in Sydney is well established.

At what point did you feel that you were starting to move forward with the project of creating a University Gallery, and why did you consider it so important for the University to have a gallery?

1971 was a real turning point. Betty Clark, with the help of Eric Westbrook and Ursula Hoff, put on an exhibition of the University of

Melbourne Collection at the National Gallery of Victoria. We showed some of the great portraits and many other treasures. Pride of place was given to the lovely John Perceval angel with lute⁵ and the Constance Stokes nude⁶ which were gifts from Joe Burke.

But the climax of the year for us was the 1971 catalogue. Coincidentally with the NGV show and following a year of strenuous effort with the help of staff in the archives, principally Mrs Julie Marginson, and great support from Dr Hoff and Professor Burke, with many others, as well as a generous donation from Colonel Aubrey Gibson, we produced the first catalogue.⁷

It was an enormous achievement and a milestone in the development of an appreciation and understanding of the breadth and depth of the University's cultural collections. It included the Baillieu Library holdings, the classical collections, silver, ceramics, the holdings of the colleges—the whole range. Professor Burke's introduction to the catalogue is worth reading today to understand the source and substantial nature of the collections, particularly those acquired since the War and with the help of the Society of Collectors and other donors.

In my view it was the most significant achievement in the whole history of the University Gallery, achieved with pitiful resources but with major and willing support by all involved. I still look at it with pride and wonder just how we got it out.

And finally why did we have to have a gallery?

We simply had to be able to let the students and staff and the wider public see as much of our great holdings as we could; see the works in carefully designed exhibitions from



time to time. Further, we needed to exhibit in the University the work of significant Australian artists. The overall aim was to raise the level of art and cultural appreciation in the University. This was in my view an essential part of being a university. I hope later to publish, somewhere, a list of the incredible number of exhibitions the small staff, Betty Clarke and her assistants, mounted. We did anything from eight to 14 exhibitions a year over a long period.

Thank you Ray. I know that there is so much more we could discuss including the contribution and commitment of the professional staff who worked with you on the establishment of the University Gallery and the development of its programs. I would also like to have some further discussion with you on the sculpture in the grounds and the battles that ensured the preservation of many of the University's historic precincts and the renewal of many of the important buildings.

I have perhaps, Robyn, rambled on too much, there is a great deal more I would like to set down. Particularly I would wish to acknowledge the great help we had in the Old Physics gallery from the many assistants to Betty Clarke, like Grazia Gunn, Charles Merewether, Denis Colsey, Lyn, Lady Nossal, and of course Maudie Palmer. I would like to set

down the arrival of Maudie as our first full-time assistant curator, Betty Clarke's retirement and the great good fortune of our appointment of Frances Lindsay.

Frances' stunning debut exhibition was devoted to *L'Oiseau-Lyre*—the work of Louise Hanson-Dyer and the Lyrebird Press—in March of 1985.⁸ Through Margarita Hanson the University now has the significant Hanson-Dyer library and also the responsibility of carrying on the great tradition of that publishing house. I hope that these early days of the University of Melbourne's development of its art exhibitions and collection development will form the basis for a substantial history at some stage in the future.

Dr Ray Marginson AM graduated with a Bachelor of Commerce from the University of Melbourne in 1946. After working for the Commonwealth Public Service, in 1965 he was appointed Vice-Principal of the University of Melbourne, with responsibility for financial policy, accounting systems, budgets, building, maintenance, grounds and property, until his retirement in 1988. His many other roles have included Chairman of the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works (Melbourne Water), President of the Museum of Victoria, a director of Geotrack International, Vice-Chairman of the Melbourne Theatre Company, member of the Howard Florey Institute and founding President of the Victorian Jazz Archive.

Associate Professor Robyn Sloggett is Director of the Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation at

the University of Melbourne. The Centre provides conservation services to the cultural collections of the University and to the public, manages an internationally renowned research program and delivers the only comprehensive postgraduate conservation training program in the Australasian-Pacific Region.

Notes

- 1 John Poynter and Carolyn Rasmussen, *A place apart: The University of Melbourne: Decades of challenge*, Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1996.
- 2 William Dobell, *Professor Lyndhurst F. Giblin*, 1945, oil on board, 88.2 x 81.2 cm. Accession no. 1945.0001, University of Melbourne Art Collection. Commissioned by the Commerce Graduates Association, 1945.
- 3 Donald Laycock, *The Mercurions*, 1965, oil on canvas, 132.0 x 175.5 cm. Accession no. 1971.0075, University of Melbourne Art Collection. Purchased 1971.
- 4 Arthur Boyd, *Untitled (Woman in cornfield)*, (1961), charcoal on paper, sight: 145.0 x 171.0 cm. Accession no. 1971.0072, University of Melbourne Art Collection. Purchased 1971.
- 5 John Perceval, *Untitled (Angel playing the lute)*, 1958, stoneware with *sang de boeuf* glaze, 31.0 x 26.0 x 24.0 cm. Accession no. 1960.0013, University of Melbourne Art Collection. Gift of Professor Joseph Burke, 1960, through the Society of Collectors.
- 6 Constance Stokes, *Untitled (Nude)*, (c.1946), oil on composition board, 69.5 x 51.0 cm. Accession no. 1949.0002, University of Melbourne Art Collection. Gift of Professor Joseph Burke, 1949.
- 7 *Catalogue of works of art 1971: Catalogue of works of art in the University and its affiliated colleges with a catalogue of the collection in the Dept. of Classical Studies*, Carlton: University of Melbourne, 1971.
- 8 The catalogue of this exhibition is *L'Oiseau-Lyre: The work of Louise Hanson-Dyer and the Lyrebird Press, University Gallery, the University of Melbourne, 27 March–26 April 1985*, Melbourne: The Gallery, 1985.