

“JOE BURKE'S LEGACY: THE HISTORY OF ART HISTORY IN MELBOURNE”
CIHA Exhibition at the University of Melbourne
Opened by Sir Andrew Grimwade on Tuesday 15 January 2008

Professor Sir Joseph Burke, whose legacy to Art History we are celebrating today, would have known about Ariston of Argos. In 400 B.C., he was the most famous gymnastic coach in what today would be known as the Athenian Institute of Sport. He had a famous pupil called Aristocles, renown for his broad eloquence and broad shoulders. From the Greek word for “broad”, which is “*Platon*”, Ariston coined the name “Plato”. For over two millennia, Plato has been remembered for his breadth of intellect, if not his broad shoulders.(1)

Broad shoulders and breadth of intellect were two essentials for the young 34-year-old Joseph Terence Burke when he arrived in Australia in 1947. This Exhibition traces his life's journey in a country better known for its sports than its fine arts. Burke needed broad shoulders to effect a change in cultural attitudes; he needed Plato's breadth of eloquence.

To understand Joe Burke's Legacy to Art History, we need to consider the early influences on him. He was born on 14 July 1913 and would have been aged 95 this year. He was educated at King's College at the University of London, the Courtauld Institute of Art, and then the University of Yale. At the age of 25, in 1938, he was appointed Assistant Keeper at the Victoria & Albert Museum. (2)

With the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, Burke was seconded to the Home Office and the Ministry of Home Security. This is usually the cover name given to those who are employed in MI5 or MI6, so it is possible that Burke was an early James Bond, improbable as it may sound. He married a year later (3) and despite the bombs of war and his onerous undercover duties, Burke found time to write the first of many books on Hogarth, *Hogarth & Reynolds: A Contrast in English Art Theory, 1943.* (4) Not even Ian Fleming could have imagined such an implausible cover for James Bond!

By 1942, Burke began service as Private Secretary to three successive Lords President of Council, the fourth most senior Cabinet Ministers in Great Britain. The first was Sir John Anderson (later Viscount Waverley) until 1943, the second was Clement Attlee from 1943-45 and the third was Lord Woolton in 1945. Burke's time was brief with Woolton, for Woolton immediately “loaned” Burke back to Attlee to become the Prime Minister's Private Secretary after Attlee's landslide election victory over Prime Minister Winston Churchill in May 1945. (5)

Within two months, from 17 July to 2 August 1945, Burke was accompanying incoming Prime Minister Attlee to the Potsdam Conference with Harry S Truman and Joseph Stalin. The Conference started on 24 July 1945 with outgoing Prime Minister Winston Churchill who then handed over to Attlee. Attlee had immense political skills and his social outlook had been influenced by his First World War experiences, including service at Gallipoli. (6)

As a sensitive intellectual, the 32 year old Burke revelled in life alongside the Prime Minister at the centre of the British Empire, albeit diminished. Here he absorbed the intrigues of Westminster and of international politics. He was in the control room whilst the world's first modern welfare state was created. Burke even helped prepare Attlee's Opening Address to the very First General Assembly of the United Nations almost 62 years ago this week. (7).

Prime Minister Clement Attlee must have imagined Burke with a future in politics and, upon Burke's surprise departure to Australia, a disappointed Attlee would have been tempted to adapt Hilaire Belloc's poem:

“We had intended you to be
The next Prime Minister but three:
The stocks were sold; the Press was squared;
The Middle Class was quite prepared.
But as it is!What mystery!
Why Melbourne for Art History?”

Why Melbourne? For decades, Melbourne had become a cultural backwater. It had stagnated since the enthusiasm of the 1850's, when, within two decades of Melbourne's establishment, it had created a University, Australia's first National Gallery, a Public Library, a Museum, and the mainland's first Royal Society. In the first 100 years thereafter, the only redeeming feature was The Felton Bequest, Australia's first great philanthropic trust, which, since 1904, has built a world class art collection for the NGV.(8)

Fortunately, in the mid-1940's, there was a rebirth in the Arts caused by the fortuitous conjunction of three notable citizens: Sir John Medley (Vice-Chancellor of the University of Melbourne), Sir Daryl Lindsay (Director of the National Gallery of Victoria) and his Gallery President, Sir Keith Murdoch. In 1946, Murdoch, as Chairman of the Herald & Weekly Times, arranged for his company to provide 50,000 pounds (equivalent to several million dollars today) to fund The Herald Chair of Fine Arts.

In the words of Henri Cartier-Bresson, it was the decisive moment for the Arts in Australia. (9) It established the first Fine Arts Department at any Australian University. No wonder that Vice-Chancellor Medley could not resist a short Ode to Burke as the first Herald Chair:

“Hark the Herald angels sing
Culture is the Coming Thing.
From the circumambient murk
Call Professor Joseph Burke.” (10)

In his History of the University of Melbourne, Professor John Poynter recorded that the Chair had been “filled by the ebullient, shrewdly eccentric Joseph Burke, learned in the study of the arts of the eighteenth century and practised in its subtle manners.” Burke achieved “an outstanding department and a career of unrivalled public influence in the arts.” (11)

I first met Joe Burke through the National Gallery Society, for he was one of its founders when it was launched on 9 October 1947 (12). I often met him at Miegunyah, the home of his good friend and this University's Deputy-Chancellor Sir Russell Grimwade. Often it was with Dame Elisabeth Murdoch, Sir Daryl Lindsay or Sir Clive Fitts. Later, Burke and I used to lunch together at his favourite restaurant in South Yarra and he would try to enthuse me in the Fine Arts by taking me to meetings of the Society of Collectors which he founded.

Burke exerted huge influence on the Arts in Melbourne. First, as a Trustee of the NGV from 27 May 1952, initially under the Presidency of Murdoch, and then under Medley after Murdoch's death. In 1956, Burke resigned as a Trustee of the NGV to become a Member of the Felton Bequests' Committee, though he continued as a Member of the National Gallery & Cultural Centre Building Committee. (13)

Secondly, Burke's influence was through The Felton Bequest, of which Burke was a long-serving Member for 30 years from 1956 to 1985. His service and advice influenced three very distinguished Felton Chairmen: Sir Owen Dixon (Chief Justice of Australia's High Court), Sir Clive Fitts (eminent art-loving physician) and Sir Gustav Nossal (pre-eminent medical researcher and Australian of the Year in 2000). (14)

I served with Burke on the Felton Bequest for twelve of his 30 years from 1973. There was a wonderful spirit at those meetings. Burke was witty, erudite, brilliantly knowledgeable about art, yet sometimes suspicious - especially about medical research. He was impressively perceptive, on one occasion suspecting the infamous Father Kiss three years before the police caught up with him and charged him. (15) Burke had an eloquence full of orchestral colour and always stood tall, like an intellectual lighthouse radiating esoteric brilliance. (16)

One measure of a person's legacy is to look at the quality of their successors. Burke's immediate successor from 1979-1995 was Professor Margaret Manion, an eminent author and scholar, NGV Deputy President, Felton Bequest Member, and the first woman to chair the University of Melbourne's Academic Board (1987-1988).

In turn, she was succeeded by the irresistible Professor Jaynie Anderson, scholar, author and world authority on Tiepolo. (17) Burke would have been amazed at her achievements of January 2008 in Melbourne. He would have been delighted that the 32nd International Congress of the History of Art had been held in his backyard. It is a real tribute to her.

We congratulate Benjamin Thomas who has curated this masterly exhibition. Ben has identified the greatness and the essence of Joe Burke. He has highlighted the overdue need for a biography of Burke. I have no doubt that Professor Burke is looking down from his Hogarthian Heaven and is expressing his secret admiration through several of his most celebrated phrases to students: "Lovely, lovely" or "Bless you, bless you".

Sir Joseph Burke died on 25 March 1992 at age 78, the recipient of many honours. (18) Though outwardly wearing the disguise of an Eighteenth Century eccentric, he was spiritually a young Turk with dash and panache. His 32-year crusade is central to the standing of the Arts in Australia and to the History of Art History in Melbourne. He was after all half-Irish, so let us remember him with a limerick:

"There once was a giant called Burke,
Art History became his life's work.
With flair, zeal and dash
And lots of panache,
He was our enduring young Turk."

I am delighted to open "Joe Burke's Legacy: the History of Art History in Melbourne".

NOTES:

- 1 *Life of Plato IV by Diogenes Laertius*
- 2 *Who's Who in Australia 1992, Page 231.*
- 3 *To Agnes d. of Rev. Middleton on 20 November 1940; their son Rickard was born 1942.*
- 4 *Burke was recognised as a world authority on Hogarth and his later books included "William Hogarth's Analysis of Beauty and Auto-Biographical Notes, 1955" and "Hogarth: The Complete Engravings, 1968"*
- 5 *Reconstruction by the Author and Benjamin Thomas based on Burke's 1989 interview.*
- 6 *The Macmillan Dictionary of Biography edited by Barry Jones, Page38.*
- 7 *On 10 January 1946, Attlee addressed 51 nations when the United Nations General Assembly first convened in Central Hall, Westminster,London.*
- 8 *By 2008, works of art donated by the Felton Bequest to the National Gallery of Victoria since 1904 had an estimated market value of over \$2 billion.*
- 9 *The Decisive Moment by Henri Cartier-Bresson, 1952.*
- 10 *Sir John Medley, A Memoir, by Geoffrey Serle, Page 114.*
- 11 *A Place Apart by John Poynter & Carolyn Rasmussen, Page 80.*
- 12 *The National Gallery of Victoria 1861-1968; A Search for a Collection by Leonard B Cox, Page 204*
- 13 *The 1952 year brought abrupt changes to the Arts in Melbourne. In mid-1951, Medley had retired as Vice-Chancellor. When Murdoch died suddenly on 4 October 1952, Medley succeeded him as President of the NGV Trustees; in the same year, Medley's old friend Sir Russell Grimwade became Chairman of the Felton Bequest.*
- 14 *Upon the death of Sir Russell Grimwade on 2 November 1955, Australia's Chief Justice Sir Owen Dixon was appointed Felton Chairman and Burke resigned from the NGV Trustees to fill the Felton Bequest vacancy on 13 March 1956. Burke was to serve for 30 years on the FBC from 1956 to 1985, initially under Sir Clive Fitts as Chairman (to 1973) with the last ten years under the Chairmanship of Sir Gus Nossal.*
- 15 *The Authors' telephone diary note dated 23 January 1987 records Burke objecting to Father Kiss's involvement in the Felton Bequest as "not morally wise", perceptively more than three years before Kiss's arrest on 7 December 1990 on 23 charges of theft.*
- 16 *The National Gallery of Victoria 1861-1968; A Search for a Collection by Leonard B Cox, Photo 157 of National Gallery & Cultural Centre Building Committee between Pages 292 and 293.*
- 17 *A Place Apart by John Poynter & Carolyn Rasmussen, Page 465. Burke had also gathered around him art historian Bernard Smith and the refugee scholar Franz Phillip.*
- 18 *Sir Joseph Burke KBE 1980, CBE 1973, OBE 1946. He was President of the Australian Academy of Humanities 1971-74*