

'High drama and ... comedy'

Developing the cultural collections of the University of Melbourne

The second in a series of interviews of Ray Marginson, speaking with Robyn Sloggett

Robyn Sloggett: *Ray, I feel we have only begun to touch on the 'high drama and comedy' of your involvement with the development of the University cultural collections.¹ I remember the period when you were Vice-Principal as one of very active support for the University's cultural development, and this was a broad support. You were interested not just for the gallery,² although I think this may have been your special passion, but of course the development of the grounds and the more general sense of the cultural identity of the University. In our last talk you indicated that there were other aspects of the gallery development you would like to cover.*

Ray Marginson: Yes, Robyn, there is much to recall over the two decades plus of my involvement. The problem is the work in the grounds and the gallery interwove quite a bit, so you might have to bear with me if I slip from one to the other.

On the gallery itself, from early on we received many significant gifts. I have already mentioned Sir Joseph Burke and Colonel Aubrey Gibson. However, there were two most

significant elements in the building of our collection; the first was the continued generosity and careful selection of works by the late Dr Joseph Brown, the other, the wealth of Australian material included in the bequest of Sir Russell and Mab, Lady Grimwade.

Joseph Brown was a major supporter of our gallery initiative, and a frequent and considered donor, who knew weaknesses in our collection and, whenever possible, filled them. In 1982 we gave him a special exhibition of the 33 works he had given us to that date. I have many memories of the unexpected appearance of many of his gifts; none more memorable than the telephone call that said, 'Ray, I have a painting for you, it is Leonard French's *The trial* from his 1960 Campion paintings' (illustrated opposite). My involuntary reply was 'I didn't think you owned it.' His reply was, 'I bought it this week.' The explanation was that the police had just returned several works from his collection that had been stolen. This was his celebratory gift. Later, when Daryl Jackson and his interior designer Jan Faulkner asked what colour should be used in the new conference room in Old Physics, my answer was 'coagulated blood', the predominant note in *The trial*, which would hang there.

The placing of this significant work in the new conference room, with its splendid full-length red drapes that can cover the large sash-hung windows, its red carpet and its specially designed 32-person table and chairs, was not without irony. The room was provided to give the University what it did not have up to then (apart from the council chamber), a meeting room capable of accommodating the extremely large professorial selection committees. The trial indeed.

Of all Dr Brown's gifts I think my favourite is the beautiful small version of Bertram Mackennal's *Salome* (illustrated opposite, above).

I can see you can go on indefinitely about the gallery, but I would like at this point to draw you back to a focus on the grounds and buildings, and enhancing the overall quality of the site. There are a large number of probably apocryphal stories about your role in protecting and developing the heritage architecture on campus. What were the most successful battles you undertook on this front?

The answer here relates to the much wider topic I have already mentioned, the then state of the grounds. I had a completely different view from that which I heard at Cambridge later, that said it didn't matter how broken down or inconvenient the building



Left: Bertram MacKenna, *Salome*, (c.1900), bronze, height: 27.0 cm (excluding base). Reg. no. 1980.0010, gift of Dr Joseph Brown, 1980, University of Melbourne Art Collection.

Below: Leonard French, *The trial*, (1962), enamel on hessian on hardboard with spackle and plastic flowers, 228.5 x 183.5 cm. Reg. no. 1979.0043, gift of Dr Joseph Brown, 1979, University of Melbourne Art Collection. © Leonard French, 1962. Licensed by VISCOPY, Sydney 2009.

was in which you worked, it was the work that was central. The reference here, I think, is to the tin sheds, which were Rutherford's laboratories, where the fundamental experiments that were part of the work that ended in nuclear fission, were carried out. I could not have disagreed more. The state of our grounds was abysmal and depressing and buildings were haphazardly located without a coherent plan and many were run-down. There had been many attempts to plan but all, in the end, were frustrated by individual interest and advocacy about the placing of particular buildings. I felt that something must be done to demolish the war-time fibro huts and other 'temporary' buildings that were all over the site (including a two-storey one north of Wilson Hall that housed the accounts branch and other administrative functions); also to get rid of the asphalt which was everywhere, the swamp that existed in winter (on the site of the old lake) between the Union and Old Commerce, the uncontrolled car parking and speeding traffic. Further, that everything was to be gained by creating a pleasant working environment for staff and students and by restoring and improving the many older architectural treasures on the campus. Somehow we had to get



Brian Dunlop, *The Old Physics Building*, (1980), oil on canvas, 213.5 cm x 427.5 cm (triptych).
Reg. no. 1980.0029.000.A.000.C,
purchased from the artist, 1980,
following his term as artist-in-residence,
University of Melbourne Art Collection.
© Brian Dunlop, 1980.
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importantly, the master plan did not give us a rigid blueprint, but firmly showed where we should not build buildings.

Perhaps here we should get back to the gallery?

In the early 1970s we extensively renovated the Old Physics Building, funded with the assistance of donations, to the design of Daryl Jackson. It was to here we moved from our gallery in the John Medley Building in 1975. It was opened by Sir John Rothenstein CBE. Among

those who made the gallery section of the work possible, by generous gifts, were the Myer Foundation, the estate of John F. Hughes, the Ian Potter Foundation, Middletons, the Edward Wilson Trust, North Broken Hill and the Australian Government. As is clear we were getting better by 1975 in attracting funding. At this stage we also had funding support on an annual basis from the Australia Council's Visual Arts Board and the State Ministry for the Arts.

The gallery with its three exhibition spaces and offices and store

was a dream come true. Structurally it had its problems. The upper floor had a load limit of 150 people and the basement had a depth of water, but we were finally in a position to undertake the major exhibitions that the curator Betty Clarke and the Works of Art Committee had in mind. In the east entrance to the old physics gallery are placed two splendid half-moon shaped bronzes by Michael Meszaros (illustrated opposite, above). These celebrate the gift by Norman and May Macgeorge of their Desbrowe Annear designed



Arts and Crafts style house 'Ballangeich' at the junction of the Yarra River and Darebin Creek in Ivanhoe. In addition to a capital sum to maintain the house, we also received a significant collection of Norman's and other artists' works.⁴ Patrick McCaughey, then fellow in fine arts, and his brave family were the first occupants of the house before it was renovated—a process much drawn out, as we had to accumulate income from the bequest before tackling vital restoration. Generously Norman had given his copper roof to the war effort and the external fabric, the domestic facilities and the grounds needed much work. Professor Carrick Chambers worked with Maurie Pawsey and the staff to restore the garden, which was originally designed by Blamire Young.⁵

As a result of this major bequest and the terms the Council established to carry out its intention, we were able to commence a program for appointing artists-in-residence. Through contact with the Australia Council (principally through Jean Battersby, the then General Manager) and by Maudie Palmer (the latter had joined the gallery staff in 1975) we obtained an annual grant of \$10,000 (later increased to \$12,000) to sustain an artist to live in the house, with

family, and to work in a studio on the campus. The first appointment of this very successful venture was William Delafield Cook. He became available to be visited in his studio in Old Physics (at this stage in an unrenovated old laboratory) by all and sundry on Wednesdays. Bill was a slow painter and after one visit to him a month or so after he started I saw him one third of the way through a typical work of meticulously painted leaves. The next week he was standing in front of a blank canvas. 'It wasn't working' was his comment.

I learnt much from the successive artists; from Brian Dunlop whose *Old Physics Building* (illustrated on page 15) won the Sulman Prize and which we were able to acquire (reasonably); also from Christine O'Loughlin whose *Cultural rubble* adorns the Swanston Street façade of our Ian Potter Museum of Art.⁶ Christine took off for the Forestry Department at Creswick shortly after her arrival and sweet-talked the department into delivering her a large eucalypt trunk for installation in her first exhibition/installation. Too many memories for this short piece: of John Hoyland the great British abstract painter, with every art student in Melbourne packing out the lecture theatre when he gave a two-hour review illustrating the whole of his oeuvre up to the

work of that very week. Of his giving us a suite of coloured etchings, five abstract compositions and two paintings; also selling us five coloured etchings for a risible price; the arrival back in Australia from New York at our invitation of the impeccably stylish Robert Jacks to commence his substantial middle period contribution, also in the abstract field (illustrated opposite). Each artist-in-residence brought their own particular and special contribution to the University and to the increasing sophistication of our whole operation and exhibitions.

The program continues today as the MacGeorge Fellowship, although without Commonwealth or State support. It was a major and significant element in the success and reputation of the gallery over succeeding years. An outstanding and personally satisfying feature of my retirement year was that Frances Lindsay mounted a superb exhibition showing works of the 13 artists-in-residence up to 1988.⁷

You also oversaw some substantial additions to the art in the grounds. Yes, one significant feature of Deakin Court is the ceramic mural by John Olsen, *Eastern world*.⁸ Tom Sanders, who had already produced the tiles, accepted the commission to make

Robert Jacks, *Past unfolded 5*, 1987, oil on canvas, 167.7 x 251.0 cm. Reg. no. 1987.0022, purchased 1987, University of Melbourne Art Collection.
© Robert Jacks, 1987.
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several rows of sympathetic tiles to fill the vertical space. It was an intensive and strange exercise for me, fixing the price in a three-way negotiation with John, the wily Rudy Komon and Tom, who was not an easy personality. The collection still houses the scrap of paper on which John sketched out the original design.⁹ The final twist to the project was the culmination of the considerable antagonism that developed between Betty Clarke and Tom Sanders. Tom had the last word by making a tile with his signature (the second on the work) located conspicuously by the entrance to Betty's office, where she could not

help seeing it as she passed in and out. Frances Lindsay later embellished the court by acquiring two of Bruce Armstrong's monumental red gum carvings.¹⁰ The ambience was added to by Daryl Jackson saving finials from the apex of the gables on the demolished sections of the building. We mounted them on a stone platform to carry the naming plate of Deakin Court. Their installation immediately resulted in the students dubbing the area 'Prick Court'.

As to Old Physics, we eventually, with University funds, renovated the rest and created the fine major conference room already mentioned,

named for Jim Potter, my colleague as former Registrar.

We could perhaps come back to the grounds and buildings later. However, you have referred to two significant sources of gifts to the gallery and outlined the late Dr Joseph Brown's generosity. Would you like to say something about the Grimwade bequest?

I have already written elsewhere about two earlier substantial gifts of works to the University, that of Dr Samuel Ewing and of Norman Lindsay.¹¹ I was not able at that time, within the brief period of my talk at the Felton Centenary Symposium in November 2004, to give a similar account of the extraordinary generosity of Sir Russell and his wife Mab, of their home 'Miegunyah' in Orrong Road, Toorak, and its artworks and library including the important collections of Australian material. For that I am extremely sorry. However, this interview may be a means of making some amends. The problem posed by the house was squarely on me as the officer responsible for advising the University Council on its property. Our early problem with the gift of the house was the nature of the governing wills. Sir Russell had been a great benefactor to the University and the School of Biochemistry (now



demolished) bore his name. He had wide interests in the eucalypt, of which he had a flourishing grove in his grounds, in wood generally (with close connection to the CSIRO), in photography, in carpentry (in which he was very skilled), as well as in collecting Australian art and classic glassware. His Australian book collection was significant, particularly in the area of exploration. With all of this he set out in his bequest to achieve certain ends, some of which were difficult to implement. The most difficult was that the house was to be a residence either for the professor of fine arts, then Sir Joseph Burke, or the manager of the Melbourne University Press, then Peter Ryan. The difficulties involved were substantial. Tax laws meant a heavy penalty for anyone enjoying residence, and the suggestion that the MUP should establish a printery in Sir Russell's (remarkably equipped) workshop was not one to contemplate. I did not relish making an application to the then Prahran council to establish a light industry in Toorak. All this meant interim arrangements were necessary whilst the situation was sorted out. My colleague Professor Carrick Chambers and his family generously occupied the house with some discomfort for some time, ensuring

security for it and its valuable contents. We then proceeded to try and find a use for the property consistent with the Grimwades' intentions. Some formal entertaining took place there and other minor uses were developed. Finally I conceived of the idea of proposing to Joseph Brown that he might consider housing his great historical Australian art collection there in a professionally staffed art museum. There had been several proposals considered by Dr Brown for his collection, including, I think, some from interstate. Through talks with the Ian Potter Foundation with the help of its CEO Pat Feilman (a significant figure in supporting the University's gallery) it was thought a substantial capital sum might be found to carry out the necessary alteration, security and other works, together with the construction on the Orrong Road frontage of a new building to house the contemporary works. Patrick McCaughey at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) thought it was possible that his trustees could enter into a joint venture. They had recently closed a branch at Heidelberg, 'Banyule', and some staff could perhaps be found. A solution seemed almost possible. One Saturday morning I walked around the site with my good friend Joe Brown, pacing out the dimensions of

the new wing, indicating the demolition area of the external rear of the house. With what I recall now as real embarrassment he turned to me and said a family discussion had resulted in them not wishing to proceed further, that there were too many difficulties, the site was too far from the city, etc. It was a great disappointment but the essential thing is that a solution was later found by Dr Gerard Vaughan and the trustees of the NGV. The collection is now housed at Federation Square and is available for the public to appreciate.

One almost successful concept was that the Commonwealth Government would lease the property as a Melbourne residence for the Governor-General. Sir John Kerr even hosted a party to celebrate this. The Whitlam Government was ousted the day before the agreement was signed.

Despite effort, no other use could be found for 'Miegunyah' and I had to quit stalling and agree with David Derham that it had to be sold. We had to go to the Supreme Court to obtain a ruling confirming that a substantial number of Sir Russell and Lady Grimwade's wishes could not be met. Further, that we could sell the property to implement some of their intentions regarding the University Press, the library, the art collection

George Lambert, *Untitled (The Tirranna picnic race meeting)*, 1929, oil on canvas, sight: 74.8 x 151.0 cm. Reg. no. 1973.0036, gift of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest, 1973, University of Melbourne Art Collection.



and the School of Biochemistry. As you would expect, the auction was a gala day in Toorak and the property was bought by the Holmes à Court family, minus the four blocks on Selborne Road which had already been subdivided. After the death of Robert Holmes à Court it was later on-sold.

The blocks to the north meant the 2.1 acres were reduced and the rose garden, the small pool, the silver birch wood and the flowering gum wood were lost. The gum wood was where Sir Russell had photographed and later developed prints showing a nut,

flower and leaf for eucalypt specimens he used to illustrate his beautiful work *An anthography of the eucalypts* (illustrated on page 20). He also crafted the fine cabinet to hold eucalypt specimens, still in possession of the University.¹² We then commenced the major task of removing the artworks to the University Gallery, transferring the large 18th and 19th century glass collection to the Ernst Matthaei Memorial Collection of Early Glass, in the care of University House, and identifying which of the furniture was historically important. Russell's great

wood-working facility meant that he would purchase old black oak board and, in his workshop, construct a piece for the house. With the help of experts we sorted out the originals from the constructs. Some pieces went to the gallery, some to University House. Lesser pieces (nonetheless handsome) went to Medley Hall and to International House. A fine piece is in the walk-through of Old Physics from Deakin Court to Cussonia Court. The library was culled over by the Baillieu Library staff and the balance, with unwanted furniture, sold. The

Russell Grimwade, *An anthology of the eucalypts*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1930, plate 16. Sir Russell's own copy is now held in Special Collections in the Baillieu Library, as part of the book collection that he and Lady Mab bequeathed to the University.

charming statue of Amanda Grimwade as a young girl, which stood in the lily pond, was copied for the interior court of Old Arts,¹³ the original remaining with the family. The marble bench and the 15th century wellhead from the garden went to the west garden of University House.

The library collection of course enriched the Baillieu Library and the benefit to the University Art Collection was substantial. A number of exhibitions of the Grimwade collection have been mounted. All have borne this out. The William Strutt *Busbrangers in St Kilda Road* is an icon,¹⁴ as is *The Tirrana picnic race meeting* of 1929 by George Lambert (illustrated on page 19) and the small, delightful Tom Roberts *A road at Sherbrooke* of 1920 (illustrated opposite), but of course the benefit to the University does not stop there. The funds from the sale and the rest of the bequest monies now reside within the University trust funds and the use of the substantial income is administered on the advice of a representative committee, on which we are fortunate to have Sir Andrew Grimwade.

We have covered a great deal of ground in this interview. I hope at a later date we can continue and perhaps draw you

out on the background to the acquisition of some of the sculptural works in the grounds and buildings.

I would very much like to do so. At a later stage I would also like to pay tribute to the successive members of the Works of Art Committee over the two decades of my time with the gallery, and to the significant role of my deputy, the Controller (Buildings) Maurie Pawsey.

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 The first of this series of interviews appeared in issue 3 (December 2008) of *University of Melbourne Collections*.
- 2 The name and location of the University's art



museum have changed over the years. Upon its establishment in the early 1970s it was referred to as the University Gallery, University Art Gallery or University of Melbourne Art Gallery, and was housed on the fourth floor of the east tower of the then new John Medley Building. In 1975 it was relocated to the Old Physics Building, south of the Union Building. In 1988 additional accommodation was found in the former Physics Annexe on Swanston Street. At this point the overall institution became known as the University of Melbourne Museum of Art, with the Swanston Street space accommodating the Ian Potter Gallery and Art Conservation Centre, while the University Gallery continued to operate in Old Physics. The Physics Annexe was incorporated into the new Ian Potter Museum of Art, designed by architect Nonda Katsalidis, which opened in 1998 to house the entire museum and conservation facilities. Some of this earliest history is explained in the first of this series of interviews.

- 3 John Poynter and Carolyn Rasmussen, *A place apart: The University of Melbourne: Decades of challenge*, Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1996.
- 4 For more about the collection see John Pigot, *Norman Macgeorge: Man of art* (exhibition catalogue), Melbourne: Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, 2001.
- 5 One of Young's original plans for the garden is held in the University of Melbourne Archives: Blamire Young, *Garden plan for 'Fairy Hills'*, 1911. Accession no. 75/111, Norman Macgeorge Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.
- 6 Christine O'Loughlin, *Cultural rubble*, 1993, reinforced polyester resin, in four panels, overall: 149.5 x 319.5 cm. Reg. no. 1993.0019.000.A.000.D, commissioned by the University of Melbourne with funds provided by the Ian Potter Foundation, 1993, University of Melbourne Art Collection.
- 7 *The University of Melbourne artists-in-residence, 1975-1988* (exhibition catalogue), Parkville: University Gallery, University of Melbourne, 1988.

Tom Roberts, *A road at Sherbrooke*, 1920,
oil on canvas on wood panel, 28.2 x 19.3 cm.
Reg. no. 1973.0062, gift of the Russell and
Mab Grimwade Bequest, 1973,
University of Melbourne Art Collection.

- 8 John Olsen (designer); Tom Sanders (ceramicist), *Eastern world*, 1971 and 1975, glazed ceramic tile mural, 325.0 x 915.8 cm and 595.0 x 559.2 cm. Reg. no. 1975.0050, purchased with assistance from the National Bank of Australasia Ltd, the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council, the Myer Trust and the Charles Duplan Lloyd Trust, 1975, University of Melbourne Art Collection.
- 9 John Olsen, *First sketch for 'Eastern world'*, (1975), watercolour and pencil on paper, sheet: 56.0 x 76.3 cm. Reg. no. 1985.0006, gift of Tom Sanders, 1985, University of Melbourne Art Collection.
- 10 Bruce Armstrong, *So its come to this*, 1986, red gum, 90.5 x 80.5 x 163.5 cm. Reg. no. 1986.0283, on loan from the artist, 1986; and Bruce Armstrong, *She would like to be left with it*, 1986, red gum, 101.7 x 98.0 x 122.6 cm. Reg. no. 1986.0182, purchased 1986, University of Melbourne Art Collection.
- 11 Ray Marginson, 'One hundred and fifty years of gifts to the University of Melbourne', in Andrew Grimwade and Gerard Vaughan (eds), *Great philanthropists on trial*, Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press and the National Gallery of Victoria, 2006, pp. 101–112.
- 12 Sir Russell and Lady (Mab) Grimwade, Timber eucalypt specimen cabinet, (c.1919–1920), eucalypt timber with brass handles, 85.0 x 72.3 x 53.0 cm. Reg. no. 1973.0755, gift of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest, 1973, University of Melbourne Art Collection.
- 13 Sculptor unknown (re-cast by Michael Meszaros), *Gosh says Amanda*, 1930, re-cast 1973, bronze, overall height: 84.0 cm. Reg. no. 1973.0764.000.A.000.B, gift of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest, 1973, University of Melbourne Art Collection.
- 14 William Strutt, *Bushrangers, Victoria, Australia 1852*, (1887), oil on canvas, 75.7 x 156.6 cm. Reg. no. 1973.0038, gift of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest, 1973, University of Melbourne Art Collection.

