

Resolution of Council

8 April 2019

Item 3.2

Vale Edmund George Capon AM OBE

Minute by the Lord Mayor

To Council:

I want to pay tribute to the death of the long serving Director of the Art Gallery of NSW, Edmund George Capon AM OBE, who passed away in London on Tuesday 19 March 2019.

Born in London in 1940, Edmund gained his passion for painting during his early school years in Kent, insisting on travelling with easel and paintbox during summer holidays with his family.

His father, a paper mill manager, insisted that the young Edmund take up a “respectable career” after he left school. Conforming with his father’s wishes, he trained as a chartered surveyor, working for a few years in London. Once he had passed his exams, he returned to his interest in art, managing an art gallery, painting portraits and studying drawing at a Chelsea studio. He also learned to speak Chinese as a photograph of the Great Wall of China had piqued his interest in Chinese art. This was a precursor to studying at the London University School of Oriental and African Studies where he graduated with a Master of Philosophy in Chinese art and archaeology. He matched this by studying 20th-century painting at the Courtauld Institute of Art at London University.

He joined the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1966, initially in the Textile Department before moving to the Museum’s Far Eastern Section, where he held the position of assistant keeper from 1973 to 1978.

Edmund was invited to apply for the position of Director of the Art Gallery of NSW while on his first visit to Sydney in 1977 to promote a book and exhibition on Chinese art. Edmund returned to Sydney the following year with his second wife, Joanna, a photographer and art researcher to take up the position. He initially thought to stay only three years, the duration of his contract. Instead he retired as Director 33 years later, having transformed the Gallery.

Soon after his arrival he abolished the gallery's entry fee, declaring its collection belonged to the people. He also observed that the gallery made more money by "letting people in free and charging them to get out", via the gallery shop, café and restaurant. Gallery admissions rose from 329,000 in 1978 to more than 1.3 million in 2010, the year before he retired.

The gallery's collection also grew from 10,500 artworks in 1978 to more than 29,000 by 2011. His first major acquisition was a Tang dynasty ceramic horse and rider, which gallery staff remember being carried around under his arm as an act of understandable pride. Other important purchases followed, including Picasso's *Nude In A Rocking Chair*, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's *Three Bathers*, Grace Cossington Smith's *The Curve Of The Bridge*, David Hockney's *A Closer Winter Tunnel, February-March*, Sidney Nolan's *First-class Marksman*, Cezanne's *Bords de la Marne* and John Olsen's *Five Bells*.

Many of these purchases were made possible by the gallery's philanthropy programs which Edmund had strengthened, including establishing the AGNSW Foundation in 1983. He drew many generous benefactors to the gallery, including James Fairfax, Kenneth Myer and the artist Margaret Olley, who donated more than 130 artworks with a total value of around \$7 million.

He also ensured that the gallery had the expert staff and dedicated gallery spaces it needed, appointing specialist curators in Asian art, photography, contemporary art and Indigenous art and overseeing the opening of specialist wings for Asian and Indigenous art. He also oversaw the conversion of the gallery's storage facility into a new large gallery space to house the Kaldor collection, John Kaldor's gift of 200 works worth over \$35 million first announced in 2008. The new Kaldor Gallery opened in May 2011, a few months before Edmund's retirement.

Edmund recognised the role of temporary and touring exhibitions in attracting people to the gallery, particularly for multiple return visits. Significant successes include the first exhibition of the terracotta warriors outside of China in 1983 and the subsequent *The First Emperor: China's entombed warriors* in 2010. Other exhibitions brought the art of many different cultures to Sydney, including *Gold of the pharaohs*, Michelangelo to Matisse: drawing the figure, Jeffrey Smart and Bill Henson retrospectives, *Papunya Tula: genesis and genius*, *Caravaggio and his world: darkness and light*, *Pissarro: the first Impressionist*, *Giacometti: sculptures, prints and drawings from the Maeght Foundation* and *The arts of Islam: treasures from the Nasser D Khalili collection*. His last major exhibition was the blockbuster *Picasso: masterpieces from the Musée National Picasso, Paris* in 2011 which was still hanging when he retired.

Retirement as Director did not end his involvement in art and Sydney's intellectual life. He took up a position as Visiting Professor in the School of Languages and Linguistics, at the University of NSW. He co-produced and presented two successful three-part series on art for television, *Meishu: Travels in Chinese Art* and *The Art of Australia*. In 2014, he was appointed Chair of the 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art in Sydney and Chair of the Australian Institute of Architects Foundation. Late last year, shortly before he became ill, Edmund and Joanna travelled through Central Asia, driving the old Silk Road in a restored E Type Jaguar.

Throughout his career in Australia, Edmund successfully combined scholarship with showmanship and a cultivated eccentricity. He was known for wearing colourful odd socks and his love of cigars, Magnum ice-cream, fast cars and the Chelsea football club. He had a fondness for giraffes, keeping hundreds of giraffe artefacts in his home and office, describing them as “beautiful movers with an extraordinary, slow gait”. In one interview he declared his additional interests to include opera, trees, especially eucalyptus, current affairs, and all aspects of China.

He was also known for his considerable charm and his uncanny ability to remember the names of every member of his staff. It was this charm and ease with people that enabled him to foster strong connections with political leaders, the business community, private supporters and the community of artists all in the cause of benefitting the gallery. The strength of these connections was apparent in the many tributes to him after his death.

One such tribute, by Opposition Arts spokesperson Tony Burke, captures the extent and breadth of his influence. Burke recalls being taken to see the exhibition of the entombed Chinese warriors one weekend when he was a teenager. It was 1983.

“The impact wasn’t simply the exhibition itself; it established a permanent invitation to all those who attended that the art gallery was a place to revisit regularly. His understanding not merely of the history of art in Australia and around the world, but his particular depth of understanding of the art of our region meant he arrived at the NSW gallery at the moment we needed him the most.”

Recommendation

It is resolved that:

- (A) all persons present in the Chamber stand for one minute's silence to mark the life of Edmund Capon AM OBE and his outstanding contribution to the Art Gallery of NSW and the cultural life of Sydney and Australia; and
- (B) a letter, under the Lord Mayor's signature, be conveyed to Mr Capon's widow Joanna and his family expressing Council's sincere condolences.

COUNCILLOR CLOVER MOORE

Lord Mayor

Moved by the Chair (the Lord Mayor), seconded by Councillor Scully –

That the minute by the Lord Mayor be endorsed and adopted.

Carried unanimously.

Note – All Councillors, staff, press and members of the public present stood in silence for one minute as a mark of respect to Edmund Capon AM OBE.

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