

Resolution of Council

3 April 2023

Item 3.1

Vale Elinor Wrobel OAM

Minute by the Lord Mayor

To Council:

I wish to inform Council about the passing of Elinor Dawn Wrobel OAM, curator, art collector, benefactor and advocate, on 12 March 2023.

Elinor Ring was born on 24 August 1933 in Sydney. A fifth generation Australian, her paternal family arrived in Australia in 1840.

Elinor's artistic interests emerged at a young age. Her aunt, a trained haute couture seamstress, taught her to sew. Elinor helped her make gas mantles out of silk for gaslights which she would sell for pocket money.

In 1952, Elinor enrolled in nursing at Sydney Hospital, becoming acting sister-in-charge of the Worrall and Emergency operating theatres. After graduation she became involved in experimental surgery. Her sewing skills were put to good use, constructing and sewing fabric aorta sections for use in heart surgery.

In 1949, Frederick Wroblewski arrived in Sydney on a cattle ship, speaking no English, having survived the Nazi occupation of Poland.

Frederick enrolled himself in a night-time English class, a jewellery making class at East Sydney Tech and later, an advanced bookkeeping class. He befriended some amateur yachtsmen which began a lifelong passion for boats and boating. He also met Elinor, who shared his passions.

In July 1957, Elinor and Frederick were married. In October that same year, Frederick formally changed his name to Fred Wrobel.

Elinor and Fred shared a passion for art. They began collecting, attending auctions and searching in old wares shops, buying works that others had ignored. Fred would repair and reframe them to decorate their Double Bay home.

One such work, bought for next-to-nothing, was revealed to be a painting by George W. Lambert of fellow artist, Thea Proctor. By the 1970s, their home earned the description "a wonderland of art" by the art historian Joanna Mendelssohn.

Fred and Elinor began befriending the artists whose works they had collected. Among them was the artist, John Passmore. Passmore had been a major figure in Australian art as a painter, teacher and mentor of younger artists. After suffering a heart attack in the early 1960s, he withdrew from the artworld. Becoming increasingly convinced his work was unloved, he threatened to destroy it. Elinor fortunately dissuaded him. When he died, he left Elinor his remaining artworks, some 270 paintings and the contents of his studio and made her sole trustee of the Passmore Trust.

In the early 1970s, Elinor began her career as a consultant curator, conservator and cataloguer specialising in costume, textiles, art, ethnographic material and memorabilia. Between 1981 and 1999 Elinor was consultant curator for the Percy Grainger Museum at the University of Melbourne, arranging annual exhibitions and being responsible for the conservation of the Grainger costumes and textiles.

In 1983, Fred and Elinor established the Woolloomooloo Gallery where Elinor curated many of the exhibitions featuring work by established and younger artists. They also shared their collection, which had grown to over 1,000 works of art from the 1840s to contemporary pieces.

From 1978, they loaned work to the Historic Houses Trust and major public galleries in every Australian state. In 1995, the Penrith Regional Art Gallery's exhibition 'Australian Women Artists of the 20th Century' was comprised of works drawn entirely from the Wrobel collection.

After the Gallery closed in 1995, Elinor continued with her consultancy work. In 2000, Elinor attended the Nursing Graduates Association meeting where she learned of plans for a museum at Sydney Hospital. She secured the job of establishing it. It opened in 2001 in the Nightingale Wing, the oldest remaining building on the hospital site. She later admitted it had become "an obsession".

"I have now established a museum which records the history not only of the nursing profession but also the medical staff, related professions. It is a vast repository of archives and objects - a resource and study centre for scholars and historians. For over 100 years, many held a dream for a Sydney Hospital museum. I have made it a reality."

In 2009, the museum was threatened with plans to convert its premises into offices and disperse its collection. This included its histopathology and anatomy collection which Elinor had sourced and restored. Elinor campaigned against the plans, even threatening to go on a hunger strike. Through newspaper article and radio interviews she gained support from historians, the medical profession and members of parliament. The museum survived.

Elinor's commitment to Sydney Hospital's past continued beyond the museum. In 2015, she published "Caps and Veils": The Nursing History of the Sydney Hospital Matrons and its Nurses by Valerie Griffiths, Jingzhe Li.

In 2003, Fred and Elinor purchased the Merryfield Hotel, an 1874 Romanesque Revival building in Woolloomooloo. It became their new home and a living gallery. They established the John Passmore Gallery on the ground floor and the upper two floors became their home, along with the rest of their collection, which they continued to share. In later years, they made significant donations to the National Gallery of Australia and NSW regional galleries.

In 2020, five years after Fred's death, Elinor donated her personal archive to the National Art Archive which documented her long and diverse career as curator, collector and gallerist.

Stephen Miller, described it as a "rich gift" noting that Elinor had established three important galleries and museums in Sydney: the Woolloomooloo Gallery, the John Passmore Museum (2003-); and the award-winning Lucy Osborne-Nightingale Museum at Sydney Hospital, and that the art collection she had acquired with Fred was considered to be "one of the most important historic survey collections of Australian art in private hands".

Joanna Mendelssohn has written that Elinor's and Fred's legacy reminds us "that works of art are personal both to the artist and their viewer, and connections between those who make art and those who appreciate beauty can be as meaningful as the work of art itself ... the ongoing value of their collection is a salutary reminder that the significance of an individual work of art does not depend on the current reputation of the artist. Art is indeed longer than life."

COUNCILLOR CLOVER MOORE

Lord Mayor

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

It is resolved that:

- (A) all persons attending this meeting of Council observe one minute's silence to mark the life of Elinor Wrobel and her outstanding contribution to the cultural life of Sydney as a curator, gallerist and philanthropist;
- (B) Council express its condolences to Ms Wrobel's family; and
- (C) the Lord Mayor be requested to convey Council's sincere condolences to Ms Wrobel's family.

Carried unanimously.

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Note – All Councillors, staff and members of the public present stood in silence for one minute as a mark of respect to Elinor Wrobel OAM.