

Resolution of Council

20 November 2023

Item 15.1

Vale Aunty Esme

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

It is resolved that:

(A) Council note:

- (i) Bidjigal Elder and renowned shell artist, Aunty Esme Timbery, passed away on 6 October 2023 aged 92;
- (ii) Aunty Esme was born 1931 in Port Kembla - at one of her family's fishing camps, Hill 60. The youngest of five children of Hubert Timbery and Elizabeth Butler, Aunty Esme had nine children, twenty-six grandchildren, fifty-one great grandchildren and five great, great grandchildren. She was a proud descendent of the Timbery family from the La Perouse Aboriginal Community with enduring historical and cultural connections to Coastal Sydney and South Coast NSW;
- (iii) Aunty Esme came from a family of well-known Fishermen. Her Great grandfather George "Trimmer" Timbery and father Hubert were both fishermen. George Timbery applied to the government and was granted a boat and was able to provide his community with a livelihood through fishing. One hundred and fifty years later, in 2022, the NSW Government honoured Aunty Esme's achievements in Shellwork by naming a River Class Ferry "Esme Timbery";
- (iv) La Perouse in the 1870's was an Aboriginal fishing village established by the men and women of the surrounding Southern Sydney area. The men and women who were relocated there used traditional knowledges and practices to make a living. In 1895, La Perouse was established as one of the earliest Aboriginal Government reserves in NSW;
- (v) the women of La Perouse were known to be earning income by making and selling shell baskets used for a variety of purposes including ornamentation. This long tradition of shell working in La Perouse and on the NSW South Coast has continued to this day;

- (vi) the history of shellwork represents connection between generations of Aboriginal mothers, sisters, and daughters, between Indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, locals and tourists and with beaches, tides and oceans. Shellwork is recognised and acknowledged as a unique artform that can be traced back to both Indigenous and Victorian roots to evolve as a contemporary and unique artform;
- (vii) Aunty Esme comes from a long line of shell artists (shell workers). Her great-grandmother “Queen” Emma Timbery, was a renowned shell worker whose shellwork was displayed at Sydney’s Royal Easter show and in 1910 was included in an exhibition of Australian Craft in London;
- (viii) as a young girl, Aunty Esme started to follow in Queen Emma’s footsteps, learning the intricacies of shellwork from her mother, grandmother, and Aunties of La Perouse. Aunty Esme learnt about the different types of shells and on which beaches to find them;
- (ix) among her notable body of work, are the following stand out contributions and achievements:
 - (a) the 1997/1998 exhibition “*Djalarinji – Something that Belongs to Us*”;
 - (b) the shell worked, Sydney Harbour Bridge, Centrepont and Sydney Opera House commissioned by the Sydney Opera House in 2001/2002 for the Message Sticks festival. These artworks are now part of the National Museum of Australia collection;
 - (c) in 2005, two of Aunty Esme’s blue shell worked Sydney Harbour Bridges were awarded first prize in the inaugural Parliament of New South Wales Indigenous Art Prize;
 - (d) in 2007, Aunty Esme was featured in the ABC documentary “*She Sells Seashells*”;
 - (e) one of her most important pieces is the 2008 installation “*Shellworked Slippers*” featuring 200 pairs of shell encrusted baby slippers as a memorial to the Stolen Generations and later presented at the Biennale of Sydney; and
 - (f) the 2015 artwork “*Shellwalk*”, a collaboration with Wiradjuri / Kamilaroi artist Jonathon Jones, is her most significant. The artwork is a façade of the Aleander residential building at the southern gateway to Barangaroo’s waterfront promenade, Wulugul Walk. The 22 x 3.5metre work is made from multiple aluminum panels, each decorated with a combination of larger-than-life shells welded onto the screens. Each shell is laid out and designed by Aunty Esme. The artwork is significant in that Barangaroo was an area renowned for its shell middens during the colony’s establishment in Sydney;
- (x) in 2019, the University of NSW named their new arts facility The Esme Timbery Creative Practice Lab (CPL) or “The Esme” as students nicknamed the space a multi-arts production hub. It is the first building on the University’s campus named after an Indigenous woman; and

- (xi) the Timbery family are proud of this family tradition and cultural practice. Shell work continues with Aunty Esme's daughter Marilyn Russell today;
- (B) Council observe a minute's silence to mark the passing of Aunty Esme, noting her significant contribution to Australia as one its longest serving and enduring First Nations artists; and
- (C) the Lord Mayor be requested to write to Aunty Esme's family expressing the Council's condolences.

Carried unanimously.

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