

Item 3.2

Vale Nelson Meers AO

File No: S051491

Minute by the Lord Mayor

To Council:

I wish to inform Council of the passing of Nelson John Meers AO philanthropist, arts patron and 38th Lord Mayor of Sydney.

A fifth-generation Australian, Nelson Meers was born into a pioneer grazing family in Dubbo in 1938. He recalled the walls of the Meers' homesteads being adorned with numerous European bucolic landscapes. Another memory was his father taking him to the Art Gallery of New South Wales at the age of eight to be introduced to George Lambert's iconic painting Across the Black Soil Plains. It was his first real experience of the power of art, and one that helped shape his later work.

After obtaining a law degree from the University of Sydney he worked as practising solicitor for several years, establishing an extensive commercial and defamation practice as a partner of two leading international law firms.

On 21 September 1974 he was elected as a Civic Reform Alderman representing Fitzroy Ward, which included Potts Point, Kings Cross and Elizabeth Bay.

As an Alderman, he advocated for the residential regeneration of the CBD and the restoration of the Queen Victoria Building. In 1978, he briefly served as Deputy Lord Mayor, before becoming Lord Mayor following the sudden death of Alderman Leo Port. He continued as Lord Mayor until 21 September 1980 when he did not seek re-election to Council.

He subsequently became the National Executive Director of the Australian Retailers Association and was also involved in the NSW Chamber of Manufactures. He later established Nectar Hoteliers Pty Ltd, an investment company which became owner of seven western Sydney hotels. The venture made him a wealthy man. This wealth was not to be directed exclusively to his private benefit.

In the late 1960s he visited Minneapolis as a young lawyer. He later recalled:

“There I visited the city's Institute of Arts and was totally unprepared for the visual feast I was served up – Rubens, Rembrandt, El Greco, Pissaro, and all the major impressionists were represented. I was told that all the paintings were donated by private citizens, and I was astounded. There was not enough hanging space in the galleries to accommodate the treasures in the museum's archives!”

“I thought of the relative impoverishment of the art gallery in Sydney at the time and it was then that the dream was born of one day creating a foundation that would support the arts community and its institutions.”

That dream was realised in 2001 when, together with his daughter Sam, he established The Nelson Meers Foundation, the first prescribed private fund in Australia.

He later explained: “I accept as a basic truth that if you have prospered it should be shared with the community. It also follows that I do not want my children's ambitions to be shackled by inherited wealth.”

The Nelson Meers Foundation was established as a family foundation, with its operations are overseen by an advisory board comprised of family members and members of the community. Sam Meers is its executive director.

The Foundation directed its efforts towards providing grants to cultural organisations engaged in the visual arts, the performing arts, and the literary arts. Australian cultural institutions which have benefited from the Foundation's support include the New England Art Museum, the Australian Ballet, and the Australian Youth Orchestra. Its Heritage Collection project with the State Library of NSW resulted in the creation of a gallery within the Library in historical artefacts such as Bligh's logbook, are made available to the public through a 10-year rotating exhibition program.

Nelson Meers believed wholeheartedly in “conspicuous philanthropy”.

“Anonymous giving does little to encourage others and implies a passive role in the giving process. We believe it's important to have a positive, interactive relationship with the organisations we support, and our approach has always been to speak publicly about our giving and about the benefits of philanthropy more generally. I think often of Churchill's famous words: 'We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.'”

In 2005, the Foundation won the Australian Business Arts Foundation's Philanthropy Leadership Award. In the same year, Nelson Meers became an Officer of the Order of Australia in recognition of his service to the preservation of Australian cultural life.

Nelson Meers explained the motivation for his Foundation's work.

“In my life I have been fortunate to experience the magnificence of visual art, literature, music, architecture and all the performing disciplines. Throughout history, and indeed in my lifetime, I have seen the potency of art and the capacity various artistic forms have to influence and focus the human spirit for the better. The credo for our foundation has therefore become 'where the arts and learning flourish so do tolerance and enlightenment'. As such we are extremely proud to support organisations and projects that advance the arts, or that seek to utilise the arts to create positive social change, by promoting individual wellbeing, community sustainability or cultural tolerance.”

Recommendation

It is resolved that:

- (A) all persons attending this meeting of Council observe one minute's silence to commemorate the life of Nelson John Meers AO and his significant contribution to the arts, philanthropy and civic life;
- (B) Council express its condolences to Nelson Meers' family;
- (C) the Lord Mayor be requested to convey Council's condolences to Nelson Meers' family.

COUNCILLOR CLOVER MOORE

Lord Mayor