

### Item 3.3

#### Vale Leon Paroissien AM

File No: S051491

#### Minute by the Lord Mayor

To Council:

Australia's visual arts world is mourning the passing of Leon Paroissien AM on 5 November 2024. Curator and mentor to many, Leon made a significant contribution to Sydney's and Australia's cultural life, including as inaugural Chair of the City's Public Art Advisory Panel.

As with many professionals of his generation, Leon's career began with being awarded a trainee teacher's scholarship which enabled him to study at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. After initially teaching in Victorian secondary schools, he taught art history at the Melbourne Teachers College and subsequently became a senior lecturer at the Tasmanian School of Art. Along the way, he completed a Bachelor of Arts at the University of Melbourne.

In December 1972, then Minister for the Arts, Gough Whitlam, revamped the Australia Council, establishing seven independent artform boards. Leon was founding director of the Visual Arts Board, a position he held from 1974 to 1980.

In this role he sought funding for exhibitions, and organisations that could support the visual arts, including the Art Association of Australia and New Zealand, which celebrates its 50th anniversary in December.

One significant achievement from those years was his role in establishing the Art Indemnity Scheme, which enables valuable international artworks to be seen in Australian galleries, by indemnifying their owners against loss and damage.

In late 1983, Leon and his partner Bernice Murphy were appointed as co-curators of the University of Sydney's Power Collection. In 1961, the University received a bequest of £2 million (valued at more than \$45 million today) from the estate of the artist, Dr John Wardell Power, to be used to introduce the latest artistic ideas from around the world to Australia. The University soon amassed an extensive diverse collection of contemporary art, and Leon and Bernice were determined that it would be more widely seen.

Negotiations with the then Premier, Neville Wran, led to the former Maritime Services Building at Circular Quay being secured. Plans to renovate the building were confirmed in 1989 and two years later it opened as the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) with Leon as its first Director and Bernice its Chief Curator.

As the MCA's Director, Leon continued a commitment to contemporary Australian art. It was the first major public institution dedicated to collecting and exhibiting contemporary Australian artworks, with Leon describing it as "a facility of national cultural significance."

Leon left the MCA in 1998 to develop a new Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei as its first Director. It opened in 2001, the first museum in Taiwan to be dedicated exclusively to contemporary art.

Leon maintained his involvement in Australia's cultural life. He was a strong supporter of the Biennale of Sydney, having been its Artistic Director in 1984. He chaired many boards and committees, including the Sydney Olympic Public Art Advisory Committee and Object: Australian Design Centre, as well as the City's Public Art Advisory Panel. He edited *Art and Australia* and many other publications and authored several books. The most recent was *Andrew Andersons: Architecture and the Public Realm* (2020) co-authored with Bernice, which reflected his longstanding interest in the relationship between the visual arts and architecture.

In all these roles he mentored countless curators, arts administrators and others, including many City staff. Many will remember him for this support as much as for his public achievements.

In a statement describing Leon's contribution, Susan Templeman, the Australian Government's Special Envoy for the Arts said, "Leon planted seeds from which towering trees have grown".

We are fortunate that many of those seeds were planted in the City of Sydney.

### **Recommendation**

It is resolved that:

- (A) all persons attending this meeting of Council observe one minute's silence to commemorate the life of Leon Paroissien and his contribution to the visual arts, Australia's cultural life, and to the City of Sydney as inaugural Chair of the Public Art Advisory Panel and in other roles;
- (B) Council express its condolences to Leon's partner, Bernice Murphy, his son, David and daughter, Karen and his many friends and former colleagues; and
- (C) the Lord Mayor be requested to convey Council's condolences to Leon's partner, Bernice Murphy, his son, David and daughter, Karen and their families.

### **COUNCILLOR CLOVER MOORE AO**

Lord Mayor