

Item 3.1

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 (RMIT) and Melbourne Teachers' College. 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 in Hobart. Along the way, he completed a Bachelor of Arts at the University of Melbourne majoring in English, History and Art History, which led to his extensive research for a master's degree in the history of Australian colonial architecture pre-1850 (to be interrupted by later professional postings).

In December 1972, then Federal Minister for the Arts, Gough Whitlam revamped the Australia Council, establishing 7 independent artform boards. Leon was founding director of the Visual Arts Board, a position he held from 1974 to 1980.

In this role, Leon sought funding for artists, exhibitions, and organisations that could support the visual arts. Initiatives included founding (for support of Art History) the Art Association of Australia and New Zealand (AAANZ) in 1974, which celebrated its 50th anniversary in December. A partner organisation also initiated by the Visual Arts Board in 1974 (to support art and design schools nationally) was the Australian Association for Tertiary Art and Design Education (AATADE) – which evolved into the Australian Council of University Art and Design Schools (ACUADS, active since 1981).

Another significant achievement from those years was Leon's role in establishing the Australian Government's Exhibitions Indemnity Scheme, which today continues to enable valuable international cultural works to be seen in Australian galleries and museums, by indemnifying their owners against loss and damage to works loaned.

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 \$60 million today) from the estate of distinguished expatriate artist, John Wardell Power, grandson of William Wardell the architect of St Mary's Cathedral. John Power left his fortune to be used to introduce 'the latest artistic ideas', and 'the purchase of the most recent contemporary art of the world' to Australia. In 1968, the University of Sydney began to amass an extensive 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 in 1984. Renovation designs by Andrew Andersons were confirmed in 1989, and 2 years later it opened as the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) with Leon as its first Director and Bernice its Chief Curator.

This was the first major public institution dedicated to collecting and exhibiting contemporary Australian and international artworks, with Leon describing it as “a facility of national cultural significance”.

Leon left the MCA in 1998 to become founding director of a second Museum of Contemporary Art, this time in Taipei. It opened in 2001.

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 later Object: Australian Design Centre in Sydney, as well as the City’s Public Art Advisory Panel from 2007 to 2019. Leon 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 shaping the public domain of civic experience.

In all these roles he mentored countless curators, arts administrators and others, including many City staff. Many will be remember Leon for this personal support as much as 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, Dr Bernice Murphy, his son, David and daughter, Karen and his many friends and former colleagues; and
- (C) the Lord Mayor 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