

ARTS PATRONAGE IN AUSTRALIA BEFORE 1970.

By Jennifer Eurell

In 1967 H.C. Coombs convinced the Holt government that specific support for the arts was essential, and the Australian Council for the Arts was formed. This set the stage for the current funding enjoyed by the arts in Australia, but just how did arts patronage operate prior to 1970? This essay looks at government assistance and the private patrons, movers and shakers of a fledgling art scene in a nation still trying to establish its identity.

There are various types of patronage. A work of art needs a creator, and a viewer. The creator needs to earn a living, and the viewer needs access. In between these two acts lies a variety of patronage ranging from government funding, bequests, monetary support of artists, art societies, corporate sponsorship, to gifts of artworks to galleries. There are also patrons who have devoted their time and life, rather than fortune, to the arts.

When the First Fleet set sail for Australia no one thought to send an artist to record the new colony. This oversight was followed by another in that early works of art, often by naval officers and convicts, were sent to England to show off the new colony and satisfy English taste for curiosities. This led to Australia's deficit of early artworks and made the British the first patrons of Australian art. (Neville 2000).

Life was hard. It was enough to survive. However, in pre-photography days there was a call for illustrators so artists obtained work in scientific fields and as expedition artists. Both Augustus Earle and Conrad Martens sailed as artists with Charles Darwin on *The Beagle*, and artists accompanied inland explorers. (Serle, 1987).

The first public sector arts grant was in 1818 when the poet Michael Massey Robinson was given two cows from the government herd for his services as Poet Laureate (Throsby 2001). Visual artists, however, relied on a variety of entrepreneurs

and societies to sell works. Shireen (2008 p.33) notes: 'auctions, retail stores, art dealers, art unions, Mechanic's Institutes, artists' exhibitions, artists' societies, private commissions, periodicals and newspapers'.

Augustus Earle had set up a private art gallery in Sydney by 1825, however it is reputed that the first gallery was The Colonial Picture Gallery in Hobart (MacDonald 2000; Shireen 2008).

The Gold Rush of the 1850s made the economy buoyant, so there were buyers and collectors. Eugene Von Guérard's, '*Australian aborigines on the road to the diggings*' was among 16 oil paintings that he sold through a lottery, and he and Nicholas Chevalier often attracted patrons from their studios and shop windows (Shireen 2008).

From the 1860s State governments were supporting State art galleries. Galleries sprung up in Melbourne in 1861, Sydney in 1871, Adelaide in 1880, Brisbane 1895, Hobart 1887 and Perth by 1901 and all were given an annuity for running costs (Craik 2007). The first regional gallery was established in Ballarat in 1884 (Smith 1991).

The Art Gallery of NSW had a policy of collecting Australian Art, and would spend part of their first £500 grant on commissioning Conrad Martens to paint *Aspley Falls* (Art Gallery of NSW 2010).

Around the turn of the 20th century galleries gained significant bequests. Among these were bequests from Alfred Felton and Sir Thomas Elder. The Elder Bequest of £25,000 benefited the Adelaide Art Gallery; however, the Felton Bequest was the most important benefaction for Australian art and currently, in 2010, contributes \$1 million per annum. This bequest set up the National Gallery of Victoria's collection, allowing purchases while works were not expensive, and still accounts for 80% of a collection currently valued at around \$1 billion (ANZ 2010). Many works of the Heidelberg painters hang in State galleries because of these bequests.

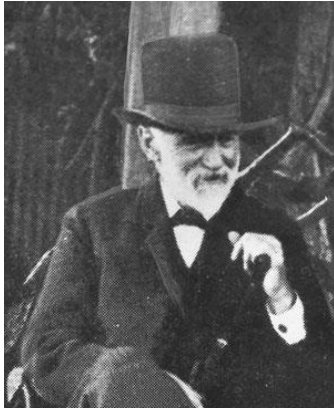


Plate 1
Alfred Felton was the major benefactor for the National Gallery of Victoria
Source: www.theage.com.au

Early patronage of art galleries was good, with the National Art gallery of New South Wales attracting 250,000 visitors in 1908, the Art Gallery of Adelaide 130,000 and the Queensland National Art Gallery 40,000 (Throsby 2001).

Not long after Federation the Commonwealth Government directly supported the arts. A Commonwealth Literary Fund was established in 1908 as a pension fund for writers and families, including Henry Lawson (Throsby 2001). This was followed by the appointment of a Commonwealth Art Advisory Board in 1912 (Parliament of Australia 2009).

One early patron was Eadith Walker who would cover the cost of sending 373 works of the Heidelberg painters and Julian Ashton School to London in 1898. Another person, not to be underestimated, was Tom Roberts. Roberts was not only one of Australia's finest painters, he had the ability to create patronage. Many painters were indebted to him for his support of an Australian style of painting, but he also knew how to court the right people and commented: 'you don't usually sell your stuff to people who rent cottages at seventeen and six a week: Business, my dear boy, is business.' (Smith 1991 p.121).

The first half of the 20th century was a period of austerity as the country coped with two world wars separated by the Great Depression. Strangely enough, one of the pivotal auctions was in war time in 1919 when the Baldwin Spencer collection of 200 'Australian pictures and works of art' went under the hammer. This boosted the careers of Frederick McCubbin, WP McInnes, George Lambert, Arthur Streeton, Hans Heysen, Charles Conder, Thea Proctor, Sydney Long and Norman Lindsay. Sir Walter Baldwin had been a patron of Streeton, although there is a grey area between

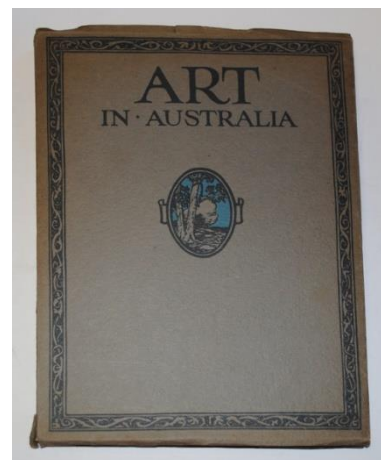
patronage and exploitation. Streeton's *'Golden Summer, Eaglemont, 1889'* was sold in this auction; but Streeton later repurchased his painting (Shirreen 2008).

Howard Hinton donated paintings to the Art Gallery of NSW but also over 1000 artworks to the Teachers College at Armidale, NSW starting in 1928. Norman Lindsay described it as the 'only complete collection of Australian art in the country' at the time (Adams 1979; Australian Dictionary of Biography 2010).

Prior to 1970 most Australian artists headed overseas to enhance their career despite art schools existing in Australia. The first scholarship to do so was handed out by the National Gallery of Victoria in 1895 (Smith 1991).

Art patronage often came from the illustrated press. Bernard Smith described artist and publisher Sydney Ure Smith as 'probably in some ways the greatest patron we've ever seen' (Underhill 1988 p.516). Ure Smith set up *Art in Australia* in 1916 and remained its editor until his death in 1949. Financial backing came from Charles Lloyd Jones who was a Trustee of the Art Gallery of New South Wales and founder of the David Jones Gallery. *Art in Australia* gave artists a meeting place and irregular income, especially Lloyd Rees and Roland Wakelin who were employed as etchers. More importantly it publicised the Sydney art scene. Ure Smith published more on Australian art than all other publishers in this time, including Bernard Smith's influential work, *Place, Taste and Tradition*.
(Underhill 1988)

Plate 2
The first edition of
Art in Australia 1916
Source: www.cornstalk.com



Some of the other artists connected with Sydney Ure Smith were William Dobell, Hans Heysen, Donald Friend, Thea Proctor and Margaret Preston, and there were literary contributions from Norman Lindsay who also worked as a cartoonist for *The Bulletin* for 50 years. *Art in Australia* would be revived in the 1960s by Sydney Ure Smith's son Sam, as the still current *Art and Australia* (Paroissien 1988).

It was the editor of *The Bulletin*, J. F. Archibald, who would leave a bequest of £95,000 for the *Archibald Prize* for portraiture in 1921 (Allen 1997). The first major arts prize, the *Wynne Prize* was set up much earlier on the bequest of Richard Wynne in 1897.

The 1939 Herald Exhibition of French and British contemporary art conceived by newspaper magnate Keith Murdoch was the first corporate sponsored exhibition, bringing publicity, controversy, and the shock of European post-impressionism and modernist painting to the public (Smee 2005).

War artists were welcomed back after WWI with eyes open and government contacts. They would become 'critics, connoisseurs, gallery directors, and advisors to the government' and knighthoods were bestowed on William Longstaff and Arthur Streeton (Serle 1987). Lord Woolavington bought Longstaff's '*Menin Gate*' for £2000 in 1928 and presented it to the Australian Government (Australian War Memorial, 2002).



Plate 3
Art patrons John and Sunday Reed
Source: www.ernmalley.com

In 1930s Victoria, heiress Sunday Reed and husband John bought an old dairy farm in Heidelberg, which is now part

of the Heide Museum of Modern Art. The Reeds were aware of the past camps of the Heidelberg artists in the area and became known as the Heide Circle. Modernists, including Arthur Boyd, Albert Tucker, Joy Hester, John Perceval and Sidney Nolan, became house guests and the Reeds purchased their works for their collection. Nolan, who was supported at Heide for 10 years, painted his *Ned Kelly series* there (Brown 2009). Many of the Heide artists were connected with the *Angry Penguin* magazine which was co-edited and financed by John Reed (Harris, 2003).

World War II had brought many displaced Europeans to Australia. Among them was Rudy Komon who set up a gallery in Sydney's Paddington and supported a number of artists including Sidney Nolan and Jon Molvig. Komon gave Fred Williams a £80 a month salary which gave him freedom to paint (Thomas 1993). Komon was not the only gallery owner to support artists in this way.

In 1943 an Arts Council, based on the British model, was set up in NSW on a grant from the NSW Department of Education. The early arts council was very much tied to education with a mandate to 'bring art in all its forms to the people'. The Australian Elizabethan Trust was set up in 1954 for the performing arts, and eventually in 1964 there was Federal Government support for the Arts Council (Throsby 2001).

H. C. Coombs, a governor of the Reserve Bank, not only persuaded Holt to legislate for the Australian Council for the Arts (now the Australia Council) but also became chairman by 1968. Coombs had earlier convinced the Reserve Bank to start its art collection.

For a country whose 'intellect and arts, until recent times have been almost the last thing a European has associated with Australia' (Serle 1987 p.1) it must also be said that Australia did have an early history of support for the arts.

Patronage of the arts pre 1970 often relied on individuals; however there was also a tardy, but increasing contribution from the public sector, initially by State governments, and followed by Federal support and the beginnings of corporate sponsorship.

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