

## Roddy Meagher: a life in art\*

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### Plate 1



Mark Tedeschi, *Justice (Roddy) Meagher* (2001). Digital image.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Roddy Meagher used to say that Robert Hughes did a great injustice to Margaret Olley and her colleagues by describing them as the Sydney Charm School, “as if they were nothing but pretty-pretty”, whereas Meagher thought that “Sydney 1945-1960 was one of the greatest art scenes we have known”. Robert Hughes, Margaret Olley, and Roddy Meagher all died within a year of each other. Aside from all being recently deceased, they also have in common the fact that, in different ways, Meagher, Olley, and Hughes were all Sydney identities who lived high-profile lives in art. That we are the poorer for their passing, there is no doubt. But there is greater doubt as to what it means to say that each of them lived a life in art. Or, rather, there is greater doubt as to whether it means the same thing to say that each of them lived a life in art.

Margaret Olley’s life was obviously a life in art. She encouraged young artists, and was a munificent benefactor of institutions. But the obvious reason that hers was a life in art was because, first and foremost, she was an artist.

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\* All the plates discussed in this lecture are images of works in Roddy Meagher’s collection, which was bequeathed to the University of Sydney under the terms of his will.

Robert Hughes's life was obviously a life in art. He made television documentaries that enabled mass audiences to share his love of art and culture. But the obvious reason that his was a life in art was because, first and foremost, he was an art critic.

Roddy Meagher's life was, one might readily assert, obviously a life in art. But what would it mean to say that his was obviously a life in art? He was not an artist and was not an art critic. He was a collector, but it is difficult to say that his collection has made a significant contribution to the life of art in Sydney. He loved art and artists, and enjoyed spending time around both. But what does it mean to say that his was a life in art?

In the following discussion, I hope to get clearer about what it would mean to say that Roddy Meagher's was a life in art. There are, I suggest, four bases for claiming that Meagher's was a life in art: his life as an aesthete (someone who professes a special appreciation of art); his life as a collector (someone who acquires works of art); his life as a patron of the arts (someone who promoted the cause of art in the public life of Sydney); and, the central place of art in his personal life.

I shall consider Meagher's life in art in each of these senses in this lecture. But, before doing so, let me say something about his life outside art. Unlike Hughes and Olley, his professional life rarely involved any significant engagement with art. Most of Roddy Meagher's professional career was spent at the Bar, where he was one of the most celebrated QCs of his generation. He became a Judge of Appeal, but, upon retirement, returned to his old barristers' chambers on the Eighth Floor of Selborne Chambers.

Aside from his work in the law, Meagher was well known for his conservative position in social and political life, and his staunch opposition to political correctness. There is certainly a sense in which he was deeply conservative. But there is also a sense in which it was highly misleading to describe him as a conservative. I have spoken and written about this elsewhere. His attacks on political correctness are also deceptive. He enjoyed cultivating an appearance that misrepresented his real personality, so that he was presumed to be sexist, racist, and homophobic by many who had not met him. To understand his approach to political correctness, however, is to understand that he hated the attitude of political correctness, not the people that political correctness sought to protect. Again, I have written and spoken elsewhere about his approach to political correctness.

We are interested, today, in understanding Meagher's life in art. But as Mark Tedeschi's photograph (Plate 1) demonstrates, there is no rough and ready distinction to be made between his life in art and his life outside art. Here, we see him in his judge's chambers at the Supreme Court, a domain in which one might expect to find the life of art curtailed. And yet, it dominates the image. So, although we shall try and prise apart these two aspects of his life, there is also a sense in which, at the end, we must acknowledge that art saturated all aspects of his life.

The photograph depicts Meagher dressed in winged collar and bands for Court, and surrounded by some of his art collection. It also shows him holding a page of Hebrew text. This is because he was in the middle of a Hebrew lesson when the photographer arrived at his Chambers for the shoot, and the lesson continued throughout the shoot. I know this because I was in the room at the time, giving Mr Justice Meagher his daily Hebrew lesson. We were reading a passage from the Book of Judges. It was in this way that I befriended Meagher, and, in time, came to write his biography, *Roddy's Folly: R. P. Meagher QC – art lover and lawyer*, which was published in April this year, eight months after his death.

## **Aesthetics**

I turn first to Roddy's life as an aesthete, and ask what it means for him to have a life in art as an aesthete. An aesthete is someone who professes to have a special appreciation of beauty.

Roddy was such a person. In trying to understand what constituted the aesthetic value of art for Roddy, I shall discuss the appeal of three different kinds of properties that a work of art might have: formal properties, historical properties, and expressive properties.

### Significant Form

Guy Brown is a contemporary Australian still life painter. He met Roddy Meagher through the Ray Hughes Gallery, and struck up a friendship whilst painting still life tableaus and interiors in Roddy's home at Darling Point. Brown exhibited twenty-two paintings from the series, *Roddy's Home*, at an exhibition at the Hughes Gallery in 2011. Here we see three works that are representative of the series (Plates 2, 3, 4).

#### Plates 2, 3, 4



Guy Brown, *Downstairs Front Room III* (2011). Oil on canvas.



Guy Brown, *Sitting Room III* (2011). Oil on canvas.



Guy Brown, *Downstairs Front Room V* (2011). Oil on canvas.

There are many observations that these oil paintings invite. However, what I should like to focus on is two observations. First, Brown has depicted a very wide range of different art forms in these images: landscape, portraiture, modernist painting, ceramics, classical and oriental figurines and assorted artefacts. Secondly, I suggest, he has painted these things in such a way as to draw out the common aesthetic appeal that these very different things share. What is this appeal? These things were created in very different times and places, for different reasons, and sometimes to serve specific practical, social or religious purposes; in other cases simply to be admired.

From an early age, Roddy Meagher was interested in the visual arts. Initially, it was the French School that captured his aesthetic sensibility – Picasso, Matisse, and their contemporaries. It was not, however, enough for him to enjoy looking at these artists' paintings (or at least reproductions of them). Rather, he wanted to understand why they appealed to him so much; he wanted a theoretical account of their beauty. This he found when, at about the age of eighteen, he read Clive Bell's classic treatise, *Art*.

Bell had a great interest in the Post Impressionist painters, and did much to promote awareness of their work in London. But he too had not been content in simply appreciating their pictures. His account of what makes something a work of art begins with a reflection on his own experience of art, and the realization that there is a special kind of experience that he has when looking at art. This he calls an experience of the aesthetic emotion.

Aesthetic emotion, Bell asserts, is a special emotion that we do not experience in our practical life, but only when looking at art. If we only experience aesthetic emotion when looking at art, Bell must explain what it is about art that arouses aesthetic emotion in us. This property of art is 'significant form'. Significant form is found in certain combinations of colours and lines (and three-dimensional form in sculpture). Something counts as art if it possesses significant form, and art arouses in us the aesthetic emotion because it possesses

significant form. Bell claims that it is a fact about our psychology that we are peculiarly responsive to form.

It is hardly surprising that this theory would appeal to the eighteen-year-old Meagher when he first read it. First of all, it attempted to provide a rational argument for the nature and value of art. Secondly, it was particularly well suited to explaining the value of the paintings that most appealed to Meagher at this time. Thirdly, although it purported to be a rational argument, it gave a central place to the sensuous experience of art: Bell says that the nature of art can only be understood by starting with the experience of art and reflecting on this. Fourthly, as Meagher's aesthetic interests diversified, this theory could accommodate whatever objects he came to appreciate, so long as this translated into his becoming aware of the objects' significant form.

Meagher had been completely entranced by the French School, and so long as this was the case, it was natural that Bell's theory of significant form should hold intellectual sway with him. Certainly, as an adolescent, he would have sought an intellectual argument for the value he had come to find in these Post Impressionist paintings. But, whereas once he had no time for Dutch still lives or Russian icons, his interests began to broaden, and he came to acquire more wide-ranging tastes, as diverse as French history painting and Japanese genre painting. At the same time, he became less enamoured with Bell. It seems that he identified Bell narrowly with Post Impressionism. Now, it is true that Bell aims to explain the special achievement of the painters of this school. However, he does not claim that they have an appeal that other art does not have. Rather, his whole point is that all great art shares a common property: significant form. Post Impressionism forces us to realize that this is what really matters about art, but it is not a claim that other art does not matter.

Possibly, Meagher misunderstood Bell. Probably, he misremembered him. Most likely, the branching out of his artistic interests overlapped with his rejection of Bell's theory of aesthetics (probably because of its logical flaws). The consequence was that he was left with a burgeoning collection of diverse works of art, but no theory of aesthetics to explain the appeal of these objects.

### History of Meaning

Aside from the formal properties of works of art, Meagher was also highly sensitive to other art historical properties. It is in the history of meaning that Meagher witnessed in an object that Edmund Capon believes Meagher's aesthetic is best understood.

### Plates 5, 6, 7, 8



Attic red figure lekythos (600-500BC), (attributed) Athens, Greece.

Sepik mask (date unknown), Papua New Guinea.

Tang horseman (date unknown), China. Terracotta.

Collecting Passions exhibition at the University Art Gallery, 2009.

Images courtesy of University of Sydney.

As an undergraduate at the University of Sydney, Meagher read Greek, and wrote a dissertation on ancient Greek pottery in his final year of Arts. The dissertation involved comparing a large number of black and red vases (such as Plate 5), in order to understand how a single myth from Greek mythology had been represented in different places and across different periods of ancient Greek civilization. It is precisely the sort of work that requires painstaking attention to small details in an object in order to draw out a better understanding of what the object meant to the person who created it.

It seems, to Capon, that this aptitude explains not only Meagher's interest in classical archaeology, but in a whole range of objects. His collection reflects his interest in often arcane objects. He was taken with things from worlds that were separated from him and one another through time – such as the ancient vases and modernist sculpture (Plate 8) – and geography – such as masks and other artefacts from Papua New Guinea (Plate 6) and figurines from China and Southeast Asia (Plate 7). His collection reflects his curiosity about wide-ranging cultures, and Capon thinks that the appeal of such objects lay in the way their history spoke to him:

*He was somebody who felt, to me, the texture of an object. When I say the texture – whether it be a painting or an object – I'm not talking about material texture so much ... I'm talking about the spiritual texture, if you like, which evokes the kind of history that exists within these objects. His aesthetic was about the history of content, in a way. It was much less a visual aesthetic. And you can have that. After all, that's what a lot of academics are like: their aesthetic is based on analysis and knowledge, as opposed to the appearance of things. To me, Roddy looked at something, whether it be a Cossington Smith, or a drawing, or whatever, and as an image it appealed to him. But I think what appealed to him was what that object represented, and the kind of the history that life somehow imbued in that object [which] was somehow revealed in a mysterious way to him, and maybe not to others. Some people sense it and some of us don't. Some people see an object, and see the object as nothing else. Some people see the same object and sense another life that is within it. That's what I mean by Roddy's aesthetic.*

### **Artistic Expression**

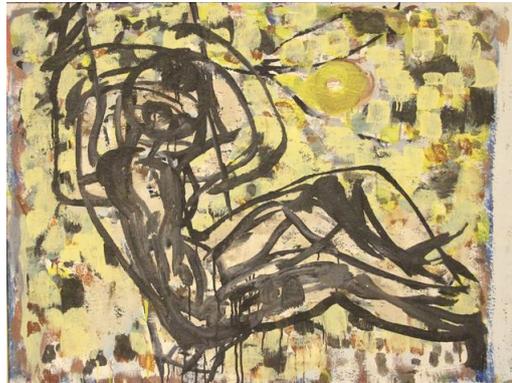
There is no doubt that Capon touches on something of the appeal that art had for Roddy Meagher. However, in some ways it seems to me that this rather over-intellectualises the appeal of art for Meagher. I suggest that what really mattered to him most was the capacity for expression of emotion in art. Meagher was a deeply sensitive person (however much he might sometimes have hidden this) and was attracted to sensitive people. It is apparent from the way that he talks about art that he prizes most highly the expressiveness of his favourite works. In each case he values the combination of emotional subtlety and emotional strength in a work. This is best brought out through examining three comparisons that he makes: between painting and drawing; between two Australian printmakers; and between Chinese ceramics and Japanese woodcut prints. I shall consider each in turn.

### **Painting and drawing**

“I find it an intensely romantic painting.” That is Roddy Meagher on *The Moon in May* (Plate 10), one of his favourite paintings by Ian Fairweather. Fairweather, along with Grace Cossington Smith, held the distinction of being the two greatest painters in Roddy's canon. Brett Whiteley, he thought was a much over-rated painter, although his drawings (such as Plate 9) are “unique, wonderful, a parade of genius”. Meagher also regarded Whiteley's

erotic drawings as some of the only genuinely erotic art that he had encountered. Why is it that one work is intensely romantic and the other genuinely erotic?

Plates 9, 10



Brett Whiteley, *Untitled* (1976). Ink on paper.

Ian Fairweather, *The Moon in May* (c.1965). Synthetic polymer paint on gouache on hardboard.

For some people, drawings are nothing more than the poor man's paintings – commanding lower prices because they involve less skill and possess less value. For Meagher, however, there is a fundamental difference between the two media. Both are equally capable of serving as vehicles of emotional expression. However, each medium facilitates expression in a different way, and therefore gives rise to a different kind of emotional experience. He explains:

*In a drawing the artist has more blank space to play with than the painter does, he thus has more freedom, more challenge, more room to manoeuvre. From this two things follow:*

*In a drawing the space is as much a part of the drawing as the lines are; AND*

*In a drawing one cannot fudge and in a painting one can – and does.*

*As a consequence a painting will always be more overwhelming, more majestic, more powerful than a drawing; but a good drawing will always be more sensitive, more spiritual and perhaps more immediately effective than a painting.*

*A drawing compared to a painting is an epigram compared to an epic. It is caviar compared to beef stew. It is chamber music compared to a gigantic novel. It is Voltaire compared to Patrick White.*

Part of the value of art for Roddy is that one can appreciate the overwhelming, majesty, and power of one medium, and the sensitive, spiritual and more immediate effect of another. And one appreciates painting and drawing differently on account of their different emotional qualities.

### **Printmaking**

I turn briefly to printmaking. Again, for Meagher, printmaking is not inferior to painting, but, at its best, capable of a kind of expressiveness not found in painting or drawing. His preference for Cressida Campbell's prints (Plate 11) over Margaret Preston's (Plate 12) stems from his appreciation of Campbell's ability to create works which offer a special kind of

emotional experience; one that is only possible in the work of an artist who is sensitive to the special emotional possibilities of woodcuts:

*She is, in my view, simply Australia's best woodcut artist; and I appreciate that this involves my thinking she is superior to Margaret Preston. I do... The works by Cressida Campbell are infinitely subtle, combining the fluidity of painting with the firm texture of a print. The objects are rarely placed in the centre of the work; and the work always conjures up suggestions, arrière pensées, unspoken intimacies. By contrast, Margaret Preston is always outspoken, full-in-the-face, even aggressive: usually one object (probably a vase of flowers – in the dead centre – often, of course, of spectacular beauty, but never of any subtlety).*

Plates 11, 12



Cressida Campbell (b.1960), *Eggplant with Fan*. Woodblock, watercolour on carved plywood.  
Margaret Preston, *Red Bow* (1925). Hand-coloured woodblock print.

It will be apparent, by now, that always Meagher admires the capacity for artistic expression of emotional intensity which nevertheless retains a sense of gentleness or subtly, and that he is acutely sensitive to the special suitability of paint, pencil, and the printer's plate for realizing different kinds of expression. In different ways, the best painters, printmakers, and draftsmen offer special experiences of emotional intensity. This distinguishes their works of art as a group for a common aesthetic appeal, and one which contrasts with Capon's intellectual aesthetic of history of meaning. It is closer to that of the aesthetic emotion that Bell maintains that we experience in the presence of significant form; and, although it is not aesthetic emotion, it shows why Bell's theory would have had great intuitive appeal for Meagher, who has shown himself to be highly sensitive to the aesthetic experience of emotion, if not the experience of aesthetic emotion.

### **Oriental art**

Finally, I should like to say something about his appreciation of the expressiveness of oriental art. Meagher collected much from the Orient, and particular favourites were Chinese ceramics (eg Plate 13) and Japanese woodcut prints (eg Plate 14). Both he valued highly, but for very different reasons. He explains: "Japanese art is superbly elegant and the woodcuts not the least. Chinese art one could not describe as elegant. On the other hand, Chinese art is much more sensitive than Japanese art."

## Plates 13, 14



Ceramic blue and white container on wooden stand, China, Hang Hsi (1662-1773).  
Kitagawa UTAMARO, (1753-1806). Woodcut on paper.  
Images courtesy of the University of Sydney.

The elegance of Japanese art is exemplified by the woodcuts of Utamaro, of which Meagher explains:

*I got to love in particular the works of Utamaro of which I possess about ten or twelve... The elegance of his middle period production is just astonishing, the elaborate coiffure of his geishas, his use of seeing women through nets and obvious adoration of slim beauties holds me captive as it once held Aubrey Beardsley captive. No one has ever painted a woman's neck the way he does...*

Whereas the sensitivity of Chinese art is exemplified in ceramics:

*The Chinese area into which I delved was principally ceramics. In this regard I amassed a moderately large collection of blue and white, both Ming and Ching... I do not share the public denigration of blue and white. It still has for me exactly the same force as it had for Ruskin, and I yearn for a room one wall of which is covered in blue and white.*

What I find remarkable is the conviction with which he describes the expressive qualities of Chinese and Japanese art in such markedly different terms:

*The wood cut is essentially a Japanese form of art. So far as I know, there is no such thing as a Chinese woodcut and it is difficult to say what precisely there is about the Japanese woodcut which makes it so great. I think it is perhaps the attribute of elegance which it embodies...*

*Japanese pottery on the other hand is entirely different. One could never mistake a Japanese pot for a Chinese pot... The Japanese pots have a certain ruggedness which the Chinese lack and delight in novel and striking glazes.*

For Meagher, it matters that Chinese and Japanese art are so highly expressive, and it matters even more that they are expressive in different ways. At the core of this aesthete's life in art is his sensitivity to the different forms of expressiveness offered by different artistic media, and realized in different cultures and in different historical periods.

## Art Collector

I have said something about Meagher as an aesthete. I now propose to say something about him as a collector. A collector is someone who acquires art. An aesthete might or might not be a collector, depending upon whether he acquires the objects he finds beautiful. A collector is also different from an accumulator. Collecting is more than accumulating objects. It is accumulating objects for some reason, or having some principle that guides one's accumulating.

## Plates 15, 16



Mark Tedeschi, *Private Gallery* (2007). Digital image.

Collecting Passions exhibition at the University Art Gallery, 2009. Image courtesy University of Sydney.

Mark Tedeschi's staged photograph, *Private Gallery* (Plate 15), featured on the cover of a catalogue produced for *Collecting Passions*, an exhibition of Meagher's collection at the University of Sydney. It was a taster exhibition of the works that he intended to give to the University under the terms of his will. The exhibition included a display of Meagher's seventeen Cossington Smiths (Plate 16).

*Private Gallery* tells us much about the collector and his collection. Meagher is photographed posing in his drawing-room, surrounded by works of art that he has collected. They are allsorts: different styles, different art forms, different periods. To look at this image is not to detect any principle that governs how the objects have been selected or how they have been arranged.

This is to be contrasted with the second image from the University Art Gallery. Here, the paintings are all by the same artist. They have been arranged so that they can be seen conveniently. But more than that, the display is intended to allow the spectator to appreciate the objects as a collection; to gain some better appreciation of Grace Cossington Smith as an artist by bringing together a number of her works. These paintings are all individually quite valuable, and each would command a fair price at auction. They have a further value, however, as a collection; a value that is additional to the cumulative value that they would fetch when auctioned off individually.

Meagher adored Cossington Smith. However, he did not specialise in collecting her works. Indeed, although he had a significant collection of her works, this would not be apparent to someone visiting his home. They were scattered about the place. He saw no particular value in bringing them together as the curator of *Collecting Passions* did. Ordinarily, a collector identifies some principle that guides his collecting so that the collection has some kind of unity – as a collection of nineteenth-century Australian landscape painting, or as a collection of contemporary sculpture, for example. But there is no such principle informing Meagher's collecting.

He once explained in a speech at this Art Gallery that his principles for collecting involved buying whatever he liked if he could afford it; buying good art by less established

artists as this was often more affordable than art by more established artists, even though it was no less beautiful; and, never buying art as an investment – as used-car salesmen and medical practitioners apparently did.

*Private Gallery* demonstrates the sense in which the collector's personality and aesthetic sensibility are all that unify these objects as a collection. But what was assembled as a private collection has now become a public collection, when it was acquired by the University of Sydney through Meagher's bequest earlier this year. The University plans to hold another exhibition next year of the Meagher Collection. But this will, no doubt, be curated according to some art-historical principles. This is the price that is to be paid when a private collection is acquired by a public institution. It is to be hoped, however, that something of the collector's principles for assembling this collection will be preserved. It is only through understanding what the collection meant to its collector that we can properly appreciate it as a collection, as opposed to appreciating the individual works for their intrinsic value.

## **Patron of the arts**

As a collector and an aesthete, art was very much a private affair for Roddy Meagher. He bought what he liked, and he liked things that spoke to his aesthetic sensibilities. He did not seek to impress others by his sensibility or his achievement in assembling an extensive art collection. So one might conclude that art was, for him, an intensely private affair, an experience that involved only his personal engagement with the works of art. There was, however, another sense in which he was influential in promoting the place of art in the public life of Australia, and more particularly in Sydney, through his role as a patron of the arts.

As a patron of the arts, Meagher emphasised the importance of public institutions supporting the arts and themselves acquiring the arts. He was critical of the attempts of government agencies to cut funding to the Australian Ballet Foundation in the 1970s because it could not show on a cost/benefit analysis that the Foundation's government subsidy was justified by its productivity. He was adamant that ballet was a natural incident of civilization, and that civilization could not be measured by a cost/benefit analysis. The government, he argued, had an obligation to nurture the cause of civilization, whether or not a cost/benefit analysis justified its doing so.

At the same time, he could be very generous in his own support of the arts. In particular, he made several gifts of works of art to the New South Wales Bar Association, the most controversial of which was Geoffrey Proud's *Untitled* (Plate 17). For some twenty years this painting hung in the Bar Association's common room, before it mysteriously disappeared. To be fair, there had been ongoing attempts to rescind the gift completely, or at least to move the painting out of the common room. The drama heightened. Leading figures at the Sydney Bar were drawn into a debate about art versus political correctness. Should a painting that was deemed to be offensive by feminists be hung in a public space owned by a professional organisation? The feminists alleged it was inappropriate to present women as objects of the male gaze in this professional context. The aesthetes argued that this was art and should not be subjected to censorship. The controversy raged. A documentary, 'The Naked Lady Vanishes', aired on ABC television some years later. Meagher was outraged, but also, no doubt, loved the attention and sensationalism. It was a rather unorthodox way to promote the cause of art in public life.

Plates 17, 18



Geoffrey Proud, *Untitled* (1974). Spray gun painted on canvas.

Justin O'Brien, *Fruit and flowers with fresco* (c.1967–68). Oil on canvas laid on hardboard.

A more conventional contribution to the patronage of the arts in public life was his support for the Blake Prize for Religious Art. Since the 1950s, Meagher had been a supporter of the Prize. The first Prize was awarded to Justin O'Brien. Meagher collected a number of works by O'Brien, including one (Plate 18) lent to this Gallery for its exhibition last year, Justin O'Brien: the sacred music of colour. Meagher visited the Gallery for the last time to see the exhibition, and was pleased by how well his O'Brien looked in the company of the others. In O'Brien, Meagher saw the achievement that the Blake Prize had been founded to promote: a natural Australian religious art.

In an essay published whilst an undergraduate at St John's College, Meagher speculated about whether the Blake Prize would achieve its objective. This would only be possible if there arose genuine religious artists, who grappled with the deepest problems of the human spirit, rather than degenerating into religious decorators. That might be thought to depend upon the nature of the artists in question. But he was aware that such artists could only thrive amongst "a people who are clamouring for and absorbed in religious problems". He thought that in the 1950s it was still unclear whether this would be possible in Australia. By the end of his life, he was pleased to see the way in which this had been realized in the work of Australian artists such as O'Brien, with the support of the Blake Prize Society.

It was not only a renaissance in religious art that he witnessed during his lifetime. There was also a renaissance of sculptural art. This he attributed to the work of David Handley, who founded Sculpture by the Sea. Handley invited Meagher to become the first Chairman of Sculpture by the Sea, and was surprised by the interest Meagher took in it. Handley explains:

*Roddy liked the democratic nature of Sculpture by the Sea... He liked that we exhibited a broad church. He's not always known for being sympathetic to tastes that he doesn't like. He's quite firm with his opinion, and he would be firm in making his own judgment about whether the work in the show was good, bad, or indifferent. But even if there were works in the show that he didn't like, he liked the fact that Sculpture by the Sea was putting sculpture out there for the public... He is so particular about what he likes. But what he liked about Sculpture by the Sea is that it*

*wasn't particular: it exposes sculpture to so many people and it gave opportunities to a very broad range of artists, some of which he would very quickly dismiss as rubbish, but he would put that aside for the greater good of what he saw the exhibition as doing. If I didn't know Roddy, I would have expected him to say, "Waste of time... The public don't know what they're looking at... Ten percent of the sculptures are rubbish, ten percent I really like, whatever about the other eighty percent, now just focus on that ten percent." Well, he didn't at all: he absolutely got what Sculpture by the Sea was about, and many people in the artworld don't.*

For Meagher, the experience of art was deeply personal, but it was also something social, and he valued contributing to that through his work for the Australian Ballet, the Blake Prize, and Sculpture by the Sea.

## Art and personal life

Thus far we have considered the way in which Meagher's aesthetics, collecting, and patronage of the arts contributed to his life in art. I now turn to a more intimate contribution that it made to his personal life, and I suggest that we can see this contribution in three sculptures that he erected at his country house in Bowral.

Plates 19, 20, 21



Hui Selwood, *Untitled* (c.2000). Painted steel. Image courtesy Warren Walker.

Dave Hickson, *Landscape after Pietro della Francesca* (2003). Painted steel.

Dave Hickson, *Thistle for Didier* (2006). Waxed steel.

The house at Bowral was designed by the noted Australian architect, Glenn Murcutt, and is situated amongst numerous paddocks and magnificent gumtrees. A feature of the property is the hill, Beacon Hill, after which the property is named. Where there is a hill, there ought to be a sculpture, or so it seemed to Roddy. He asked his friend, the gallery owner, Robin Gibson, to suggest an artist whom he might commission to create a sculpture. Hui Selwood was suggested, and, a few years later, several metres of cobalt blue metal stood on top of the hill (Plate 19). It was unveiled at a black-tie-and-sandshoes dinner party for Roddy's friends, who walked up the hill in black tie and sandshoes to see the sculpture and watch the sun set over their pre-dinner drinks.

In English gardening, a folly is an architectural structure that is built for no purpose other than visual pleasure. It is an expression of the frivolity of the builder. It seemed to me that Selwood's sculpture was Roddy's folly, and this gave me the name for my book. For me the sculpture epitomises the way art brings together folly and friendship in Roddy's life.

But art also connects with more sombre feelings too. When a friend saw Dave Hickson's sculpture in a student exhibition, he sent word to Roddy. It immediately appealed and was acquired as a memorial to his friend, Mike Connors, who had recently died of

cancer. It was erected in front of the Murcutt house, and was intended to serve as a physical reminder of the enduring presence of his deceased friend in his life (Plate 20).

Some years later, his beloved and psychotic Alsatian, Didier, died of cancer. So taken was he with the effect of the Connors memorial, that he commissioned Hickson to create another sculpture in memory of his dog. The sculpture, *Thistle for Didier*, commemorates two of the most famous features of the dog's life: the sharp teeth with which he bit many an eminent Australian, and the thistles that he stood guard over at the Bowral property (Plate 21). His master loved each of these traits in equal measure. Hickson became a friend of Meagher through the process of the commission. As with the other two sculptures, this one demonstrates the way in which art functioned in Meagher's life to bring people together and to commemorate those who were gone.

## Plates 22, 23



Penny Meagher, *Still Life with Pears and Lemon in a Blue Bowl* (1990). Oil on board.  
Penny Meagher, *Fruit on Table* (1983). Oil on board.

No discussion of the place of art in Roddy's personal life could be complete without some mention of his wife, Penny. Penny was an artist who specialised in still life, of which these two works are representative (Plates 22 and 23). She was an accomplished artist in her own right, and her artistic career deserves recognition as such, rather than being treated as an appendix to a life of her husband. In *Roddy's Folly*, I devote a chapter to Penny's Painting, before continuing in the following chapter to discuss Roddy's Collecting.

This is not, however, a discussion of the place of art in Penny's life. So I shall content myself with making two comments about the place of her art in Roddy's life. First, after her premature death, Roddy said of her, "She was the gentlest person I have ever met." Secondly, he said of her paintings in a catalogue of then that he had privately published for his friends, "Her art reflects this gentleness, catching all the nuances of her universe... She poured into her canvases all her empathy and feeling."

There can be no doubt, given Roddy's aesthetic sensibility, that he valued her paintings for the very reason that he valued her: both artist and artwork exuded the same warmth and gentleness. It is also to be suspected that part of what he valued about her was that, not only was she warm and gentle, but she was able to give expression to her warmth and gentleness through her work as an artist.

Throughout his life, Roddy was susceptible to forming his most intimate human relationships with those who shared his sensitivity to art (in particular, young people who exhibited this sensibility): it was not merely that they had common interests, but that the shared emotional engagement with art facilitated the emotional human engagement. As his health and quality of life deteriorated, his engagement with art remained as vital as ever, and that he found this was a valuable weapon in his fight against depression.

### ***Ars artium* and a life in art**

So how are we to make sense of Roddy Meagher's life as a life in art? In a tribute to the Late John Lehane, his co-author for the legendary equity textbook, known by the names of its authors, *Meagher, Gummow and Lehane*, Meagher wrote:

*Constant Lambert, in his book Music Ho!, said that if you tried to describe Richard Strauss's music you would stress the brilliance of his orchestration, if it was Sibelius you would stress the austerity of his bleak Nordic melodies, but if it was Mozart all you could say was, accurately but dully, that his music was wonderful. In a way, one has a similar problem talking of John Lehane. He did not utter any famous statements, he never got violently angry, he never got drunk, he did nothing outrageous, he was not colourful yet he was one of the greatest lawyers and one of the nicest men any of us will ever meet. He had great fastidiousness and was one of those rare people, sincere and unostentatious, to whom the conduct of life was ars artium.*

One could not say of Roddy Meagher that he never uttered any famous statements, never got violently angry, never got drunk, did nothing outrageous, or was not colourful. Yet when it comes to his life in art, there is a similar difficulty. If you tried to describe Margaret Olley's life in art, you would stress her achievement as a still life painter, if it was Robert Hughes, you would stress his contribution to art criticism, but if it was Roddy Meagher, all you could say was, accurately but dully, that art saturated every aspect of his life.

Plates 24, 25, 26



Guy Brown, *Upstairs Cabinet II* (2011). Oil on canvas.

Guy Brown, *Downstairs Hallway Cabinet* (2011). Oil on canvas.

Amanda Penrose Hart, *With Respect* (2008). Oil on canvas.

So finally, I turn to three paintings by artists who knew Roddy personally (Plates 24, 25, 26). In the first painting by Guy Brown, one might think that we see nothing more than the careful study of some elegantly-arranged exquisite objects in a display case on the top floor of

Roddy's Darling Point home. However, it is apparent from the second image that there is more to the painting than that. The second painting is of a collection in a cabinet on the ground floor of the same building, facing the staircase leading up to the other two floors. Reflected in the glass doors of the cabinet, we see the stairs and paintings hanging on the walls above the staircase.

The reflection is significant. It reminds us of what we are looking at in the display case: the life of the collector. The objects in each cabinet and on the walls vary astonishingly. There is no single unifying feature. Some might be appreciated for the value of their formal properties, others for their history of meaning, and still more for their expressiveness. They reflect the tastes of their collector, and we see something deep and important about him in his collection: it is his strength of character that lends to the collection the only sense of unity that it possesses. Many of these objects have now found their way into a public collection at the University of Sydney, thanks to their collector's bequest. So looking at these images we see the life of an aesthete, collector, and patron of the arts.

But we also see something more. In Amanda Penrose Hart's painting, *With Respect*, Meagher is depicted standing next to his friend, Richard Weinstein. The artist sought to capture in this image not only the mutual respect that the two sitters felt for one another, but the sense in which the life of art was so important for each of them, and the sense in which this shared sense respect for the life of art drew the two men together in some deep and profound way. So now we see in the paintings not only the aesthete's, collector's, and patron's life, but the personal life too.

*Ars artium* – the art of arts. Roddy Meagher admired the way in which John Lehane's fastidiousness, sincerity, and lack of ostentation allowed him to elevate the conduct of life into *ars artium*, the art of arts. Guy Brown and Amanda Penrose Hart are representative of the many artists who admired the way in which Roddy Meagher's aesthetics, collecting, patronage of the arts, and personal life allowed him to elevate the conduct of life into *ars artium*, the art of arts. His life demonstrates the contribution that the life of art makes to the conduct of life.