Collecting Passions
A century of Modernism from the home of Justice Roddy Meagher
The history of collecting art in Australia contains few stories as alluring as Roddy Meagher’s. Justice Roderick Pitt Meagher — the eminent jurist, authority on Equity law, author of textbooks, spellbinding lecturer, famous for his bons mots and scathing witticisms1 — is one of the most passionate yet private collectors in Sydney. Behind the illustrious career is a gentle connoisseur, a man passionate for the visual arts, who has spent his adult life collecting with the constancy of obsession, ever since his youth studying Arts at the University of Sydney.

Meagher’s Sydney terrace house (his home since 1971) is a veritable Aladdin’s Cave of art. Rare oils and drawings jostle for space with decorative arts: Persian carpets and Verdure tapestries, a Spanish baroque screen, lustrous old faience and Delftware. On marble mantelpieces classical statuettes and busts confront Sepik or Fang masks, while the top-floor gallery boasts cabinets of antique pottery from the Peloponnesse as from Old Cathay. The Japan of the woodblock colourists Utamaro and Eisen, Eastern costumes in brocade and shot silk, and curvaceous Ghandara statuettes complete this time capsule, this cabinet de curiosités hidden in a Sydney street.

As one ascends the timber staircases, fresh wonders are unveiled under the benevolent gaze of a willing cicerone – the collector himself. Endowed with an extraordinary memory for names, dates, even prices paid for work, Roddy Meagher makes of every acquisition a story in itself, told in a gravelly baritone set off by the most elegant of Australian dictions. Graceful still-lives, figures and landscapes by the artist Penny Meagher, the judge’s late wife and mother of their daughter Amy, bring notes of strong colour to the penumbra before the spotlights go up.2

Meagher’s philosophy is to hang every work, Salon-style, from the dado to the cornice. Each corridor, bed or sittingroom is a kaleidoscope of visual experience. As far as possible, everything bought must be hung, seen, and always kept: “I despise people who buy art for investment”, Roddy says archly. He seldom buys at auction — he does not trust himself — and so places written bids. All his life Meagher has bought from a set of nearby dealers: David Jones Gallery in Robert Haines’s day, then Macquarie Galleries, Rudy Komon, Stadia Graphics, then Robin Gibson. Formerly a great traveller, in England he would visit the old master dealer Stanhope Shelton in Suffolk, or Abbott & Holder in Battersea, often using mail-order when he was unable to get overseas.
Meagher’s love of art did not spring from his family milieu: the art owned by his parents, graziers in Temora, stopped with wedding-gift prints by Lindsay and Sydney Long, and the caricatures of Phil May. From a Jesuit education at Riverview College, the young Roddy reinvented himself as an aesthete at Sydney. A student of Greek, history and classics (Fine Arts had yet to be established at Sydney), Roddy was also drawn to contemporary art. His first purchase was a monotype by Herald art critic Paul Haefliger when he was just eighteen, in 1950. The Swiss-born critic and tastemaker with his wife Jean Bellette became, like many Sydney artists, a friend and guide to the young enthusiast.

After Arts and his four years of Law Meagher travelled on the continent in 1958, visiting “every museum and cathedral in Europe” and staying in pensione. This was a great visual education for a collector who has trusted to his own eye more than to book-learning. Once back in Sydney and embarked on his career at the Bar, Meagher became a creature of the city’s art galleries, antique-dealers, even ‘junk-shops’. The ordering principle was whether a work pleased him, and his vast collection today (numbering almost two thousand pieces) is held together by the true distinction of his ‘eye’ for beauty.

As soon as his means allowed it, from the later 60s on, Meagher made forays into the birth of modernism through French graphic art of the 19th century — Delacroix, Géricault, Manet, Toulouse-Lautrec, Bonnard, a Vuillard oil, Rouault aquatints, several works each by Matisse and Picasso. The human face, the figure, and the female body are abiding foci of his collecting. Reflecting the Anglo-centrism of his generation (born in 1932, he was too young to serve in WW2) Meagher has a marked fondness for English art: the portrait drawings of Romney, the landscape sketches of Gainsborough and Constable. Indeed modern British art of the mid-20th century is a great strength of the collection, which contains works by Augustus and Gwen John, Gaudier-Breszka, Ben Nicholson, Graham Sutherland, even Lucien Freud and Frank Auerbach.

Nonetheless the mainstay of Meagher’s collecting has been the modern art of his home town, Sydney. A broad range of Sydney modernists is here, from Roland Wakelin to Margaret Preston and Grace Cossington-Smith. He is passionate about the peacock tesserae of “Gracie”, the brilliant recluse who cared for her sister and showed (to little acclaim) at Macquarie each year; Meagher has accumulated nineteen of her works. Sydney modernists Justin O’Brien, Jeffrey Smart,
Margaret Olley, John Coburn, Brett Whiteley and Cressida Campbell are all present (as are Melbourne artists E. Phillips Fox, Russell Drysdale, and Clarice Beckett). The seminal figures of the abstract tendency for Meagher are the itinerant Ian Fairweather, John Passmore, and Godfrey Miller: “all three ancient and raving mad, all three great painters”, he quips. Fairweather’s The Moon in May has had a place of honour since Roddy bought it from a one-man show at Macquarie Gallery in 1965.

Despite an earlier prediction — that retirement from the Bench would mean a cessation of collecting — Meagher continues his compulsion without stint. He has lately ventured into Aboriginal abstraction with Eunice Napanangka and Emily Kngwarreye, and broached a new generation with Melbourne punk portraitist Steve Cox. Despite the encroachments of old age and serious illness (“never get old” he admonishes, “it’s awful”), Roddy Meagher is alive to the thrill of visual art. Admirably, he has now made it his purpose to pass on that passion, through the splendid collection he has long nurtured, to a new generation of Australians.

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Exhibition curated by Ann Stephen. curatorial assistance Francesca Lola, installation Luke Palmer

Front cover photograph: Mark Tedeschi, Roddy at Rest, (detail) digital print, July 2007