

Andrew Grimwade and Gerard Vaughan (eds)

Great Philanthropists on Trial: The Art of the Bequest

Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press in association with the National Gallery of Victoria, 2006

ISBN 978 05228 5 263 9/ 0 522 85263 7

179 pp, 80 illus., rrpAUD\$39.95

The study of philanthropy in Australia has lately come of age with the publication of a number of monographs on great Australian philanthropists,¹ to which the present collection of essays is a welcome addition. This volume contains the proceedings of a symposium hosted by the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) in 2004 to mark the centenary of the Felton Bequest, still the single largest art benefaction in Australia's history. The Bequest will most likely retain this status for the foreseeable future—with the increasing value of the artworks it has acquired and the continued drawing down of interest from its capital—much as it is to be hoped that a new Felton might emerge in time. An underlying premise for this publication, alluded to in its title, is the desire to understand the most favourable circumstances for eliciting and then managing major donations. What has worked in the past and what has not? The thirteen essays in this book by a historian, art historians, and museum professionals address these questions in contexts across metropolitan and regional Australia, with a bias in favour of Melbourne—and Felton in particular—and focussing on early benefactors rather than recent ones.

The Director of the NGV, Dr Gerard Vaughan, initiates the discussion with an interesting investigation of donations of artworks to the Gallery prior to Felton.² It seems the situation was rather bleak. From its foundation in 1861 until 1901 only a handful of works by reputable artists in Australia were acquired by donation, including examples by E Phillips Fox, Rupert Bunny, Bertram Mackennal, and Louis Buvelot. Vaughan notes that only two Old Masters feature in his list of major donations, alongside the most significant work of an international artist: J.W.M. Turner's *Dunstanborough Castle*. The latter was given in 1889 by the Duke of Westminster in slightly mysterious circumstances, after he had loaned it for the Centennial Exhibition. Vaughan sees the explanation for this dearth of important donations in the unambitious beginnings of

¹ Such as John Poynter's *Mr Felton's Bequests* (Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, 2003); Peter Yule, *Ian Potter: Financier, Philanthropist and Patron of the Arts* (Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, 2006).

² Gerard Vaughan, 'Before Felton—Private Philanthropy and the NGV 1861–1904', in Grimwade and Vaughan (eds), *Great Philanthropists*, pp.1–20.

private collecting in colonial Victoria, emulating at least initially the model set by the Gallery itself.

Another factor to be considered is the legislative environment created by colonial governments. Protective tariffs were enacted in Victoria in 1866,³ adding a significant cost to the importation of works of art by private collectors (public galleries were not affected). These taxes were adopted by all the colonies, remained under Federation, and were recognised as an impediment to the formation of significant art collections well into the twentieth century.⁴ In 1882 a fifteenth-century gold-ground panel painting by an anonymous Tyrolean master, *Saints Martin of Tours and Nicholas of Bari with a Beggar*, was discovered concealed in a compartment of a shipping crate at Port Adelaide.⁵ It appears a wily colonist had tried to evade paying import duty. The ruse backfired, and the painting eventually found its way to the Art Gallery of South Australia.

Still in South Australia—the story of the one that got away. In 1918 a Belgian artist by the name of Paul Jean Cels died in Adelaide, having travelled there from America for health reasons. He left behind him a small collection of paintings, one of which he had believed to be a work from the school of Pieter Breugel the Elder. The panel depicts peasant harvesters enjoying a meal in the shade of a pear tree in a golden field of wheat. In a letter addressed to Cels in Adelaide the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York offered to purchase the work for the fairly modest sum of \$6,000. The letter was returned unclaimed because Cels had died. Fortunately for the American gallery, it was later able to acquire the work from Cels' heirs for a little over half the price initially offered. This turned out to be a sensational acquisition. The work is in fact Pieter Breugel the Elder's *The Harvests*, today one of the Met's most celebrated

³ Frank Crowley, *A Documentary History of Australia*, 6 vols (Melbourne: Nelson, 1980), vol. 2, pp. 485–88.

⁴ Commonwealth of Australia Parliamentary Papers, *Tariff Reports, 1914–1917*, VIII, part 1, pp. 771–814. In 1949 the Felton Bequest Advisor Kenneth Clark wrote to Joseph Burke, Herald Chair of Fine Arts at The University of Melbourne, arguing for the removal of the import duty on works of art in Australia (University of Melbourne Archives, Joseph Burke Papers, J.B. Personal C, U 61/9, letter of 30 March 1949).

⁵ Ron Radford, Angus Trumble, Jane Hylton, Dick Richards, Christopher Menz, and Sarah Thomas, *Treasures from the Art Gallery of South Australia* (Adelaide: Art Gallery of South Australia, 1998), p. 19.

European Old Master paintings.⁶ While there may be no indication that Cels wanted to bring his paintings with him to Adelaide, the existence of a financial disincentive in the form of a tariff may have contributed to his failure to do so.

Furthermore, Mae Anna Pang's essay on Herbert Wade Kent, one of the NGV's major donors of Asian art, notes that in 1930 his collection was returned to Japan from where he had tried to send it to Melbourne for an exhibition at the Gallery. The Commonwealth Taxation Department had assessed an entrance tax of £350, which he was apparently unwilling or unable to pay at the time. Fortunately, the collection did come to the Gallery in due course.⁷ However, the significance of government taxation policy in influencing the behaviour of art collectors and benefactors should never be underestimated.

Ironically, a problem faced by public museums is the burden on their resources created by donations of artworks, which need to be conserved, stored, studied, and displayed. Sometimes a museum might wish it had not received such a gift. Indeed, among the Old Masters donated to the NGV during the nineteenth century, Vaughan lists the '1883 Sir James MacBain's gift of *Christ at the Column*, attributed to Guido Reni', which was 'deaccessioned in 1941.' Deaccessioning is a controversial practice for many reasons, not least because mistakes can be made. Vaughan does not note that one of the most significant early donations to the NGV was the *Head of an Apostle*, accepted from the estate of Canon John Edward Bromley as 'Attributed to Raphael' in 1889,⁸ subsequently deaccessioned in 1941 by an incredulous director, and ultimately acquired by the Benedictine Monastery at New Norcia in West Australia. It has reportedly since been recognised by a visiting Italian scholar as a cartoon by Giulio Romano—working in the studio of Raphael.⁹

Fortunately, the *Christ at the Column* was not in fact deaccessioned in 1941, as Vaughan reports. It appeared in Sonia Dean's 1995 catalogue of the Gallery's nineteenth- and twentieth-

⁶ Everett Fahy, 'How the Pictures Got Here', in Maryan W. Ainsworth and Keith Christiansen (eds), *From Van Eyck to Bruegel: Early Netherlandish Painting in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998, pp. 63–75.

⁷ Mae Anna Pang, 'Herbert Wade Kent—A Chinese Art Connoisseur', in Grimwade and Vaughan (eds), *Great Philanthropists*, 57–66: note 1 on p. 58.

⁸ State Library of Victoria, Melbourne, [Arts Department] *Report of the Trustees of the National Gallery of Victoria*, 2 vols, 2 [1914–1944] 1889, p. 43.

⁹ For a discussion of this work see: www.newnorcia.wa.edu.au/raphael_room.htm (sighted 6 April 2007).

century paintings as ‘Listed up to 1948 as ‘attributed to Guido Reni’’.¹⁰ Although, it is in reality a version of Gerard Seghers’ *Christ at the Column*, of which another version is in the Musée de l’Ain at Bourg-en-Bresse.¹¹ Seghers (1591–1651) was a distinguished painter, strongly influenced by Caravaggio in the first half of his career, and later by Rubens.¹² The Melbourne painting shows the former influence in its chiaroscuro, and its composition derives ultimately from Caravaggio’s *Flagellation* in the Museo di Capodimonte in Naples. Seghers executed another version of the subject now in the church of Saint Michael’s in Ghent, there with the addition of two of Christ’s tormentors, which is closer still to Caravaggio’s model. Although, to be fair to the early cataloguers at the NGV, there is also a similar version of the subject by Guido Reni in the Städelsches Kunstinstitut in Frankfurt. MacBain, a trustee of Melbourne’s Library and National Gallery, donated the work the same year he was chairman of the Victorian Commission of the Amsterdam Exhibition.¹³ Perhaps he acquired the painting in Holland? A judicious microsample or two, or a study of the canvas support could probably determine whether this sombre work dates from the seventeenth century or the nineteenth, or somewhere in between. Naturally, these tests would require a significant investment of the Gallery’s time and money. Indeed, the lessons of Canon Bromley’s and MacBain’s gifts is that donations of artworks require the investment of resources to realise their significance, which may not be immediately forthcoming.

The question of what attracts significant art benefaction to a museum is addressed in a number of the essays. A common response seems to be that Alfred Felton, Herbert Wade Kent, Everard Studley Miller, John Connell, Thomas Elder, and Orde Poynton all had dealings—presumably happy ones—with metropolitan art institutions prior to making their substantial gifts. Present-day museums are well aware of the importance of enticing potential donors. Alison Inglis’ moving account of John Connell’s gift of his extensive collection to the NGV as a memorial to his late wife, who had influenced the collection’s formation, suggests another important motivation for art benefactors: the wish to share with the public something from which

¹⁰ Sonia Dean, *European Paintings of the 19th and Early 20th Centuries in the National Gallery of Victoria* (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1995), p. 120.

¹¹ Jacques Foucart, ‘Quelques oeuvres de Gérard Seghers’, in *Essays in Northern European Art Presented to Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann on his Sixtieth Birthday* (Doornspijk: Davaco, 1983), 89–93, pp. 90–91.

¹² Carl van der Velde, ‘In de Ban van Caravaggio en Rubens: De Schilder Gerard Seghers’, *Revue Belge d’Archéologie et d’Histoire de l’Art*, vol. 60, 1991, pp. 181–99.

¹³ J. Ann Hone, ‘MacBain, Sir James (1828–1892)’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 5: 1851–1890, K–Q, B. Nairn, G. Serle, and R. Ward (eds) (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1974), pp. 127–28.

they have themselves derived great pleasure. Inglis' contribution is also one of the few essays in this volume to discuss the role of women in art collecting and benefaction.¹⁴ Though the question remains, who was Australia's first important female art benefactor (beyond the isolated instances mentioned by Vaughan of gifts from Queen Victoria and Dame Nellie Melba)?

The question of how a bequest can best be set up by the donor for the benefit of the museum is most explicitly addressed in John Poynter's thoughtful essay reflecting on his own recent tome on the Felton Bequest.¹⁵ The unfinished business addressed here is to understand why Felton chose to make his art bequest as an independent, perpetual trust fund, with trustees even given the authority to refuse acquisitions recommended to them by the Gallery. Poynter supposes that Felton's desire to support charitable causes as well as the NGV led to the Bequest's independence from the Gallery. Yet Felton could just as easily have directed half his prodigious estate to the Gallery, and established a trust solely for charities with the other half. It might be wondered whether Felton wanted to maintain the integrity of his estate out of pride or vanity, although that does not accord at all with the numerous accounts of his personal modesty.¹⁶ A more pragmatic explanation, consistent with Felton's renowned business acumen, might be that he anticipated the inevitable differences of opinion that would arise in the interpretation of his testament, and created a perpetual fund governed by committee that would be able to overcome the peccadillos of the individuals periodically involved in implementing it (such as the opinionated trustee in the 1920s who declared that purchasing Manet was a misuse of the Bequest's funds).¹⁷ In this way the vagaries of personal politics and taste would be diminished in the greater scheme of the Bequest's history (and so the Bequest was able to acquire three Manets during Frank Rinder's advisorship—which remain the only paintings by this fundamentally important modern artist in a public collection in this country).

This book makes a substantial contribution to the study of art benefaction in Australia. Yet much remains to be investigated under the broader rubric of benefaction to the arts, including the support given to artists, art historians, and, more recently, art conservators. Elizabeth Cham's

¹⁴ Alison Inglis, 'The Gift of John Connell to the National Gallery of Victoria', in Grimwade and Vaughan (eds), *Great Philanthropists*, pp. 67–82

¹⁵ John Poynter, 'Alfred Felton and the Art of Making Bequests', in Grimwade and Vaughan (eds), *Great Philanthropists*, pp. 21–36.

¹⁶ The best account of Felton's character is found in Poynter's *Mr Felton's Bequests*, Part One.

¹⁷ Leonard Cox, *The National Gallery of Victoria 1861 to 1968: A Search for a Collection* (Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria, [1970]), p. 104. The trustee in question was the pioneering Australian etcher John Shirlow.

sustained study of art benefaction at The University of Melbourne, as Ian Roach Fellow, is in this respect a sign of more good things to come.

Hugh Hudson

Honorary Research Fellow

School of Culture and Communication

University of Melbourne