Ray Marginson: A tribute

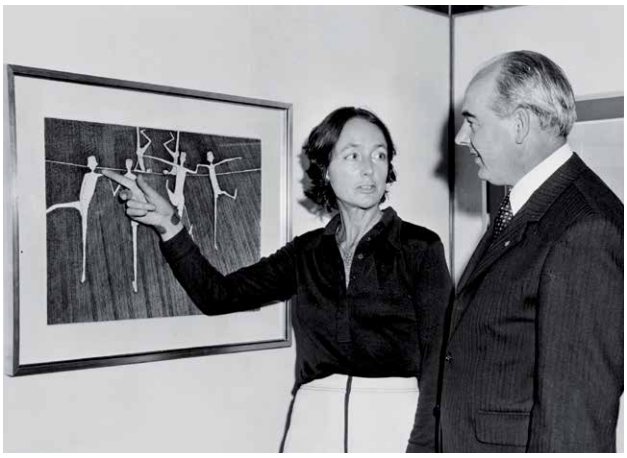
Robyn Sloggett and Belinda Nemec

If Dr Raymond David Marginson AM, BCom, DipPubAdmin, HonLLD (1923–2019) had decided in 1966 not to accept the newly created role of vice-principal of the University of Melbourne, there is no doubt that our university would look very different today. During his 22 years in office, Ray reshaped the finances, operations and physical estate of the university, effectively establishing the framework for the care, conservation and development of its cultural legacy through the latter part of the 20th century and into the 21st.

Ray began as vice-principal in February 1966, charged with reviewing and reorganising the university's administration in light of the difficult financial situation that the institution was facing. Ray described his duty statement as 'refreshingly simple: "To advise the Council on its finances and property"'.[1] In fact, this was no small task; not only had the Victorian auditor-general uncovered serious problems with the university's finances and management, but staff had low morale and lacked confidence in management, while the student body was dissatisfied with overcrowded classes and poor facilities.[2]

In 1966 the university had no art gallery (other than the Ewing Collection in the Student Union, on static display since its acquisition in 1938!),[3] and few pieces of public sculpture. Over the first century of its history the university had acquired many significant works of art and other cultural assets, but there was no consolidated documentation of these—only dislocated records and personal memories. The university's heritage buildings were hemmed in by structures that were, Ray reflected, 'haphazardly located without a coherent plan and many were run-down'. The grounds turned to mud in winter and dust in summer. 'Abysmal and depressing' was how Ray summed up his memory of the Parkville campus at this time.[4]

Ray, perhaps more than anyone else in the history of our institution, understood the term 'the university's



estate'. He understood art and music as part of an Australian identity, and as part of a proper Australian education. He had a deep interest in contemporary Australian art and Australian jazz, and suggested to the university council that 'property' under his jurisdiction should be extended to include works of art. Supported by the then dean of arts, Professor Harry Simon of Oriental Studies, who provided $100,000 for an art acquisition budget, and the Herald Chair of Fine Arts, Sir Joseph Burke, Ray convinced council that a university gallery should be part of the general administration portfolio. He established a works of art committee and by 1971 had overseen the production of the first published catalogue of the university's art holdings,[5] and its first exhibition —held at the National Gallery of Victoria and curated by Betty Clarke, the part-time curator whom Ray employed to find and bring together the university's collections.[6] The University Art Gallery opened in the new Arts South (now John Medley) building on Grattan Street in 1972, moved to renovated space in the Old Physics building near the Student Union in 1975, then in 1988

Previous page: Ray Marginson and curator Betty Clarke discussing John Brack's *Study for three pairs* (1971). Photograph 2003.0003.00173, University of Melbourne, Media and Publication Services Office, University of Melbourne Archives. © *Study for three pairs* courtesy the estate of the artist.

Below: Conservator Robyn Sloggett, former vice-principal Ray Marginson AM, vice-chancellor Professor David Penington AC and benefactor Dame Elisabeth Murdoch AC, DBE at the official opening of the Ian Potter Art Conservation Centre in the former Physics Annexe, June 1990. 2003.0003.01829, University of Melbourne, Media and Publication Services Office, University of Melbourne Archives.

also took over the former Physics Annexe on Swanston Street, a building subsequently incorporated into today's Ian Potter Museum of Art, which opened in 1998.[7] Under Ray's stewardship the university invested in a dynamic artist-in-residence program, and in energising the grounds with commissioned sculptures and the vigorous retrieval and reinstatement of art and heritage (including the monumental Atlantes figures flanking the entrance to the underground car park, salvaged in the 1930s from the demolished Colonial Bank on Elizabeth Street). Ray also commissioned a number of significant works such as the John Olsen ceramic mural *Eastern world* (1971–75), located outside the then University Gallery in Deakin Court.

Ray was skilled at forming and nurturing professional contacts and personal friendships, working with politicians of all colours, and encouraging philanthropy that would benefit the university in many ways—including the acquisition, preservation and display of collections. He identified existing bequests and trusts whose terms aligned with support for the collections, encouraged new acts of benefaction, and successfully applied for government grants from bodies such as the Australia Council and the Victorian Ministry for the Arts.[8] While he made the most of the promotional opportunities afforded by high-profile events such as exhibition launches and new commissions, he fully appreciated the importance of the less glamorous side of collections. He knew that preserving and developing the university's patrimony requires continuing, solid infrastructure and staffing, including high-quality storage and display spaces, and skilled curation, registration and conservation. In the early days he arranged for the National Gallery of Victoria to provide conservation services for many of the artworks that had been neglected, but from the early 1980s organised for a recently graduated art conservator, Robyn Sloggett, to work on a contract basis. The role grew and in 1988 Sloggett was appointed to the new position of Grimwade Conservator.[9] With support from the Grimwade bequests and other philanthropic sources, this single position evolved into the Ian Potter Art Conservation Centre (which officially opened in 1990 in the former Physics Annexe, co-located with the Ian Potter Gallery),[10] and then into the Grimwade Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation—a substantial teaching and research centre in the Faculty of Arts, complemented by a commercial conservation service that continues to care for the university's unique cultural collections.

Art historian and museum director Patrick McCaughey described Ray's contribution in vivid terms:

Artist Christine O'Loughlin observing the installation of her sculpture *Cultural rubble* on the Swanston Street façade of the Ian Potter Gallery (now the Ian Potter Museum of Art), 1993. This landmark of the Parkville campus (commissioned by the university with funds provided by the Ian Potter Foundation) originated in the artist-in-residence program established by Ray Marginson in the 1970s; O'Loughlin was in residence in 1987–88, Ray's final year as vice-principal. 2003.003.01510, University of Melbourne, Media and Publication Services Office, University of Melbourne Archives.

> … on the fourth floor of the South Arts Building, the University of Melbourne Gallery had its first incarnation. Ray Marginson … was the chief instigator. Having saved the university from bankruptcy, he had gone on to become the arts czar of the university. Like the Medici, he worked by stealth, able to talk to and keep afloat both *Overland* and *Meanjin*, reserve funds from buildings to purchase works of art and, along with Carrick Chambers, the visionary Professor of Botany, transform a listless and slovenly campus into the environment of native precinct and spreading lawn that the university enjoys today. Under his tutelage the University of Melbourne Gallery mutated to Old Physics, to the post-modernist splendour of the Ian Potter Museum of Art. With these transformations came the opportunity to show the collection as it had never been shown before.[11]

Opinion might vary on whether Ray 'worked by stealth', but subtle negotiations were certainly part of his remit. He applied his skills to complex matters such as the management of the Donald Thomson Collection; the best use of Miegunyah (the Toorak house and garden bequeathed alongside the collection of Sir Russell and Lady Grimwade); and the ultimately unsuccessful plan to house University of Melbourne Archives in the beautiful Parkville mansion known as Wardlow.

Ray was supported throughout his career at the university by his wife Betty Marginson AM (1923–2015), whom he in turn actively supported in her many roles and activities, including as mayor of the City of Hawthorn and president of University College. Betty was made a Member of the Order of Australia in 1993, eight years after Ray was awarded the same honour 'for services to university administration'. Ray also held the positions of chairman of the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works (now Melbourne Water), president of the council of Museum Victoria (he worked in the interests of both organisations in achieving the construction of Scienceworks on the site of the old Spotswood sewage pumping station), director of Geotrack International, vice-chairman of the Melbourne Theatre Company, member of the Howard Florey Institute, and founding president of the Victorian Jazz Archive (now the Australian Jazz Museum).[12] At the time of his formal 'retirement' in 1988 the university acknowledged his contribution by awarding him a Doctor of Laws (*honoris causa*). He retained strong links with the university, including continuing to chair the Donald Thomson Collection Administration Committee until 2013, when he was 91 years of age.[13] He contributed to the written record of the collections, generously sharing his sharp and often amusing memories in a series of three interviews published in this journal in 2008–10,[14] and penning

essays such as 'One hundred and fifty years of gifts to the University of Melbourne'.[15]

Ray was a collector at heart. The home that he shared with Betty after their children had grown up was filled with works of art from Australia and around the world, books, documents, music, and intriguing mementos from their rich and varied lives and careers. Ray's public legacy extends to an extensive personal archive, the Ray Marginson Collection, which he donated to the University of Melbourne Archives. This material reflects his professional career as well as his wide personal, political and social interests, which ranged from banking legislation; the Australian Labor Party; the Victorian Fabian Society; membership of clubs such as University House, the Boobooks, Beefsteak Club, and Athenaeum, and includes an extensive collection of catalogues and programs from exhibitions of the galleries and venues on campus.

In his role as vice-principal of the University of Melbourne, Ray was able to bring together his good humour, razor-sharp wit, breadth of interests, wide circle of contacts, keen sense of civic responsibility and public spiritedness, untiring energy, and understanding of the significance of history and culture in Australian scholarship and identity. His contribution makes manifest the university's motto: *Postera crescam laude*—To grow in the esteem of future generations.

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1 Ray Marginson, interviewed by Robyn Sloggett, '"High drama and … comedy": Developing the cultural collections of the University of Melbourne' [part 1], *University of Melbourne Collections*, issue 3, December 2008, p. 3.

2 Stuart Macintyre and R.J.W. Selleck, *A short history of the University of Melbourne*, Melbourne University Press, 2003, p. 125.

3 Ray Marginson, 'One hundred and fifty years of gifts to the University of Melbourne', in Andrew Grimwade and Gerard Vaughan (eds), *Great philanthropists on trial: The art of the bequest*, Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2006, pp. 101–12.

4 Marginson, interviewed by Sloggett, '"High drama and … comedy"' [part 2], *University of Melbourne Collections*, issue 5, November 2009, p. 13.

5 *University of Melbourne catalogue of works of art 1971: Catalogue of works of art in the university and its affiliated colleges with a catalogue of the collection in the Department of Classical Studies* (foreword by R.D. Marginson; introduction by Professor Joseph Burke), University of Melbourne, 1971.

6 In 1967, postgraduate student Robert Gaston prepared a preliminary listing; this was amplified by Betty Swann, who was appointed as curator in May 1968, and then in 1970 by her successor Betty Clarke (R.D. Marginson, 'Foreword', in *University of Melbourne: Catalogue of works of art 1971*, p. vii–viii; Christopher Menz, 'Introduction', in *Visions past and present: Celebrating 40 years*, Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, 2012, p. 10).

7 Menz, 'Introduction', pp. 10–11.

8 Marginson, interviewed by Sloggett, '"High drama and … comedy"' [part 2], p. 15.

9 John Poynter and Benjamin Thomas, *Miegunyah: The bequests of Russell and Mab Grimwade*, Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2015, pp. xv–xvi, 164, 231–2.

10 Chris McAuliffe, 'The art collections', in Chris McAuliffe and Peter Yule (eds), *Treasures: Highlights of the cultural collections of the University of Melbourne*, Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2003, p. 26; Menz, 'Introduction', p. 12; Poynter and Thomas, *Miegunyah*, p. 234.

11 Patrick McCaughey, 'A hidden collection', in McAuliffe and Yule (eds), *Treasures*, p. viii.

12 For a summary of Ray's life and career, see the obituary by his eldest son: Simon Marginson, 'Raymond Marginson 1923–2019: Builder of institutions showed "heart"', *The Age*, 19 March 2019, p. 22.

13 Alison Inglis, 'Retirement and recollection: Dr Ray Marginson AM and the Donald Thomson Collection', *University of Melbourne Collections*, issue 13, December 2013, pp. 35–8.

14 Ray Marginson, interviewed by Robyn Sloggett, '"High drama and … comedy": Developing the cultural collections of the University of Melbourne', *University of Melbourne Collections*, issue 3, December 2008, pp. 3–8 [Part 1] and issue 5, November 2009, pp. 12–21 [part 2]; and 'Impecunious magpies, or how to adorn a university with little ready cash', *University of Melbourne Collections*, issue 7, December 2010, pp. 26–33.

15 See note 3 above.