

The Arts Issue

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ROGUES GALLERY

Inside the eccentric art collections of top lawyers

BY RONALD MIZEN

Inside KIP WILLIAMS Taking Oscar Wilde to London's West End | MUSEUM GALAS On the red carpet, and in the red



As corporates offloaded their art collections, many in the legal fraternity continued to build theirs.



Above: Chief Justice Andrew Bell's mother, Pamela Bell, with Lloyd Rees' *Kingdom and the Glory* at Sydney University in 1991. Left: Chief Justice Andrew Bell in his chambers in Sydney.

IN THE MID-1980s, PAMELA BELL BECAME Sydney University's first art curator – a role she would hold until her retirement many years later. For her son Andrew Bell – at the time in his late teens and early 20s – it was a pivotal moment. “As a result of her work at the university, I came to learn of the works of Jeffrey Smart, Donald Friend, James Gleeson, Lloyd Rees and others,” he tells *The Australian Financial Review Magazine*. “That was my introduction to art.”

Bell, now 57 and chief justice of the NSW Supreme Court, is reflecting on his love of art from his corner office in Sydney's Law Courts Building. There is little beauty about the building that houses NSW's top judges – a 1970s brutalist, concrete-clad tower. While it is considered to be of some architectural importance, few would describe it as nice to look at. One architect writing in its defence back in 2012 said it could “only be hoped that if the building survives another 50 years then the original design may be appreciated”. It will need all the time it can get.

But once inside, beauty abounds. In the chief justice's office, a low bookcase that runs under the windows is crammed with sculptures, pictures, pottery and curios. Mao Zedong in miniature sits in a wicker chair, a trinket picked up on a trip to China. A bright red metal maquette of a sculpture by Japanese-Australian artist Ayako Saito sits next to a maquette of another sculpture by Australian Linda Bowden. A found objects sculpture by Ian Swift sits next to a colourful torso sculpture called *Yes Man* by Stephen Marr.

On a bookcase stacked floor to ceiling with law reports are various paintings, including three distorted portraits of Captain Cook by Sydney artist Hugh Ramage. “They are very republican in their thrust and fairly satirical about the monarchy. He's got a particular wit about him,” Bell says. “All of these, I see them, they make me smile. Quite a lot of the paintings I have are whimsical. They have humour. Sometimes it's blatant. Sometimes it's subtle.”

Bell's collection, formed with his wife Joanna Bird, is extensive and began in his early years at the NSW Bar when he lived near a Surry Hills gallery owned by legendary Sydney art dealer Ray Hughes. “He was a very colourful and charming and seductive art dealer.” He does not know how many pieces are in the collection, but it numbers much more than 100 spread across office and home.

PAUL JONES

OF THE PIECE

We take you inside their eclectic treasure troves.

STORY BY RONALD MIZEN PHOTOGRAPHY BY LOUIE DOUVIS



Weinstein in chambers with his collection of art pieces.

As an art-loving jurist, Bell is far from alone. Indeed, behind the spiritless walls of some very plain buildings in Sydney's legal district, and beyond the soulless glass facades of others nearby, lie some of the most eclectic and interesting private collections in Australia. The situation is replicated in the tight-knit legal profession around the country, usually in offices and chambers clustered in or around courts.

Three floors below Bell in a slightly smaller office, visitors to the chambers of Justice Richard Weinstein are hard-pressed to see the harbour beyond the paintings, sketches, furniture, textiles, sculptures and bric-a-brac adorning every surface. "Roddy did it to me," Weinstein says, referencing the state of his office. Roddy is Roderick Meagher, the late NSW Supreme Court judge. In a 2011 obituary for Meagher, Weinstein wrote that he "was often considered to be the most brilliant, remarkable and memorable character to have graced Phillip Street," where the Supreme Court is located.

"His passion for art was well known," he wrote. "To describe his enormous collection as eclectic understates both its importance and diversity: paintings, drawings, prints, sculpture, ancient and contemporary ceramics, coins and items of antiquity; Australian, European, Chinese, Japanese and Pacific Islander. In his later years, after visiting the outback for the first time, he developed an interest in Aboriginal art. It was a revelation to him."

For Weinstein, who was Meagher's tipstaff for two years, the passion for art was infectious both in breadth and zeal. The pair were close and a portrait of them sits behind Weinstein's desk. Another sketch of Meagher by Simon Fieldhouse hangs below. "He's still my judge," Weinstein says. "That's the way it is, forever."

Visitors to Weinstein's chambers can pick from about half a dozen Eames chairs – part of a much larger 36-piece collection – or perhaps a design by Jan Utzon. Arranged above the window are about a dozen paintings by American artist Fritz Haeg, from his Wall Oval Suite collection. On the windowsill are Bronwyn Kemp ceramics, a painting by

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NSW Crown prosecutor and artist Miiko Kumar, and a collage by Dave Hickson – "I've been buying him for years," Weinstein says. There are temple decorations from Bhutan, a sculpture by NSW artist Randall Sinnamon, furniture by Caroline Casey, a sculpture by Sydney-based artist John Nicholson and another from the other side of the country by West Australian artist Richie Kuhaup. "There was a time when Richard [Weinstein's husband] said to me 'no more paintings. We have no more wall space. It's impossible. No more paintings!' But he didn't say sculptures or ceramics," Weinstein says, adding that, as a sculptor himself, his partner was a "good sport" about the growing trove.

Weinstein, like Bell, is not entirely sure about the size of his collection or indeed how it might even be measured, but it certainly numbers well into the hundreds. "A lot. Many, many, many, many, many pieces," he says. "I love them all. I wouldn't part with any of them." There are at least 30 works by Elisabeth Cummings alone. But the one that takes pride of place in his chambers – directly across from the desk – and which Weinstein describes as "probably the most important", is a large painting by West Australian Mangala/Yulparitja artist Daniel Walbidi.

Of his collection Weinstein says there's no rhyme or reason. "It's only what I like," he says. "It's a total obsession."

IT WAS ONCE THE CASE FOR AN AUSTRALIAN company to be truly blue chip, it needed an art collection. If you could commission the works from a well-known artist, that was even better. In the late 1970s, CRA Limited – later subsumed by Rio Tinto – sent Fred Williams to the Pilbara on assignment. That trip led to the miner having 13 of his paintings and 18 gouaches on its walls.

In recent decades, however, many collections held by corporate Australia have been sold off; some for financial reasons, and some because executives could no longer justify to shareholders keeping them on the balance sheet. Among them is Foster's collection featuring works by Frederick McCubbin, which sold for \$13.3 million in 2005. Orica offloaded its collection in 2002 for \$13 million, largely to Kerry Stokes, which included works by Brett Whiteley and Arthur Boyd. AXA Asia Pacific, Fairfax Media and BHP have all also made divestments since the turn of the millennium. Fred Williams' *Pilbara* series for Rio Tinto was given to the National Gallery of Victoria.

Law firms haven't been immune from the trend. In 2015, a collection of 56 works owned by law firm MinterEllison led a major auction at Sotheby's. Largely comprised of images by Australian photographers including Max Dupain, Bill Henson and Tracey Moffatt, the collection was put together by art consultant Amanda Love from about 2001. Max Dupain's much-loved *Sunbaker* image of 1937 was the marquee sale.

Some collections were sold because they no longer represented the image the businesses wanted to convey to the world. In 2021, National Australia Bank sold more than 2500 works valued at about \$10 million to support projects that help communities prepare for natural disasters and climate change. "It is clearly not core to NAB's role as a bank and supporting customers," NAB's then chief operating officer, Les Matheson, said around the time of the sale. Though the big four bank was unable to give it all up, Whiteley's 1976 oil on plywood *Still Life with Up Front Out Back and Cherries* stayed on.

Art consultant Mark Hughes says other collections were just no longer relevant to the people working in the company. "Often they've been put together by this organisation merging with that organisation, and you get this mishmash of works by dead, white, male artists that doesn't sit well. What relevance do those pictures have to the branding, the ideas, the whole sort of ecology of how this organisation moves forward?"

"There was this '80s idea of what a corporate art collection should be – get an Arthur Streeton in the boardroom to show we're important. But now, the whole idea of art in the workplace means something else. Inclusion is important. The people leading organisations are not the people visually who were leading them years ago, and it's not just the face, it's also the presentation. What you see when you go into the lobby, what you see when you're in the boardroom, what you see when you're entertaining."

There is a more prosaic reason some companies and law firms disposed of their art collections – a lack of wall space in the shift to open-plan offices. MinterEllison's sale, for example, was necessitated by the move to an industrial-style warehouse office in Sydney.

For judges and barristers, however, the individual office is still alive and well, and with plenty of wall space, art collecting remains in vogue. Indeed, as new generations flow into the profession, new collections are being formed. Hughes recently oversaw the development of a 14-piece collection for Banco Chambers as part of its move to a new two-level office at Sixty Martin Place. "Banco was a very unique situation," he says, largely because unlike law firms, barristers operate as sole traders and would each be purchasing works that suited their tastes but also worked as a collection.



Michelle Painter, SC, collects Asian-origin headpieces and has them on show in her Sydney chambers.

Says Banco clerk Jeh Coutinho: "We wanted to do something where everyone could feel a shared sense of ownership in what was going to end up on the walls." The result was a scheme allowing barristers to purchase works based on the advice of Hughes. Artists chosen included Guan Wei, Michael Cook, Peta Minnici, Amber Boardman and Oliver Watts. Reflecting the make-up of the chambers, about 40 per cent of the artists were women.

Hughes says despite large corporates offloading collections in recent years, there are still buyers around. Barristers, who steadfastly maintain the tradition of the office, are regularly among them, along with judges and law firms with influential partners who have caught the collecting bug.

A FEW HUNDRED METRES DOWN FROM THE LAW Courts Building, NSW Supreme Court Justice John Sackar is located in the 142-year-old Chief Secretary's Building while he oversees an inquiry into historical gay hate crimes. Built in the Victorian free classical architectural style and opened in 1881, Sackar's temporary chambers is a large, high-ceilinged room with dark wood panelling and a central marble fireplace – it suits his collecting habits perfectly.

To say his tastes are eclectic is an understatement. Like his fellow judges, the number of pieces in Sackar's home and workplace are vast, and when prompted he is unable to give an answer other than "in the hundreds". On display in his temporary headquarters are Chinese porcelain, a Greek fifth-century skyphos, a Roman second-century putti, two 18th-century Spanish polychrome apostles and a piece by French painter Raoul Dufy.

But it is Sackar's fascination with natural sciences that

makes the collection particularly unusual. Scattered around the room are a stuffed wolf's head, a sea lion head, a complete emperor penguin and a falcon. There is also a sperm whale spinal bone and what Sackar thinks is a full zebra skeleton. "My wife complains that I buy too much. Her philosophy is it is best to have one really good thing, but that doesn't excite me. If I owned the *Mona Lisa*, I could say it's really nice to have it on the wall, but I'd actually like some Chinese porcelain, I'd like a little Greek vase, I wouldn't mind a bronze, I wouldn't be satisfied with one object," he says.

In Canberra, Craig Edwards, partner at Maliganis Edwards Johnson, is a prolific collector of Indigenous art, which he fell in love with while visiting his parents in Broken Hill more than three decades ago. In the intervening years, Edwards' collection grew so vast that in 2018 he donated 124 pieces worth \$9 million to his alma mater, the Australian National University.

Keith Bradley and Bill McCarthy at Canberra law firm Bradley Allen Love are also keen collectors. Bradley is quick to note McCarthy's passion is such he does not even own a house – just art. BAL sponsors the ANU School of Art and Design, which Bradley says affords an opportunity to preview the works of graduating students each year. "We have often taken advantage of that, buying works from emerging artists to get first dibs on their product," McCarthy is quick to note it is not about investing, but rather supporting emerging artists. "I haven't sold anything and I haven't really turned over my mind how it will all finish up," he says.

South of the Murray, the Victorian Bar Association holds one of the most extensive portrait collections outside the

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National Portrait Gallery. Known as the Peter O'Callaghan QC Gallery, the collection has been housed in the shared entrance foyer of Owen Dixon Chambers East and Owen Dixon Chambers West since the space was given to the Bar Association in 2017.

Founding chairman Peter Jopling, KC, says after establishing the gallery, designed by Sue Carr, \$700,000 was raised to commission more pieces. Portraits in the collection include former prime minister and barrister Sir Robert Menzies painted by Sir Ivor Hele; the first female Supreme Court chief justice in Australia, Marilyn Warren, painted by Peter Churcher; former High Court justice Sue Crennan, KC, painted by Lewis Miller; and former High Court justice Kenneth Hayne, KC, photographed by Bill Henson.

Back in Sydney, the view from Michelle Painter, SC's, chambers at Ninth Floor Selborne Chambers would not be anything to behold even if it were visible. For many of Sydney's pre-eminent barristers located on various floors of the Wentworth Selborne building on Phillip Street, the view is of a rather bleak central lightwell dotted with dozens of air-conditioning units.

Painter has opted for frosted glass to go with an all-black chambers, which contrasts magnificently with a passion for Asian-origin headpieces – of which she has about a dozen. “This collection got its genesis about 15 to 20 years ago on a trip to Bali,” she says, adding an education in and love of history sparked her interest. “I like to know the story behind objects and because of my feminist roots, a lot of those are women’s objects.”

A few floors above at Eleven Wentworth, about a dozen Brett Whiteley originals hang on the walls alongside a rotating collection hired from the NandaHobbs Gallery. Clerk Zach Rymer says the Whiteleys have been in chambers for as long as anyone can recall.

Meanwhile, Two Selborne Chambers, a few floors below, is decorated with large paintings by New York-based Australian artist Wai Ling Chan, a former lawyer at Debevoise and Plimpton. Chan’s biggest supporter is her sister Laina Chan, a barrister on the floor. Laina has two large paintings in her office, one light, one dark – yin and yang – commissioned from her sister.

Against the window are about a dozen glass vases from husband and wife artistic duo Kayo Yokoyama and Keith Rowe. At certain times of the year, when the sun follows the right arc, it hits Chan’s window and the vases; when that happens, “the whole piece feels alive,” she says, smiling.

Connection between art collecting and family is a recurring theme. Sackar says his uncle – an archaeologist who would return from overseas travels with strange trinkets and artefacts – passed to him a “deep-seated infection” that is incurable. “It manifests itself in very different forms. I can be as enamoured with an 18th-century portrait bust as I can with a piece of Indigenous art as I can with Mark Rothko. I blame it on him,” he says. Weinstein says he remembers being around artworks from his earliest years because his grandfather was an artist, and he lived in a home filled with his charcoal drawings.

Along with being the Sydney University’s first art curator, Pamela Bell was also an accomplished artist in her own right. In his chambers, Chief Justice Bell has several of her works, including a painting of his father. In the corridor on the way to his courtroom, there are nine pencil drawings from about a decade ago. “It makes me think of her. She’s very old and not very well, so it’s a very, very nice thing for me to have in my life on a regular basis,” he says. The drawings are the last thing he sees before heading into his courtroom each day.



John Sackar's art collection reflects his love for the natural sciences.

ART AND THE ALLENS AFFAIR

Long before collecting modern art was the done thing among Australia’s C-suite elite, law firm Allens built what is, to this day, one of the most important collections of post-1970s Australian works. It includes Helen Eager, Dale Frank, Rosalie Gascoigne, Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Tim Maguire, Susan Norrie and John Walker.

Most purchases long pre-dated the artists’ fame; indeed during the ‘70s, ‘80s and ‘90s, being selected for the Allens collection was considered a signifier of an artist’s rising star.

A coffee table book produced for the firm’s 200th anniversary in 2022 noted the first piece was purchased in the 1960s by Sir Norman Cowper, who decided it was “time for the firm to move on from images of racehorses and sailing ships”. Cowper set another partner, Hugh Jamieson, to the task.

“A man of taste and style”, according to the book, Jamieson was tasked with acquiring a work for the reception area of the firm’s head office in Sydney’s P&O Building. He chose a Pro Hart painting featuring Ned Kelly on wheels. Despite being happy with the choice, another partner, Gabriel Reichenbach,

thought clients would “have a field day” with the title, *Highway Robbery*.

When Allens moved to the MLC Centre in 1978, Jamieson acquired several pieces to complement the modern design of the building. With a budget of \$15,000, he purchased works by David Rankin, John Peart and Richard Larter. This time his efforts were met with enthusiasm and, emboldened, he embarked on what the firm describes as “a substantial acquisition program” often buying one painting for the firm, and one for himself, at exhibitions.

In a 1993 speech, Jamieson said to survive and thrive in the 21st century, Australians needed to find innovative solutions to their problems. “For those of us who work with the collection in front of us every day, the artists encourage us to confront the new, not only through the colour and vitality of their works, but also by the messages they convey,” he said. “By supporting working artists, the firm is encouraging the development of Australian cultural expression. By providing a platform for this expression, the firm makes a statement about the sort of Australia it believes in.”

Though never intended as an investment, the art collection came in useful during the so-called ‘Allens affair’ in the 1990s, when the firm faced an existential crisis. Its partners discovered their former partner Adrian Powles had spent years misappropriating client money and oversaw the loss of millions of dollars while working in the firm’s London office. Allens owed tens of millions and the receivers were circling. When the senior partners went to their long-time banker Westpac seeking help to cover the massive liability Powles created, the art collection – and the assets of the firm’s remaining partners – was used as collateral.

When Jamieson retired, Michael Ball carried on his legacy and oversaw the expansion of Allens’ collection until 2010, when he was sworn in as a judge on the NSW Supreme Court. Today, partner Ross Drinnan oversees the collection of more than 1500 works. Drinnan is also chairman of Sculpture by the Sea, a position he was preceded in by Bell, and Meagher.

Weinstein says, along with Meagher, his passion for collecting art was also influenced by a stint early in his career at Allens. “I was surrounded by all of those beautiful paintings.” ●



Laina Chan with a work by her sister, Wai Ling Chan.