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## Legacy of a gifted man

Matthew Westwood | January 14, 2008

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**VISITORS to William Bowmore's home in Newcastle, NSW, in the 1970s would have discovered one of the more remarkable private collections of international art assembled in Australia.**



William Bowmore at the Art Gallery of South Australia in 1999

Ron Radford - now the director of the National Gallery of Australia, but at that time a young man in awe - says the experience was like entering a kaleidoscope of fine art, in rooms lined with grey damask. Among the pictures he recalled seeing at Bowmore's home were paintings by Reynolds, Gainsborough and Monet, and sculptures by Rodin. Surprising in this context were two paintings by the 20th-century expressionist Willem de Kooning.

Bowmore enjoyed showing his collection to visitors and opened his house for charity events. In the '90s he moved to a property outside Gosford and turned a former farmhouse into a private art museum. Busloads of visitors arrived. When Bowmore eventually moved again, to an apartment in Sydney, he gave his collection of European old masters and British works to the Art Gallery of South Australia, the main beneficiary of his generosity.

The AGSA this week said the value of Bowmore's total gifts to the gallery - including Roman antiquities and Islamic decorative arts - was more than \$17 million.

Bowmore never lived in South Australia and had not even visited Adelaide until 1989. Nevertheless, he came to view the AGSA - through the attentions of Radford, its director at the time - as the ideal repository for his collection.

"He loved our displays and the high quality of the collection in Adelaide, and he liked the personal attention," Radford says. "But I never actually talked him into (giving to the gallery). I think he volunteered: he thought it was a good home for the international areas he was interested in. We looked after him and he became a friend."

The AGSA's director Christopher Menz says Bowmore's contributions transformed the gallery. His donation, in 2004, of 45 ceramic pieces from the Middle East became a foundation for the AGSA's gallery of Islamic art, the only permanent display of such work in Australia.

Among the paintings he gave to the AGSA were Sickert's *The Raising of Lazarus* (loaned to the Royal Academy in London for an important retrospective, and now on display in the Modern Britain exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria), the French portrait by Nicholas de Largilliere, *Frances Woollascot*, an *Augustinian Nun*, and the only painting by Gericault in an Australian public gallery, *Head of a Youth*. A

Roman sculpture from the second century AD, now known as the *Bowmore Artemis*, graces the gallery's vestibule.

A collection of 20 Rodin bronzes and a drawing were sold to the AGSA, Radford has written, "at a very reasonable price, payable over five years".

Bowmore also gave to the Art Gallery of NSW (the splendid rococo portrait *Madame de La Porte* by Jean-Marc Nattier) and substantially to the Newcastle Region Art Gallery, including Australian art as well as bronzes from Rodin's Balzac series. Among the Newcastle gallery's most popular exhibits is a Brett Whiteley landscape, *Summer at Carcoar*, which Bowmore commissioned and which won the Wynne prize in 1978. His gifts to the Newcastle gallery, says director Ron Ramsey, are valued at more than \$7 million.

"He had such a commitment to Newcastle, where he had been such a successful businessman," Ramsey says.

One of six boys, Bowmore was born in Dalby, Queensland, to Lebanese immigrant parents who ran a general store.

The family name was Abraham: Bowmore adopted a different surname. (According to his niece Karma Abraham, he gave a different answer every time he was asked why he had done this.)

There was no great affinity for music or visual arts in the family, but Bowmore showed interest and even excelled in these areas. He was a fine pianist and later taught cello at the Newcastle Conservatorium. (He instituted two cello scholarships at the conservatorium.) His main occupation, though, was in hospitals and hotels. During World War II he was stationed on the island of Morotai near New Guinea, and after the war he converted a mansion in Brisbane into a private hospital.

Bowmore began collecting art in the '60s, when he started buying the works of living Australian artists such as William Dobell. In the late '60s, he began collecting international art through the David Jones gallery in Sydney, run at that time by Robert Haines. Soon he was travelling overseas, buying old masters through London dealer Agnew's, and Islamic art in the Middle East.

A self-educated enthusiast rather than a scholar, Bowmore was guided by his art adviser and negotiator James Deas. Bowmore's taste was eclectic, ranging across the centuries, from Roman antiquities to Italian baroque painting and 17th-century carpets.

His collecting revealed certain preferences and strengths. He was captivated by sculpture from many cultures: ancient Greek and Roman, African, Asian and European. He was interested in portraiture, and the human form in sculpture. His collecting from the Middle East reflected his Lebanese heritage.

Rather than a particular aesthetic guiding his collecting, Daniel Thomas, a respected curator and a former director of the AGSA, identifies a love for luxuriousness - the rich patterns and textures of Islamic art, and Rodin's glossy bronzes, for example - but "good-quality lush".

"Often you can pick out a personal aesthetic," Thomas says. "In Patrick White's case, it was quite obvious to me that he went with anything that had spiky forms. Nothing like that personal aesthetic seems to be visible in Bowmore, he just seems to have had good taste across the board."

At an exhibition opening in 1993, Bowmore said of his collecting: "I have seen, handled and made a study of many facets in the world of art. I have constantly changed, revised and polished my various collections, always with an end in mind of creating a balance and harmony of interrelated pieces that educate and instruct the beholder as much as to uplift or inspire."

A bachelor, Bowmore was entertaining company and had a busy life in his old age. As recently as six weeks ago, Radford was talking to Bowmore about him giving a lecture at the National Gallery on French art and collecting. "He did expect to live to 100, and wanted to," Radford says.

One of his last gifts was a bust of Beethoven to the Newcastle Conservatorium, which had held a concert for his 98th birthday last November.

Bowmore was generous in the truest sense. "He loved giving," Karma Abraham says. "He only ever believed that he was a caretaker of the things he had. They shouldn't be hidden away in private collections, they

should be out there, they should be seen."

Bowmore had a blood condition called cold haemagglutinin disease. He went into hospital early last month and died last Wednesday.

He was admitted to the Order of the British Empire and the Order of Australia. At the age of 95, he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Newcastle. The AGSA named the William Bowmore Gallery after him in 1997.

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