

John Schaeffer AO (1941-2020)

Angus Trumble



Fig. 1. Evert Ploeg, *John Schaeffer AO—art collector and philanthropist*, 2014. Oil on canvas 152.0 x 152.0 cm. National Portrait Gallery of Australia. Purchased with funds provided by Harold Mitchell AC. © Evert Ploeg.

With the death of art collector John Schaeffer in Sydney on 14 July 2020, the field of studies in the arts of Victorian Britain, not just here in Australia but also in Europe and America, lost one of its most engaging and enthusiastic devotees, collectors, and philanthropists. Many will surely feel that they have also lost a stalwart friend and supporter in John, a man whose lively intellect, business acumen and ample generosity were reminiscent of titans of the Victorian era such as George McCulloch, Frederick Leyland or Thomas Holloway.

At one time, indeed, John owned two paintings by J. W. Waterhouse—*Ophelia* (1894) (Fig. 2) and *Flora and the zephyrs* (1898)—both of which had initially formed part of George McCulloch's remarkable collection at his London home, 184 Queen's Gate, Kensington. In recent years, John derived much pleasure from showing off the gold and hardstone signet ring (c. 1854) that he acquired at Bonham's in London in 2013. John Everett Millais gave it to William Holman Hunt as a token of their friendship shortly before Hunt's departure for the Holy Land. John wore it with much pride.

John's own story is quintessentially Australian. He was born in the Netherlands in 1941, barely a year after the destruction of Rotterdam by the Luftwaffe and the traumatic Nazi occupation of the Low Countries. As a teenager in the late 1950s, John joined the huge wave of migration to Australia out of the wreckage of post-war Europe. Seeking to avoid compulsory national service, he earned his passage by working as a ship's steward. Upon his arrival in Sydney, John secured a job at Woolworths, soon rising to be a section manager. He

realised that the company was paying more than they needed to for cleaning and maintenance services, and decided that by starting his own business from scratch he could provide those services under contract more efficiently, and for a lot less. With unremitting hard work, he began to build up what would eventually become Tempo Services Limited. Tempo prospered, steadily expanded and eventually made John a large fortune. At its height, Tempo employed upwards of 20,000 people and provided security and cleaning services to whole industries all over the country, generating annual revenue of hundreds of millions of dollars.

All the while, and for the rest of his life, although he cherished his Australian citizenship and anglicised his given name, John retained much of the character of the country of his birth, childhood and adolescence. In 1970, Sir Peter Garran, sometime British Ambassador to the Netherlands, wrote of the Dutch that “there is an odd mixture in their make-up of directness and occasional inscrutability, of hard-headedness and emotionalism ... the Dutch have a sensitive outer skin and a tough inner core. The complexities and complications are in the outer skin. But the important thing is the tough, sound inner core. That is what makes them such splendid friends and allies.” Sir Peter could have been describing John Schaeffer.

It gave John particular pleasure that when in 2014 his portrait was painted by Evert Ploeg, an artist who shares his Dutch heritage (and for whom that project gave the artist almost as much pleasure as it gave to John), the National Portrait Gallery immediately acquired it with funds generously donated by Harold Mitchell AC, a former Chairman of the Council of the National Gallery of Australia (Fig. 1). Afterwards, John prevailed upon Evert to paint for him a one-third scale replica of that portrait, a task that was for the artist almost more enjoyable than painting the original.

When speaking about the works of art that he loved, John had the autodidact’s habit of telling you the whole story in every detail and with no shortcuts or any shared assumptions. But while methodical and thorough and certainly unhurried, John was never ponderous. He also relished the usually intricate narrative surrounding the price paid or, often, the lengthening distance between the modest foothill of an upper estimate and the veritable Annapurna of what ultimately came under the hammer, often in the middle of the night and on the other end of an increasingly clammy telephone. At the same time, John was devoid of self-importance: more often than not, such lengthy conversations took place not in the splendour of Bellevue Hill, but whilst having a coffee, seated in the sunshine on an upturned plastic milk crate on the pavement outside a busy café in Challis Avenue, Potts Point—as was the fashion in Sydney just then.

John’s interest in art began locally in the 1970s. He knew the sculptor Barbara Tribe and admired her work. He duly amassed an impressive collection of it, as well as paintings by Rupert Bunny, E. Phillips Fox and John Russell. Out of these relatively cautious beginnings,

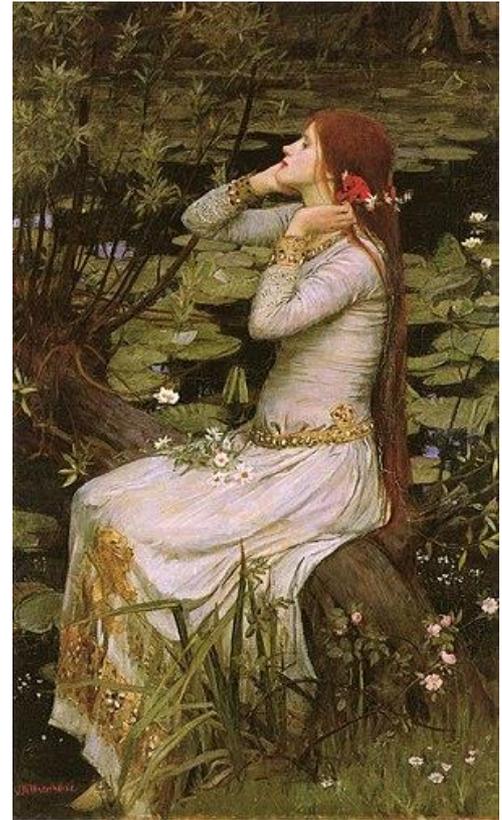


Fig. 2. J. W. Waterhouse, *Ophelia*, 1894. Oil on canvas, 73.6 x 124.4 cm. Private Collection. Image: Wikiart.

a somewhat intemperate passion soon took the place of merely awakening interest. In 1984, at the Tate Gallery in London, John was entranced by *The Pre-Raphaelites*. He was not alone. That major exhibition did much to create an upsurge of new interest among students who are today among the foremost scholars in the field. However, for more than ten years prior to that, John had also benefited from the work of curator Renée Free at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, in particular her big pioneering loan exhibitions *Victorian Olympians* (1975) and *Victorian Social Conscience* (1976), at a time when Victorian paintings were mostly regarded as cloying rubbish, or worse. Sydney was in many respects the perfect plot in which to plant the seeds of a great new Pre-Raphaelite collection. With the apparently unstoppable growth of his company John began to prepare this legacy, collecting the art of Victorian Britain more generally. His collecting accelerated. His acquisitions grew exponentially in scope and ambition.

In 1989, John purchased *Rona*, one of the most impressive (and expensive) colonial sandstone houses in Sydney, occupying an unsurpassed bosky acreage atop Bellevue Hill, and commanding magnificent views over Sydney Harbour (Fig. 3). Less than ten years later, *Rona* had been beautifully and meticulously restored, and was crammed to the rafters with masterpieces of Victorian art, as well as sculpture, innumerable *objets d'art* and major, usually enormous, pieces of Gothic Revival furniture that perfectly suited its lofty and capacious interior.



Fig. 3. The Victorian Rustic Gothic mansion Rona in Bellevue Hill. Image: Lang + Simmons.

By then, John's collecting had acquired a degree of fervour that led him in stages to dispose of certain of his business assets so that he might successfully outbid at auction major collectors in Britain and America, and secure more and more stellar works of art. A number of his rivals on both sides of the Atlantic had been active for decades before John first entered the fray. The market for Victorian pictures, meanwhile, was overheating—not least because of John's own activities—so his finest *coups de théâtre* at Christie's and Sotheby's became a more and more oppressive burden, while at the same time they further stoked his ambition. These, he used to say, were things that he simply had to have. There can be no doubt that, by

driving up the bidding by tens of millions of pounds sterling, certain of his rivals were occasionally determined to punish him. At length, John became overextended, and *Rona* had to be sold.

Well before this happened, however, in the late 1990s the Art Gallery of South Australia was preparing an exhibition that sought to bring together the finest examples of Victorian painting in Australian and New Zealand public and private collections. Many of these had been acquired directly from artists' studios and had therefore, in many cases, formed the core of nascent colonial art galleries that to varying degrees were established as a sort of fusion of the National Gallery model with that of South Kensington. Mindful that the Adelaide show would eventually tour to Sydney, Brisbane and Auckland for almost a whole year, nevertheless, without hesitation, John committed himself to the enterprise as by far its most generous private lender. John had no way of knowing that *Love and Death: Art in the Age of Queen Victoria* (2001–02) would ultimately prove to be only one of a handful of exhibitions through the 2000s that captured something of the eminence of his collection prior to the dispersal of its brightest lights (Fig. 6).



Fig. 4. John Everett Millais, *Portrait of Alice Gray*, 1858. Oil on Canvas, 30.5 x 20.3 cm. Getty Centre. Image: Wikimedia Commons.

The subsequent history of many of John's pictures speaks to their exceptional quality. *Clytie* (c. 1895–96) by Frederic Leighton was in 2008 acquired with the assistance of the UK Art Fund for Leighton House Museum in Holland Park, London, where two other of John's pictures now also reside. *Lovers* (1855) by W. P. Frith was acquired by the Art Institute of Chicago. *Love and the Maiden* (1877) by Roddam Spencer Stanhope was acquired by the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. *Alice Gray* (Fig. 4) by John Everett Millais was acquired by the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles. *Marguerite and Faust in the garden* (1846) by Ary Scheffer was acquired by the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, while two exceptionally fine bronze portrait medallions, *William Charles Wentworth* (1854) and *Sir Charles Nicholson* (1854) by Thomas Woolner, were acquired by the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven, Connecticut. *The Syracusan Bride leading wild beasts in procession to the Temple of Diana* (1865–66) by Frederic Leighton was perhaps John's most grievous loss. It remains in private hands, but there

were many others. All were infinitely regretted, but with an admirable lack of bitterness. That, despite all this, John was able to retain his sense of humour and remain philosophical and centred was one of his most appealing qualities.

Such were the volume and velocity of John's collecting through the 2000s, there were, perhaps inevitably, occasional missteps. One thinks, for example, of the frightful Shakespearean potboiler *Scene—Lawn before the Duke's palace; Orlando about to engage with Charles, the Duke's wrestler* (1854) by Daniel Maclise (based on Act I sc. ii of *As You Like It*), which was actually foregrounded in *Victorian Visions: Pre-Raphaelite and Nineteenth-*

Century Art from the John Schaeffer Collection (2012), Richard Beresford's exhibition for Sydney and Leighton House that marked the *apogee* of John's collection. However, it was easy to forgive John the occasional lapse of taste because for every such Maclise (or the bizarre *Wings of the Morning* [1905] by Edward Robert Hughes) there were *The sempstress* (1846) by Richard Redgrave; the extraordinarily rare *To let* (c. 1857) and *For sale* (c. 1857) both by that PRB outlier James Collinson; *Il Dolce Far Niente* (?1859/60) by Holman Hunt (Fig. 5); *Worn out* (1868) by Thomas Faed; *Till death us do part* (1878–79) by Edmund Blair Leighton; *Mariamne* (1887) by J. W. Waterhouse, and the *Study for Flaming June* (c. 1895) by Frederic Leighton. The list went on.

Fig. 5 (right). William Holman Hunt, *Il Dolce far Niente*, 1859–66. Reproduced on cover of *Victorian Visions: 19th Century Art from the John Schaeffer Collection* exhibition catalogue, AGNSW, 2012. [Link](#)

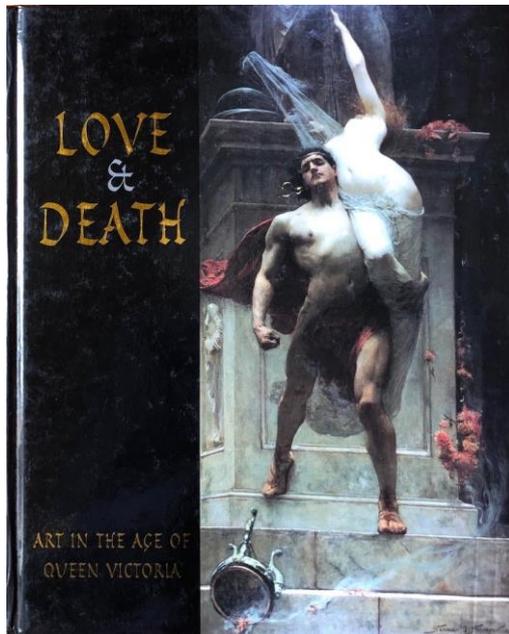
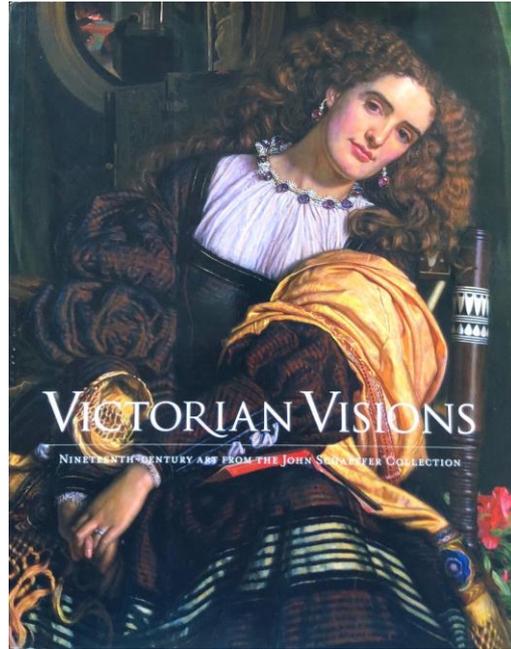


Fig. 6 (left). Solomon J. Solomon, *Ajax and Cassandra*, 1886. Reproduced on cover of *Love and Death: Art in the Age of Queen Victoria* exhibition catalogue, AGSA, 2002.

It was a matter for rejoicing that through the past fifteen years, John was gradually able to resume his collecting activities on a more moderate and measured scale, and once more to build upon what had already become an extremely generous record of philanthropy (Fig. 7). John was more relaxed. He enjoyed attending scholarly fora and conferences. He supported the establishment of scholarships and lectureships. In acknowledgement of his generous donations, the University of Sydney renamed the Power Institute of Fine Arts library: it is now the Schaeffer Fine Arts Library. John became more interested in the life and governance of art institutions. He was an Honorary Governor of the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, and became a devoted trustee and Life Governor of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. It gave John much satisfaction that in 2017 he was once more in a position to donate to Sydney his colossal marble *An athlete wrestling with a python* (1888–91) by Frederic Leighton.

John sat on the Boards of the Art Gallery of New South Wales Foundation, the National Gallery of Australia Foundation in Canberra and the newly established National Portrait Gallery. For the latter, he supported with others the acquisition of the *Portrait of Captain James Cook, RN (1782)* by John Webber. He also presented to the NPG the bravura *Self-portrait with gladioli (1922)* by George Lambert. With characteristic thoughtfulness, in 2012 John presented to the National Gallery of Victoria his delicate pencil *Study of sleeves for the Portrait of Baronne Madeleine Deslandes (1896)* by Edward Burne-Jones, the NGV having acquired the finished work from John seven years earlier. He even started hunting for a historic house in Sydney that, although it could never replace *Rona*, might nevertheless retrieve something of its flavour and *mise-en-scène*.

In the Australia Day honours of 2003, John Schaeffer was appointed an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) in recognition of his service to the community as a major benefactor to a range of arts and cultural institutions. He is survived by Bettina Dalton, his partner of the past eighteen years, and Joanne Schaeffer, a daughter from his first marriage, and three grandchildren.

Rust in vrede mijn vriend.



Fig. 7. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Beatrice meeting Dante at a marriage feast, denies him her salutation*, 1852. Watercolour and bodycolour with gum and scraping out over traces of pencil, 35.1 x 42.5 cm. Art Gallery of NSW, purchased with funds provided by John Schaeffer, 2003. Image © Art Gallery of New South Wales.

Angus Trumble FAHA was Senior Research Fellow in Australian History at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra. He was a former director of the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra. Previously he was senior curator of paintings and sculpture at the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven, Connecticut, and before that curator of European art at the Art Gallery of South Australia. In 2015 he was elected a fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities. His new book about Helena Rubinstein's hidden years in Australia and New Zealand (1896-1907) will be published next year in Melbourne by La Trobe University Press (Black Inc.).