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## LAURINE · DIGGINS · FINE · ART

**Tribute to Lauraine Diggins by Dr Daniel Thomas AM  
Emeritus Director, Art Gallery of South Australia**



### SWEET LAURINE

Last week, in Sydney, at a Memorial event for art-museum director Edmund Capon, I collected views about Lauraine.

“Eccentric.” “Sociable.” “Optimistic.” “Enthusiastic.” “Loved art history and art museums.” “We always came away from a visit with new information about Australian art.”

My view: Not eccentric, just *ardent* about art. And it’s also a view of Melbourne from elsewhere, in my case from Tasmania, which is where I have been retired, for over 20 years, from art museums in Sydney, Canberra and Adelaide. At the Art Gallery of South Australia, the Max Carter Collection of Australian colonial art, worth many millions, was developed by our greatest donor, and major works came from Lauraine.

I see that Lauraine Diggins Fine Art was established in 1974, when I was chief curator at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney, and had just published a book *Outlines of Australian Art: The Joseph Brown Collection*.

In Sydney there was no art dealer-cum-collector like Melbourne's Joseph Brown who loved publishing high-quality exhibition catalogues filled with information about provenance and more, an example that Lauraine followed. In Sydney there were no gallerists who took convivial lunches seriously, like Georges Mora, Marianne Baillieu — and Lauraine Diggins. I was in and out of Melbourne a lot, always visited the interesting exhibitions at Malakoff Street, but moved too fast for lunches.

Lauraine, and Michael, at times looked beyond our specialisations in Australian art. Very early, I was electrified to see they had bought, from Hans Heysen's estate auction, a magnificent drawing, *The Washerwomen* by the great French artist Jean-François Millet.

Lauraine knew of my Tasmanian origins, and would sometimes ask me about the Tasmanian landscape subjects in colonial paintings, for example by Melbourne visitors Arthur Boyd senior and Tom Roberts as well as by John Glover and W.C. Piguenit.

On retirement from Adelaide, waiting for my tailor-made dream house to be built above a beach in northern Tasmania, Maudie Palmer organised a six-month loan house for me in Melbourne. That was when I enjoyed relaxed lunches with Lauraine.

Around the same time, I wrote a catalogue essay for an Emily Kame Kngwarreye exhibition, and in 2002 an essay "Creating Australia" for Lauraine's exhibition of *Australian Modern Art and Contemporary Aboriginal Art* at the Fondazione Mudima in Milan, a specially adventurous project. I don't know whether she ever saw my 2005 book review, of an academic study of the Australian art world and art market, in which I sneered at the author's misspelling of Lauraine's name.

Art dealers usually double as gallerists for living artists. One of Lauraine's is Michael McWilliams, whose eight exhibitions at Diggins Fine Art since 1995 have been eccentric, humorous and serious; they titled one of his shows after a Sesame Street soft toy's slogan, "It's not easy being green".

On her visits to McWilliams in northern Tasmania, Lauraine would also visit me. She said she copied aspects of my architectural design for her own beach hideaway on the New South Wales south coast.

Another of her living artists was the late Andrew Sayers, a onetime art historian, curator and director who led a secret life painting very fine landscapes of the coasts near Canberra. More proof of her fine judgment.

Finally, a vivid memory of a lunch for a senior living artist, Albert Tucker. A true eccentric, Tucker floated off on an account of his out-of-body "astral travel".

Starstruck by major artists as curators and gallerists are, we were enthralled. Afterwards Lauraine sighed: "He sang for us! Wasn't that wonderful!"

Indeed it was.

Dear Lauraine, thank you for the memories.