

PHILANTHROPY FOR AUSTRALIANS
Speech given by Nelson Meers AO
AbaF Breakfast, 2 June 2006

With your permission, I would like to share with you my journey along a road not sufficiently travelled which has brought me, in my sixties, to a spiritual haven.

I have become an apostle of Philanthropy.

I am a 5th generation Australian, born into a pioneer grazing family from the mid west of NSW. The walls of the Meers' homesteads were adorned by numerous European bucolic landscapes, as well a forbidding array of sepia tinted portraits of bewiskered ancestors. These images of my childhood explain why I grew up firmly believing that "Home is where the Art is".

At eight (8) years old, I was taken by my father to the Art Gallery of NSW to be introduced specifically to George Lambert's iconic painting "Across the Black Soil Plains": for those of you not familiar with his work, it depicts a huge wagon of wool bales being transported by straining Clydesdales to a rail head destination. Even then my sense of irony was piqued by the fact that the nearest town to this scene is called 'Nevertire'.

My father's mission on this occasion was, I think, to instil in me an enduring connection with my native land and respect for the fortitude of my antecedents. His simple message to me as we stood before the painting was: "That's Meers Country. Know that your forefathers loved it". On the many occasions I have recalled this experience, I have come to understand that it was the seeding of my patriotism, which has become an enduring conviction that sustains my identity.

My next important encounter on the road I travelled occurred in the late 1960's in the twin city of Minneapolis in the US where I had gone as a young lawyer negotiating a commercial matter for my Australian client. Once the legal issues had been resolved, the opposing American attorney, many years my senior, with the sincere hospitality that I have come to associate with so many Americans, arranged a conducted tour of the City Museum, as I had told him of my interest in art. I was totally unprepared for the visual feast which awaited me - Rubens, Rembrandt, El Greco, Pissaro and all the major impressionists were represented. After I recovered from my incredulity, I was told that all the paintings were donated by private citizens, so much so, that there were no longer enough

galleries to provide hanging space for the treasures in the museum's archives.

On my trip home, I thought of the impoverishment of Sydney's Art Gallery which, besides Lambert's masterpiece, offered little to ignite the visual imagination. The comparison I made between an American Provincial City of similar population to Sydney's was plainly, for me, odious; but the dream was borne of creating a personal philanthropic vehicle which would support the arts community and it's institutions to create a better and more understanding Australia.

My aspirations were realised in 1999 when the government proposed a new form of charitable trust to encourage greater corporate and personal philanthropy. The Prescribed Private Fund. On the 28th June 2001, the Nelson Meers Foundation was the first of the new structures to be gazetted. I embraced the opportunity to engage in a climate of conspicuous philanthropy and I hope you will recognise that the eponymous identification of the Foundation is not entirely vanity on the part of the founder. It is most definitely an attempt to encourage others to follow my example. The credo for my family's foundation has therefore become "Where the arts and learning flourish so does tolerance and enlightenment". Is this merely an expression of naïve idealism or is there a solid historical footing for its assertion?

Let us look no further than the Renaissance: the birthplace of modern western humanistic man. This phenomenon did not evolve from the fact that the middle ages had matured; it was a quantum leap forward when the old systems of government and the straight-jacketed social order were abandoned.

Events and personalities coalesced on the 16th century European map, and mostly in Italy. It was the time of Lorenzo the Magnificent, who really should be the patron saint of modern arts philanthropy. Unfortunately, I do not believe he is likely to be canonized any time soon. Between 1450 and 1455, both Columbus and Leonardo Da Vinci were born and the births of Bottecelli, Copernicus, Luther, Raphael, Titian, Michaelangelo, Machiavelli, Erasmus and Sir Thomas More soon followed.

By way of digression, may I suggest that if you intend to visit New York at any time in the future a visit to the Frick Museum should be compulsory. It is located on the corner of 5th Avenue and East 70th Street. There you will find positioned on either side of a fire-place, in what was once a living room, portraits by Hans Holbien the younger of Thomas More and Thomas Cromwell, the latter being almost solely responsible for More's beheading. More's serene countenance

gazes forgivingly on the crafty malevolence shown on Cromwell's, and I, for one will be forever grateful to Henry Clay Frick for providing a transcending artistic experience.

And now I return to the Renaissance. The mighty names I have mentioned previously were not a superior species: rather, they achieved their immortality because a new era of tolerance and enlightenment permitted the expression of their genius. It is interesting to note that at the end of the High-Middle Ages, only one in twenty paintings concerned a non-religious subject. In the 16th and 17th centuries, there were five times as many and even in the Vatican nude paintings and pagan gods co-mingled with pictures of the Madonna. This was justified by the church, no doubt, as a revelation of God's wisdom in creating the human body with such beauty and harmony, however, it revealed a new age of tolerance.

Another spectacular example of the arts capacity to influence and focus the human spirit for the better is Picasso's Guernica, which commemorates the aerial bombardment and obliteration of the ancient basque town of 5,000 inhabitants by German and Italian squadrons in 1937. It has justifiably been held to be one of the outstanding works of modern art as it came to be seen as the picture of all bombed cities and therefore a comprehensive indictment of warfare. So powerful is its anti war imagery that in 2003 the United Nations hung a blue curtain over a tapestry reproduction of the painting which had been donated by the estate of Nelson Rockefeller. This is the area where diplomats and world leaders make statements to the press, and officials were concerned that it would be embarrassing for the U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell to speak about war in Iraq in front of the 20th century's most revered talisman against war. The action of these officials merely confirmed the potency of art to set standards for human behaviour.

Australia in the last ten years has enjoyed another halcyon period of prosperity and, as a consequence, the number of Prescribed Private Funds has grown to 340 and another 160 are awaiting A.T.O. approval. These are encouraging statistics, but a warning beacon is already starting to flash as it estimated that these Trusts hold \$500 million dollars in funds which have not been passed on to eligible recipients. That is to say, the tax deduction has been obtained but the philanthropic purpose has been left languishing. I do not believe that the A.T.O. will tolerate this apathy in the long term.

Whilst I take heart from the momentum already achieved in respect of the PPF's, the wealthy in Australia are not contributing as generously as they could. Australians as a

whole give much less than those countries with which a comparison can be made. For example, in the U.S.A. the proportion of total giving for philanthropic purpose is 2.1% of GDP but in Australia it is only 0.5%.

That Americans have a greater tradition of giving than Australia is unarguable. John Jacob Astor, a German immigrant to America and the patriarch of an extraordinary family, was for a time the richest man in the U.S., but more importantly it was his library that became the cornerstone for the inspirational New York Library. The Rockefellers, Guggenhiems, Mellons, Gettys and latterly the Gates are truly names to conjure with. The Brooks of Vallombrosa are barren by comparison to the dollars in the rivers of wealth that have flowed from these families for the benefit of their countrymen.

Incidentally, both the Netherlands and Sweden are ahead of America in private philanthropy. These countries give 4.95% and 4.41% as a share of their respective G.D.P.'s.

Victoria has always been seen as the homeland of Australian Philanthropy, and rightly so. It has been argued by the envious in other states that the reasons for this eminence is that Victoria had more tax incentives. This was contained in legislation introduced in 1907 which provided that probate duties did not apply to charitable bequests or settlements in Victoria. Another reason offered is the great wealth engendered by the gold rush in the 1860's. I prefer to believe that Victoria was blessed by the presence of a series of remarkably generous benefactors. Starting with the fabulous Felton bequest in 1904, which has contributed so greatly to the National Gallery of Victoria, which in itself adds such dimension to this great city. Then there is the wonderful contribution of the Myer family and this honour roll continues to be illuminated by names such as Potter, Pratt, Besen and lately Harold Mitchell has joined their stellar company.

For a man of my mature years, I shudder to see the grim reaper hovering in the background whenever I hear the expression "Intergenerational Wealth Transfer". However it has compelled me to examine how the fruits of a life of toil should be distributed. Here I find myself in the distinguished presence of Bill Gates, who is on record as saying that he does not intend to burden his children with great wealth. I think he has even stipulated publicly what he believes is a proper provision for his children. It follows that I accept as a basic truth that if you have prospered it should be shared with the community and it also follows that I do not want my children's ambitions to be shackled by inherited wealth. Liz

Hurley the one-time model and actress and now full-time celebrity is on record as saying "I don't know anyone with inherited wealth who is not messed up". The actual quote is a little more salty than that. You may doubt her qualifications as a social commentator but you cannot dispute the fact that she trawls in the international swamps which the idle rich inhabit.

It was Churchill who said "We make a living by what we get but we make a life by what we give". He also said democracy has many imperfections but it is the best form of Government so far devised by mankind. Capitalism is inextricably linked with democracy and has many cruel and ugly facets. It is through Philanthropy that these can be softened.

It has been a pleasure to be with you this morning and if you have gained the impression that I am visual-arts-centric, I would hope that on another occasion I could share with you my thoughts on the magnificence of literature, music, architecture and all the performing disciplines.