



Australian
Academy of the
Humanities

Angus Alexander Geoffrey Trumble FAHA

1964 – 2022

Angus Trumble was one of the most memorable writers on art that Australia has known. He has written theses, catalogues, articles, blogs, lectures, obituaries, and books, all seemingly effortlessly. During his far too short life, he was an art historian, curator, blogger, and museum director. Since his death, the notable outpouring of grief in church services, on social media and in newspapers, testifies to his influence and huge popularity internationally and in Australia.

Angus was born into a distinguished family of Melbourne lawyers. His parents, Peter and Helen Trumble were descendants of Scottish and Irish settlers in East Gippsland. He was the youngest of four sons, their genius baby brother. He went to school at Melbourne Grammar, where on graduating he won the Barry Humphries prize for Liberal Arts in 1981, sharing certain abilities with the donor.

In 1982 he enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts degree, in Fine Arts and History at the University of Melbourne, with classics and English as minor subjects. At Trinity College, Melbourne, where he resided, Professor John Daley remembers that Angus went in for the Wigram Allen Essay Prize, an award of some financial and intellectual significance. When Angus announced the title of his essay, 'A Marxist Interpretation of Jemima Puddle Duck', his peers were deflated by the title alone, that predicted inevitable success. Dr Adam Jenney remembers that later when Angus was the Secretary of the Trinity College Dialectic Society he invited Barry Humphries to speak. As a gift, he gave him a Trinity scarf which Barry Humphries loved and was seen wearing it at his next television interview.

Angus graduated with first-class honours in 1985, receiving the Dwight Final Examination prize in **both** Fine Arts and History, a unique achievement. He did equally well in what he took as minor subjects, Classical Civilisation and English, which he dropped after achieving first-class honours in them. His final year thesis was on the *Iconography of the Crucifixion in the aftermath of Iconoclasm: the evidence of Byzantine cloisonné enamel*. The surprising choice revealed an enthusiasm for deeply religious art and complex problems of interpretation which were at the root of Christian experience. The acknowledgements in his thesis went far beyond thanking a supervisor, Margaret Riddle, and revealed a gift for cultivating friendships across the Faculty of Arts and with scholars overseas. Even as an undergraduate, Angus was a superb writer on art, always entertaining. After graduating he won a Fellowship to be an intern at the Peggy Guggenheim Museum in Venice from 1986 to 1987.

When he returned from Venice, he was appointed *aide-de-camp* to the Governor of Victoria, Davis McCaughey, from December 1987 until December 1991. McCaughey was an Irish-born theologian of great charm, learning and integrity. He was appointed Governor after a successful term as Master of Ormond College at the University of Melbourne. Angus blossomed socially and intellectually in his new role and wrote a first book, jointly authored with Davis and Naomi Perkins, *Victoria's Colonial Governors 1839-1900* (1993). As his blog reveals, he was charming, ably abetting Jean McCaughey at the dinner table with conversation and on the croquet field, as she vanquished guests at Government House. There Angus met many remarkable people and realised he could successfully write about almost anything. Even here as the Honourable Linda Dessau recounted, at the memorial service at Trinity College on 9 November 2022, Angus created legends so strong that all future aides were given his advice, to be found in the Tumbrel Diaries, under the heading, 'A Day at Government House'. Previously Angus had been dressed by his mother, but from his Government House days he always stood out in a crowd, with his charming, inimitable sense of dress that he wore with aplomb on his tall thin frame.

When Angus commenced postgraduate studies, he chose for his MA (1992) at Melbourne the quirky and difficult subject of the exquisite eight panels, *tavolette*, representing the Miracles of San Bernardino (1473), in the Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria, one of which may be by Perugino himself, the others attributed to his friends or workshop. The choice reveals that he

was fascinated by beauty allied with difficulty. The research question revealed the curiosity of a quizzical High Church Anglican about proving miracles. Having won a trio of Australian scholarships (the Australian and Italian Postgraduate Research award, the Lisette Bentwitch Scholarship and a fellowship from Trinity College) he went to the Hertziana library in Rome, the most serious institution for Italian art history in the world, where he became the unofficial pupil of the director Richard Krautheimer, a legendary German art historian, and spent one of the happiest years of his life, looking at Quattrocento Italian art in Rome, Perugia, and Venice. Equipped with an MA in Renaissance Art from Melbourne, he won a Fulbright scholarship to the Institute of Fine Arts, New York, from 1994–1996, an institution on Fifth Avenue opposite the Metropolitan Museum, always regarded as the birthplace of American museum directors. At first, Angus was committed to Renaissance art but later on became an expert on Colonial and Victorian art.

I first met Angus Trumble in 1992 when I was a Miegunyah Visiting Fellow at Melbourne. He invited me to publish a lecture I gave on *Rubens' Eroticism* provoked by David Jaffé's exhibition, *Rubens and the Italian Renaissance*. Angus was editing *The Bulletin*, a periodical for the friends of the Museum of Art and the Department of Fine Arts, and he did not hesitate to illustrate the cover with a provocative detail of a white swan's fluffy neck and yellow beak penetrating Leda's mouth. Much later in those four years that Angus was director of the Portrait Gallery in Canberra, their biennial *Portrait Magazine* became the liveliest art historical journal in Australia. As usual, Angus elicited outrageous contributions and contributed many articles himself, including *Study in Scarlet* (2018), which gives us a glimpse of his forthcoming book. When he arranged for the National Portrait Gallery to acquire the bold portrait of Helena Rubenstein dressed by Balenciaga in scarlet brocade by Graham Sutherland, Angus was intrigued. The first self-made multi-millionaire of modern times is the subject of Trumble's last book, to be published in 2023.

Angus's museum career commenced with his appointment as Associate Curator (later Curator) of European Art at the Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, from 1996 to 2001, where he curated some important and influential exhibitions. Two especially received international critical acclaim, *Bohemian London* in 1997 and *Love & Death: Art in the Age of Queen Victoria* in 2002, resulting in an invitation to apply for a position at

the Yale Centre for British Art. This exhibition revealed the importance of the transmission of British culture to Australia. Years later Angus recalled that the curator of Asian ceramics, Dick Richards, had one of the best 'eyes' he had ever encountered and that his curatorial skills deeply influenced Angus.

At the Yale Centre for British Art, Angus curated fourteen major exhibitions, the first being on the draughtsman who accompanied Captain James Cook on his voyage in the Pacific: *William Hodges: the Art of Exploration* (2005). According to David Attenborough, Hodges was the most unjustly neglected artist of the eighteenth century and his exotic scenes of the Pacific were revelatory. Angus returned to Cook in his last position as Senior Research fellow in Australian History at the National Museum of Australia. The most famous of Angus's exhibitions was *Edwardian Opulence: British Art at the Dawn of the Twentieth Century* (2013). The exhibition celebrated the visual arts, creation, consumption, display and dazzling fashion in the reign of Edward VII, 'Bertie', the eldest son of Queen Victoria, with remarkable loans from the British Royal Collection and other London museums. The brilliantly illustrated catalogue remains unsurpassed as an exploration of the period and it was enhanced by the flamboyance of Angus.

At Yale, Angus talked about his own writing process – the way that he needed to immerse himself completely and rub up against a deadline in a terrifyingly close way. This way, he said, he could tap into the energy and clarity of thought that was needed to write and find the shape of the words that he needed. At Yale, Angus explored his love of New York. He described with characteristic joy how much he loved driving into Manhattan, seeing the city open before him as he approached – and then hurtling through its streets, tapping into the city's energy. At Yale, he was an energetic and generous colleague in the art history department. For example, Edward Cooke, a renowned expert on material culture, developed a study abroad course focusing on the art and material culture of Australia, and Angus was instrumental in connecting him with collections and curators in Australia.

In 2007 Angus was diagnosed as HIV positive. At that point, realising he was immune compromised, he wrote what he described as 'an extraordinarily grandiose document', with detailed instructions about his funeral. At the end of the brief CV, he predicted various ways in which he might die to be

printed in the order of service: 'He had the honour to follow in the footsteps of those fine men and women who were infected by the human immunodeficiency virus but, somewhat ironically, died instead as a result of a lightning strike/car crash/terrorist incident/absurd domestic accident/non-sexually-transmitted coronavirus (delete whichever).' In the end, his predictions failed to come true as he died of a heart attack.

Apart from his curatorial duties, he wrote two witty exuberant books of social history, which proved enormously successful, reprinted in numerous editions (Melbourne, London, New York), and in China: *A Brief History of the Smile*, 2003, and *The Finger: A Handbook*, 2010. Both books were about a particular iconographical motif across countries, cultures, and media. Angus was immensely popular as a preferred reviewer for *Apollo*, the *Burlington Magazine*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, and many other journals. He had the knack of fearlessly exploring subjects in a way that was different to others. Much of Angus Trumble's writing is overtly autobiographical, representing a challenge to those who write an obituary, [such as his Blogspot](#), which he described as millions of words in a little spot.

On 10 February 2014 Angus was back in Australia as the Director of the National Portrait Gallery, Canberra, which he led from 2014 to 2018 with his habitual panache and a most remarkable wardrobe. On his return to Australia, he re-engaged with Australian cultural life. During his directorship, he secured major acquisitions, oversaw the Gallery's restructuring as a statutory authority, established the Foundation and presented many diverse exhibitions. He was elected a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 2015. His tenure at the National Portrait Gallery ended with a flourish, as the catalogue of the Gallery's exhibition, *Dempsey's People: A folio of British Street Portraits 1824-1844*, (authored by David Hansen) was awarded the 2018 William MB Berger Prize for British Art History, a significant honour. The exhibition thrust into the critical limelight a collection of watercolour portraits of British street people by an itinerant artist. Few Australian exhibitions receive such recognition.

In 2022 Angus was inducted as a fellow of Trinity College, at The University of Melbourne, an honour of which he was extremely proud. His portrait by the exacting draughtsman Evert Ploeg has been acquired by the college. It contains many delightful symbols of *trumbology*, as he coined the cult of

his family. Angus had earlier been portrayed by Yale-based artist Jonathan Weinberg in the pose of Boucher's nude odalisque, which members of his family all wish to inherit. This experience of sitting for a nude portrait surely encouraged the provocative exhibition about portraiture and nudity: 'Bare. Degrees of Undress', an exhibition in 2015 that explored intimacy and was, as might be imagined, an unforgettable success.

Dr Felicity Harley-McGowan remembers that Angus sometimes recounted a story about the day he walked out of the Yale Centre for British Art and found an elderly man, fallen in the street. His vagrant-like appearance had attracted the attention of a police officer, but when Angus approached, he recognised the man to be a distinguished (then retired) Art History professor at Yale. It is easy to slip into a kind of reverie, now that Angus has died, about the ways that Angus reflected on his own mortality in that moment, and indeed the fleeting nature of life. He was, of course, a person of deep faith. Our work consumes us, the art drives us, and we hope that in what we write and the observations we make about art we might contribute something to the greater good of humanity. Angus had an enormous impact – through his energy, his drive, his razor-sharp observations, the beauty of his observations, his seemingly boundless creativity. He was thankfully spared the faltering steps of his older Yale colleague, but he was taken too soon.

In the dramatic instructions for his own funeral, written at the beginning of COVID, Angus remembered meeting Olivier Messiaen at Government House. Among the moving hymns and prayers, he chose he determined that he would love to have for the *Postlude* Messiaen's *Transports de Joie*. '...something ethereal, very modern, completely mad and theatrical: Let's go out with a bang and a wallop! But is there anyone in Canberra who can actually play it? Being a somewhat eccentric choice for one's own funeral, it might make sense to explain to the congregation exactly why I wanted it, but of course, if sheer practicalities more or less rule it out—no problem.' Messiaen did prove too difficult.

At the time of his death, Angus was aged 58, a Senior Research Fellow at the National Museum of Australia. We will never see his like again.

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