

OBITUARY

COLIN PETER HOLDEN

19 OCTOBER 1951 – 12 JULY 2016



I remember the phone call well. It was late on a sunny autumn day and Colin's chiming tone, so distinctive, immediately engaged my attention. He asked, in his slightly diffident way, whether I thought a project to fully catalogue all the prints made by Giambattista Piranesi (1720–88) and held by State Library Victoria and the Baillieu Library at the University of Melbourne might qualify for the joint Redmond Barry Fellowship. We discussed the merits and I said he should apply. A few weeks later I asked Jo Ritale, the State Library representative on the selection panel, who had been chosen and I wasn't surprised to hear that it was Colin.

He then entered the life of the Library. Always slightly dishevelled, his long grey ponytail and heavily grooved face added character and combined with his interest in everything and everyone to make him very popular with Library staff. He worked on his project with dedication and, from time to time, would appear at my door to share a discovery: a very rare early edition of prints by Giambattista Piranesi bound with those of a lesser artist; his amazing discovery that the first Paris edition of Piranesi, now held by the Baillieu Library, had once belonged to the first Catholic bishop of Melbourne;

and his glee at finding that a handsomely bound set of Piranesi's *vedute* and *carceri* at the State Library belonged to the fantasist Beriah Botfield, who used a false crest on the binding to claim a family link to the Marquess of Bath.

But it was a much shabbier second set of *vedute* (views of Rome) at the State Library that really excited him. Purchased for the Library by the Felton Bequest, Colin's painstaking research into watermarks proved that all the sheets were printed by Giambattista himself, and he speculated that the three *vedute* that were missing from the set had probably not been printed at the time it was purchased, presumably by a Grand Tourist. This intrigued me enough to visit the Rare Book room to view the set. Barely bound in coarse cloth boards, the sheets had never been folded. Colin then made his move. Speaking as *sotto voce* as he was able, he pointed out that the bindings were of little use and, if the set were removed from its binding, the State Library would have the largest holding of loose Piranesi prints in the country. This impressed me enough to say that if my conservator colleagues agreed to disbinding, Colin could have the exhibition I had previously resisted, adding that if the

Library didn't mount it, the National Gallery of Victoria would borrow the prints and do it for us.

Colin entered what became his second project with even greater vigour. He became very much a part of the exhibitions team, working skilfully with the designers to transform the Keith Murdoch Gallery into an 18th-century print room, writing a book to accompany the exhibition, and even finding donors to assist with its publication. In keeping with the spirit of the Redmond Barry Fellowship, which is jointly awarded by the University of Melbourne Library and the State Library, the exhibition became a full partnership with an international conference and a second exhibition at the Ian Potter Museum of Art at the University reflecting on the impact of Piranesi on Australian artists. With 87,000 visitors *Rome: Piranesi's vision* was the fifth-most visited show in the Library's Keith Murdoch Gallery and, quite possibly, the most popular print show ever mounted in Australia. In time a second volume of the papers from the conference was published. The festival of Piranesi, as it was known to some of us, was the finest hour in Colin's career as a curator and scholar of prints, though none of us of course were to know that at the time.

Colin's genius and his frailty were recognised early. In one of his school reports the headmaster at Balwyn High noted:

Study comes readily to Colin who has an unusually good grasp of literary and historical material. He should do very well provided he does not overtax his strength.

At his requiem, Colin's cousin Ann Cunningham recalled an idyllic childhood at the family's large market garden in Balwyn, with Colin interested in plants, his model train set and, as he grew older, the delights of the State Library and Museum. After

school he enrolled at Melbourne University and lived at Trinity College. He immersed himself in languages, classical and modern, and his Master's thesis in Ancient Syriac was considered so highly that his Oxford examiner recommended it be expanded to doctorate. It was in the Baillieu Library that he discovered the world of prints, exploring the remarkable collection gifted by Dr Orde Poynton. His enquiring mind combined with a deep piety drew him to the Church and he was ordained a priest in the Anglican Church.

He served in the Wangaratta diocese, in Bunbury in Western Australia and, finally, as a curate at St Peter's, Eastern Hill. Along the way he explored the history of his parishes (and others) and the people who made them, publishing many books and adding a doctorate to his impressive resume. With Richard Trembath he wrote *Divine Discontent* (2008) an acclaimed history of the Brotherhood of St Lawrence. His was a life of prayer, scholarship and very practical ministry and it should have continued that way in the beautiful surrounds of St Peter's.

Colin resigned his ministry early for personal reasons including failing health. Colin had been diagnosed with lymphoma and this affliction combined with his departure from the vocation he loved to create an even more empathic person. He retired to a large Edwardian house in Armadale, which he originally shared with his aged mother until her death meant he inherited all the proceeds of that market garden in Balwyn. This allowed him to expand his collecting and gave greater freedom to pursue his interests, including opportunities to curate exhibitions, especially at the Geelong Art Gallery.

In time he became in his own words 'an eccentric gentleman scholar of independent means'. Those of us who came to know him at this time in his life could only agree. The house was large, but barely heated in winter;

Colin Holden at the *Rome: Piranesi's vision* exhibition, State Library Victoria, 2014

his new financial independence allowed more ambitious collecting of prints, but he lived like a hermit. Always hospitable, a visit to lunch came with recommendations from former guests to remember a sweater and not look too closely in the kitchen.

Colin was a loyal friend and, in his own way, a missionary. If he met someone who expressed even passing interest in prints, a book might be lent and, in time, an invitation to view part of his collection. He was generous, too, to those institutions that supported him: he purchased copies of the three *vedute* that the State Library lacked and gave them to complete their set; he gave gifts of prints to the Baillieu Library; and he bestowed exceptional generosity on the Geelong Art Gallery in recognition that this was the first place to fully support his curatorial interests.

Colin and his friends knew he was dying. His illness and the treatments used to hold it at bay sapped his energy and reduced him to a frail wisp of a man. His oncologist recommended a trip to Europe, which he eagerly planned. Designed in part to escape

Melbourne's winter, it went well until some persistent pain forced an early return. Soon, diagnosed with pneumonia, he was back at what he called his favourite East Melbourne hotel, the Epworth Hospital, and making a good recovery, which all his friends expected to be complete, when he fell, breaking his shoulder and hip. The injuries combined with the infection to overcome what little strength remained and he died peacefully a few days later.

Colin had an acute sense of theatre and many visitors to *Rome: Piranesi's vision* will remember his performance in costume as a French count, so it came as no surprise that his instructions for his funeral (which he modestly called *desiderata*) included the full mass composed by Henry Purcell for the funeral of Queen Mary. At the end of the grand and sombre liturgy, the vicar of St Peter's spoke of his friend and said we were farewelling a brother priest. Colin would have welcomed that affirmation of his vocation, although it is sad he didn't hear it for himself.

Shane Carmody