

THE GIFT OF

James and Diana Ramsay dedicated their lives to giving back to the South Australian community, most significantly through the arts. On the 100th anniversary of James's birth, we look at their legacy and how, without them, the state would be a very different place today

Story MATT DEIGHTON

James Ramsay was an eligible bachelor and regular fixture on the social scene in Launceston, Tasmania's "other", more refined capital city on its northwest coast, in the 1950s.

Ramsay came from good stock. His father, Sir John, was the first surgeon in Tasmania to be knighted for his brilliance and pioneering work in the medical field.

James' family name also was synonymous with the famous Kiwi boot polish company, which was founded by his uncle William. Another uncle was artist Hugh Ramsay.

He joined the military at 19 after World War II broke out, serving as a finance officer until a medical discharge for ill health and bad eyesight before the war ended.

In the years after, Ramsay, a credit manager, seemed to enjoy the freedom that came with his name and the status of his family, hosting many a party and featuring often in the social pages of the local paper, the Examiner.

But that changed somewhat when he met Diana Hamilton through a mutual friend.

Diana was from the well-known South Australian Hamilton wine family. They clicked



straight away ... and she brought him into line. They would write letters to each other constantly. In one she told him: "James, I have a big concern about your partying nature and the way you spend money."

He listened.

They were married within six months. He was 36, she was 33, and they came to call South Australia home.

"We instinctively knew that we were meant for one another," Diana once said.

Despite their family backgrounds and the fact Launceston was baked in old money, neither started out particularly wealthy. They lived in a quiet house in Walkerville. They didn't drive fancy cars. They were, however, very good savers and conservative with their spending.

(James would later inherit wealth from his family, which is likely to have included money from the Kiwi fortune).

Together they would form the most extraordinary of philanthropic unions.

James and Diana Ramsay built a legacy that would see almost \$120m pumped into South Australian



James and Diana Ramsay at Government House, top; and a photo of a young James Ramsay.

communities, services and institutions over the next 50 years, with a particular focus on their mutual passion: the arts.

In 2019 – 23 years after his death – the James and Diana Ramsay Foundation bequeathed an astonishing \$38m to the Art Gallery of South Australia (AGSA).

Look around and their footprints are everywhere: the Ramsay Art Prize, SAHMRI, Operation Flinders, universities, arts groups and schools. It is, indeed, a long list.

July marked James Ramsay's 100th birthday and, to celebrate, the foundation gifted \$1m, its largest grant, to The Australian Ballet for a Swan Lake production in his memory. It will come to Adelaide in October.

"We think it is a fitting way to celebrate his legacy and everything he has done for this state," says Kerry de Lorme, the foundation's executive director.

"And I think it's important to remember and an important milestone to celebrate. What they have done for this state is enormous."

Kerry de Lorme believes there were a variety of factors that drove James and Diana Ramsay's philanthropic pursuits.

James, she says, often felt like he lived in the



Camille Pissarro's painting *Prairie a Eragny, 1886*.

GIVING



A painting by Anna Platten of South Australian philanthropists James and Diana Ramsay, right; and an installation view of Jeffrey Smart's work *The Argument*, Prentista, 1982, purchased by the Art Gallery of South Australia through the James and Diana Ramsay Fund. Picture: Saul Steed

shadow of his father. He was also a relatively short man, 5'2" in the old scale, and felt like he had something to prove.

She didn't know James but it was reported he was "good natured and conservative, he could also be prickly at times, but it seemed like he had a lot to live up to, given what his family had achieved".

Diana for her part had worked as a social worker and had a natural affinity for community. Both came from families who were closely involved with benevolent organisations; James's mother, Ella, a nurse, was a strong supporter of the Red Cross.

Whatever the intrinsic motivations, together they were a force of nature.

"I think it was inherent in them to ask how they could help others," de Lorme says.

"They weren't born super wealthy, they still had to work.

"Diana also said, 'In school we were taught that giving to others is so important'. So they had that sense of community ingrained in them from an early age."

She became close with Diana over the years. They first met in 1997 when de Lorme was working on the Bradman Collection at the State Library. In 2009, Diana brought her in to help launch and then run their foundation. She's been there ever since and speaks warmly about their friendship.

"I look back now ... I didn't realise that when I first met her, her husband had just passed away 12 months prior; she was very proud and never talked about that," de Lorme says.

"But it was just a relationship that gelled and I feel she just took me under her wing.

"She was very prim and proper, she was polished, she was set in her ways but she was just so warm and kind also. And she had a lot of fun.

"When she passed, (former premier) Steven Marshall was quoted as saying she could hold a dinner party in the palm of her hand. And she could. She could be funny, she could be quite naughty, she'd like to say things to shock people every now and again.

"If she wasn't at the opera or the gallery or the library or the Queen Adelaide Club, she'd be

at a friend's house, or playing golf. She was very active. I loved being around her; I miss her."

James and Diana shared a long and abiding love for the arts. Their house was just full of it. James had the family connection with Uncle Hugh and Diana often told the story about going to AGSA when she was 10 and being captivated by a beautiful Nora Heysen painting.

"And from then on, she just loved art. And when she met James, and they were writing to each other, they just talked about their love of classical music and arts and opera and ballet," de Lorme says, adding that many of these anecdotes have been unearthed during research into a book on the history of James and Diana by respected journalist (and former SA Weekend editor) Roy Eccleston.

It's difficult to know where the arts community would be in South Australia without the work done by the Ramsays.

In 1969, they joined the Friends of the Art Gallery of South Australia and three years later made the first of many donations and gifts (a fine Negoro red lacquer tray from Japan), many of which would coincide with their own milestones, such as birthdays and anniversaries.

Barry Patton writes in an article in the AGSA Magazine July edition: "... each June they sent donations, along with a handwritten birthday note from James, on the date of the Gallery's opening in 1881."

In 1981, they helped establish the Art Gallery Foundation of SA.

Key works obtained over the years through their generosity include most of the gallery's

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It was inherent in them to ask how they could help others ... what they've done is enormous

holdings of Hugh Ramsay works, as well as pieces by Jacob van Ruisdael, Napier Waller, Edwaert Collier, Christian Waller and, in more recent years, Angelica Kauffman, Jeffrey Smart, Nalini Malani and Andy Warhol.

They also were one of the major donors that helped buy the gallery's Camille Pissarro impressionist work in 2014, *Prairie a Eragny*, which cost \$4.5m.

De Lorme says the only proviso was that the works needed to be of the highest quality.

"It wasn't about the quantity, the focus really was on the quality," she says.

Their interests widened over the years and, in 1988, they sponsored the Australian Ballet company to travel and perform at the Royal Opera House, in London, a show attended by Queen Elizabeth II.

As their generosity grew, so did their interests, from medical scholarships, to services in the regions, to helping young children at risk.

Art, however, was never far from their hearts and the pinnacle was the 2019 gift.

Their motivation had been the Felton Bequest, which had helped the NGV (National Gallery of Victoria) to buy 15,000 works – including by Rembrandt, Monet, van Gogh and Turner – which, in 2004, were valued at more than \$1bn. They are now estimated to be worth more than \$3bn.

James had drawn up the bequest plan in 1994 to take effect after the death of his wife. When Diana passed in 2017, 90 per cent of it was from his estate, the rest from Diana's.

Writing in this publication in 2019, Eccleston described it as a "magic pudding" for the gallery, saying it "protects the capital, which is to be invested, while allowing the gallery to spend a portion of the interest to buy great works of art. The more it grows, the bigger the dividend for art – indefinitely."

Today, their gifts to AGSA total in the vicinity of \$63m.

During a recent speech to mark James Ramsay's birthday at Government House, SA Governor Frances Adamson described the couple as "the most generous donors in the history" of the art gallery.



"You may have heard the saying, 'only by giving are you able to receive more than you already have'," she said.

"Those who knew James Ramsay, one of Australia's most significant cultural benefactors, know that the generosity he showed throughout his life brought him a great sense of joy, hope and optimism. This joy lives on in the organisations, and countless individuals, whose lives continue to be touched by the generosity of Ramsay giving."

AGSA director Rhana Devenport describes the Ramsays' contribution as "simply transformational".

Philanthropists James and Diana Ramsay; and, right, their foundation's executive director Kerry de Lorme, with Australian Ballet principal artist Robyn Hendricks and board member Richard Jasek. Picture, right: Matt Turner

"It's allowed the gallery to enter into territory that would not have been possible," Devenport says, citing everything from major public programs, to The Studio (its free, hands-on activities space for art lovers of all ages), to the Ramsay Art Prize, to the support of young and emerging artists.

"Their great faith and belief in the power of art and the essential role that art and culture played in human life is really something that has been extraordinary to witness when one goes back through time," she says.

Devenport says the proof of the Ramsays' contributions is in the pudding; AGSA received

The joy of giving

TODAY WE FEATURE SOME OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA'S LEADING PHILANTHROPIC TRUSTS AND FOUNDATIONS

JAMES AND DIANA RAMSAY FOUNDATION

James Ramsay would have turned 100 this year. As one of South Australia's great philanthropists he, alongside wife Diana and their foundation, have poured more than \$120m into South Australian communities, services and institutions, with a particular focus on their mutual passion: the arts. In 2019-23 years after his death, they bequeathed an astonishing \$38m to the Art Gallery of South Australia (AGSA).

FAY FULLER FOUNDATION

Margaret "Fay" Fuller started the foundation in 2003. The strong and proud South Australian died in 2017 aged 91, leaving a strong and abiding legacy; to date the foundation has distributed more than \$21m to almost 60 organisations across South Australia. Key focuses include mental health and wellbeing; First Nations-led health funding; practice and collaboration. They hand out \$3m each year to areas they determine as being the biggest areas of need.

WYATT TRUST

The Wyatt Trust was established through a bequest left by Dr William Wyatt following his death in 1886. Since those early days, the trust has distributed more than \$70m in grants, which have helped more than 73,000 South Australians. In the past year alone it has distributed \$4.5m. CEO Stacey Thomas says their aim has remained consistent over the years, to support South Australians experiencing financial hardship and to fight to eradicate poverty.

DAY FAMILY FOUNDATION

The foundation was formed in 2011 by businessman Geoff Day and his wife as they felt "we have enjoyed a privileged life, by way of a good education, and an element of good business fortune. The foundation focuses on leadership, education, growing community philanthropy and social venture capital. Among a range of other areas, they have supported leadership development in the not-for-profit sector and principals in low socio economic schools.

NUNN DIMOS FOUNDATION

Alex Dimos and Andrew Nunn came to South Australia 25 years ago from Melbourne, built a number of strong businesses (Nunn is now the state's Chief Entrepreneur) and, in 2017, founded their foundation. Some highlights include the collaboration and investment into Adelaide Film Festival, State Theatre Company of SA's production of the Dictionary of Lost Words, the Adelaide Festival including Writer's Week, the Adelaide Fringe and the AGSA.



important government funding for collections, and has been backed by the South Australian Tourism Commission for exhibitions such as the highly successful "Frida & Diego: Love & Revolution".

However, it has also faced its share of challenges.

"Ongoing efficiency dividends have been in place now for several years in regard to our base grant from government, which has proven a challenge for AGSA which receives less funding than both the State Library and the SA Museum," she says.

"AGSA receives the least state funding of all the state art galleries, and has the smallest footprint, yet has the third largest collection due to the generosity of individuals such as James Ramsay.

"Our reputation for innovation and offering a unique voice on the national stage remains strong – interestingly the gallery attracts the largest number of visitors per capita."

Devenport is now hoping to work towards an expansion of the gallery which, she says, will contribute to economic health through cultural tourism, and to vibrancy, community cohesion and wellbeing.

"James and Diana Ramsay believed in the power of art to bring humanity together and to share memorable experiences; this belief is deeply shared by the AGSA team," she says.

So in answer to the original question – what would our state look like?

Suffice to say, it would look quite different.

As we know, James and Diana Ramsay loved a good party and they would have been at the front of the queue to see the reimagined Swan Lake take flight in a few months.

The celebration is two-fold – it commemorates James's 100th birthday and also the ballet's 60th anniversary, in a symbolic

Works in the Art Gallery of South Australia collection thanks to the generosity of James and Diana Ramsay, from top: Letter Rack, 1698, by Edwaert Collier; and Landscape with a Mill-run and Ruins, c.1653, by Jacob van Ruisdael.

“James and Diana Ramsay believed in the power of art to bring humanity together”

A small slice of the Ramsays' generosity

■ Provided gifts to the Art Gallery of South Australia over 50 years, including the establishment of the \$100,000 Ramsay Art Prize in May 2016, in perpetuity

■ In 2013 established The Studio, a permanent children's education activity hub at the Art Gallery of South Australia. More than 300,000 people have visited The Studio.

■ From the 1980s, provided funding to The Australian Ballet for various projects. This year gifted \$1m for a Swan Lake production in memory of James.

■ Provided seed funding for surtitles of the State Opera South Australia in 1988

■ Supported Adelaide Youth Orchestras and Patch Theatre to tour regionally to SA schoolchildren

■ Helped 40 artists through the Helpmann Academy and Guildhouse

■ Provided more than \$200,000 of Covid-19 relief funding for the disproportionately affected arts and culture sector in SA

■ Via the Adelaide Fringe Arts Industry Collaborations



The foundation funds rural mental health support.

Project, supported 13 SA arts organisations

■ Provided more than \$1m with the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons for fellowships

■ Funded research through the University of Adelaide for early intervention into youth mental health

■ Supported multiple resilience and wellbeing projects at SAHMRI, including Be Well, a wellbeing tracker and development tool.

Established the Ramsay Fellowship, a genomics position at SAHMRI. SAHMRI credits the foundation's support as being invaluable in securing

major funding to establish the South Australian Genomics Centre

■ Now funds Dr Kate Gunn at the University of South Australia to support her online mental health program, ifarmwell.com.au, providing better mental health outcomes for farmers and their families

■ Made significant infrastructure investment into the Operation Flinders Foundation, which helps 500 at-risk youths a year

■ Invested in Youth Opportunities, giving secondary students leadership skills
Source: James & Diana Ramsay Foundation

tribute to the company's first performance, which was Swan Lake, on November 2, 1962.

The Australian Ballet's philanthropy director Kenneth Watkins says it as a fitting tribute to the couple.

He describes James as "a terrific bloke and so very thoughtful" and Diana as, simply, the ballet's "fairy godmother". Both had a "very deep relationship" with the institution.

"I had a very strong relationship with both of them, very short with James but a very long relationship with Diana right up until she died, really. I'd visit her in the nursing home every time I went to Adelaide," he says.

"She was our fairy godmother. When she paid for the costumes in (one of our major productions) a long time ago, she became our fairy godmother.

"We always used to have a laugh about that and we would always engage her in any way we possibly could."

Swan Lake is anchored by the record donation of the James and Diana Ramsay Foundation, which was matched by the Lachlan and Sarah Murdoch Foundation.

De Lorme says it is a fitting way to toast both James's birthday and the couple's legacy.

"The Australian Ballet during their lives was their absolute joy," she says.

"They were committed to continuing to support those organisations that had given them much joy during their life together. But I think it's important to remember them and recognise what they did and continue to do. Their legacy and their DNA is well embedded into the South Australian community."