



What is Edmund Capon's taste in art really like? the(sydney)magazine asked him three questions:

1. Which are the five paintings or objects in the gallery collection which you would like to take home with you?

Pablo Picasso's *Nude in a Rocking Chair*, 1956, oil on canvas. Purchased 1981.

Standing Buddha, China, Sui dynasty (581-618), marble.

Bernardo Strozzi's *The Release of St Peter*, circa 1635, oil on canvas.

Long Tom Tjapanangka's *Big Mob Pull (Rocks) - Other Side of Mt. Leibig*, 1998, polymer paint on canvas.

Giulio Paolini's *L'altra Figura (The Other Figure)*, 1984, plaster cast.

2. Which are the five most significant purchases the gallery has made during your term as director, and why?

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's *Three Bathers*, 1913, oil on canvas. The first Art Gallery of New South Wales Foundation purchase (in 1984).

Alberto Giacometti's *Femme de Venise VII*, 1956, bronze. Still the only Giacometti sculpture in an Australian public collection.

Georges Braque's *Le Verre d'Absinthe (Glass of Absinthe)*, 1911, oil on canvas. The perfect demonstration of analytical cubism.

John Olsen's *Five Bells*, 1963, oil on hardboard. No other single work purchased by the Art Gallery Society has been received with such universal satisfaction – and it's destined to become an indelible Australian icon.

The big Buddha, Chinese, 6th century, marble. Because wherever it is located it imposes a rich serenity.

3. If you were suddenly given the unlimited funds of a Chelsea football manager, which art works would you have on your "most wanted" list for the gallery?

Cy Twombly's *Three Studies from the Temeraire*, 1999-2000, triptych. These have the stamp of immortality – my first real target.

Bill Viola's *Five Angels for the Millennium*, 2001, video installation. By far the most powerful, convincing and brilliant of this new(ish) genre.

Paul Cézanne: Not *Mont Sainte-Victoire* but one of his great still-life paintings, apples and fruit bowls imbued with reaffirming humanity.

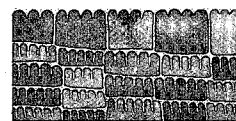
Raphael: Just about any figure drawing/study. Oxford's Ashmolean Museum has a good number from which I could happily make a selection.

Buddhist stèle of the Buddha and two Bodhisattvas, Chinese Northern Wei dynasty, early 6th century. It's in the Museum Bletberg in Zurich.

Capon's choice



John Olsen's *Five Bells*



Long Tom Tjapanangka's *Big Mob Pull (Rocks) - Other Side of Mt. Leibig*

* 1969/1 my request for a "harbour" wall painting after John said he envisaged a "ballfight"



Drawing by Raphael



Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's *Three Bathers*



Pablo Picasso's *Nude in a Rocking Chair*

I remember saying to myself, 'I won't believe it exists until I see it myself.' My love affair with China began that night."

(Strangely, Capon didn't mention that in his last term he was Head of School – a fact later confirmed by email from Colin Shaw, the honorary secretary of the Old Suttonians Association. Nor did Capon mention that, despite his supposed hatred of rugby, he played for the 1st XV, as well as cricket for the 2nd XI.)

On family holidays, he'd frustrate his parents by dragging along his easel with him, and by the time Capon finished school he believed he had enough talent to try his luck as a painter. His father disagreed. He wanted both sons to have solid professions. David became an accountant – he now lives in the West Country of England and is, says Capon, "the complete opposite to me".

The younger brother rebelled. At first he worked in his father's mill. That ended in a family crisis when the young socialist tried to unionise the workforce. To placate his father, he then trained as a chartered surveyor but handed in his notice on the day he qualified. That caused an even bigger rift: "My father didn't speak to me for several years." By this stage – now in his mid-20s – Capon had become even more hardline, joining what he now calls "the looney left". At one point he joined a radical fringe splinter group, believing the British Communist Party was far too right wing. Even when he went to China in 1972 and witnessed the anti-individualistic Cultural Revolution at first hand, he came away with his faith complete – something which astonishes him today. By then Capon had given up his own painting ambitions and still doesn't paint or draw today. Instead, he resolved to build a career in arts management – working for a commercial art gallery in London's West End while

simultaneously plotting the death of capitalism at night. Eventually, after several attempts, he was accepted by the V & A as a junior curator.

After the museum's doors shut each evening, Capon would head off to night school, gradually acquiring the academic qualifications – culminating in a Master of Philosophy in Chinese art and archaeology from London University – which would see him rise through the curatorial ranks. By the time he was 37, he was assistant keeper of the museum's Far Eastern department.

Somers Cox points out that "he was the first person at the V & A to actually go and learn Chinese. That put Edmund on a completely different level". Though, by V & A standards, Capon advanced quickly, he knew he'd be condemned to middle management. "The V & A was extremely hierarchical," recalls Somers Cox. "It would have taken Edmund a long time to get to any position where he could actually have done something."

Domestically, there were tensions. He was married to his first wife, Anne – a subject he refuses to be drawn on – and they had two children, Tara and Dominic. Yet he was still working furiously most nights, building his scholarly credentials and writing the first of his 10 books. On Saturdays he would work the morning shift at the V & A before rushing off to watch his beloved Chelsea. One suspects, too, that there may have been extramarital dalliances. Women have always found him debonair. Even in Sydney, it has earned him a certain reputation, totally unsubstantiated. Part of the image would appear to be innocent. Capon is a touchy-feely sort of person – with men as much as women. While we are having lunch he touches my knee or arm several times to emphasise a point. It's

disconcerting enough for a man; for a woman it might seem like an unwanted advance.

Then he met Joanna. She was a divorced mother of three, the ex-wife of a Scottish aristocrat soon to become Baron Tanlaw. Capon and his future wife were introduced at a dinner party by their mutual friend, Giuseppe Eskenazi, one of the world's leading art dealers. Did Eskenazi think they were suited? "No, nothing like that," laughs Eskenazi on the phone from New York. "Edmund and I were about to go to China with a small group when I did my back in. So I had this seat available. My wife and I knew Joanna was interested in going so we asked if she would like to take my place. She met Edmund, went on the trip and in a very short while they got married." Eskenazi was best man. "It was very informal. He was late for his own wedding, which will amuse anyone who knows him in Sydney. We had a lunch before the wedding and then went to Caxton Hall for the service. Edmund and I were the last to arrive. It wasn't my fault. He kept talking to people."

The couple were married on July 8, 1977. Within 18 months, they had moved to Sydney. The offer came completely out of the blue; indeed Capon thought it "weird" when he was approached to see if he was interested in the gallery job. The previous year, the Capons had come to Melbourne so he could deliver lectures about Chinese art, with a single day spent at the AGNSW. When he'd finished his Sydney talk, Capon was told the then director, Peter Laverty, wanted to meet him in his office. Capon walked in, saw the expansive harbour views and remembers thinking, "This is a bit of all right ... I couldn't help comparing it to my office back in the V & A with its view of the brick wall of the Brompton Oratory." Back in London, the newly married →

Capon
snapshots

The film star

Film director Bruce Beresford met Capon through "a mutual friend, Jeffrey Smart". Beresford says his friend is "a very good companion, full of funny stories. But he doesn't know much about film. We talk mainly about paintings." Before the 2000 Olympics Beresford was making an IMAX film on the history of Sydney. He was having trouble casting the voice for a patrician English commander of the First Fleet. "I needed a particular type of English accent and I suddenly thought, 'I know whose accent I need — Edmund Capon's.'" He rang Capon, "who dropped everything and came over". Beresford's assistant was amazed the director of the art gallery would be so amenable. Beresford recalls, "We didn't even pay him."

The tennis player

Every Saturday Capon plays tennis in a foursome with NSW Chief Justice Jim Spiegelman, the corporate heavyweight and gallery owner Brian Sherman, plus Sherman's son, Emile.

Despite his reputation for turning up late to business meetings, Spiegelman says Capon is always on time for the tennis game — one of at least three matches Capon plays every week. "He hates losing," says Spiegelman. "Very competitive. He never challenges a line call, but he does get angry with himself for not playing up to his own standards." Brian Sherman, who played competitive tennis in his youth, describes Capon as "a manic player. He runs every ball down, no matter how exhausted or injured he is." Are his strokes as elegant as the man? "No, he's a vigorous player. He makes up in energy what he loses in his stroke play."

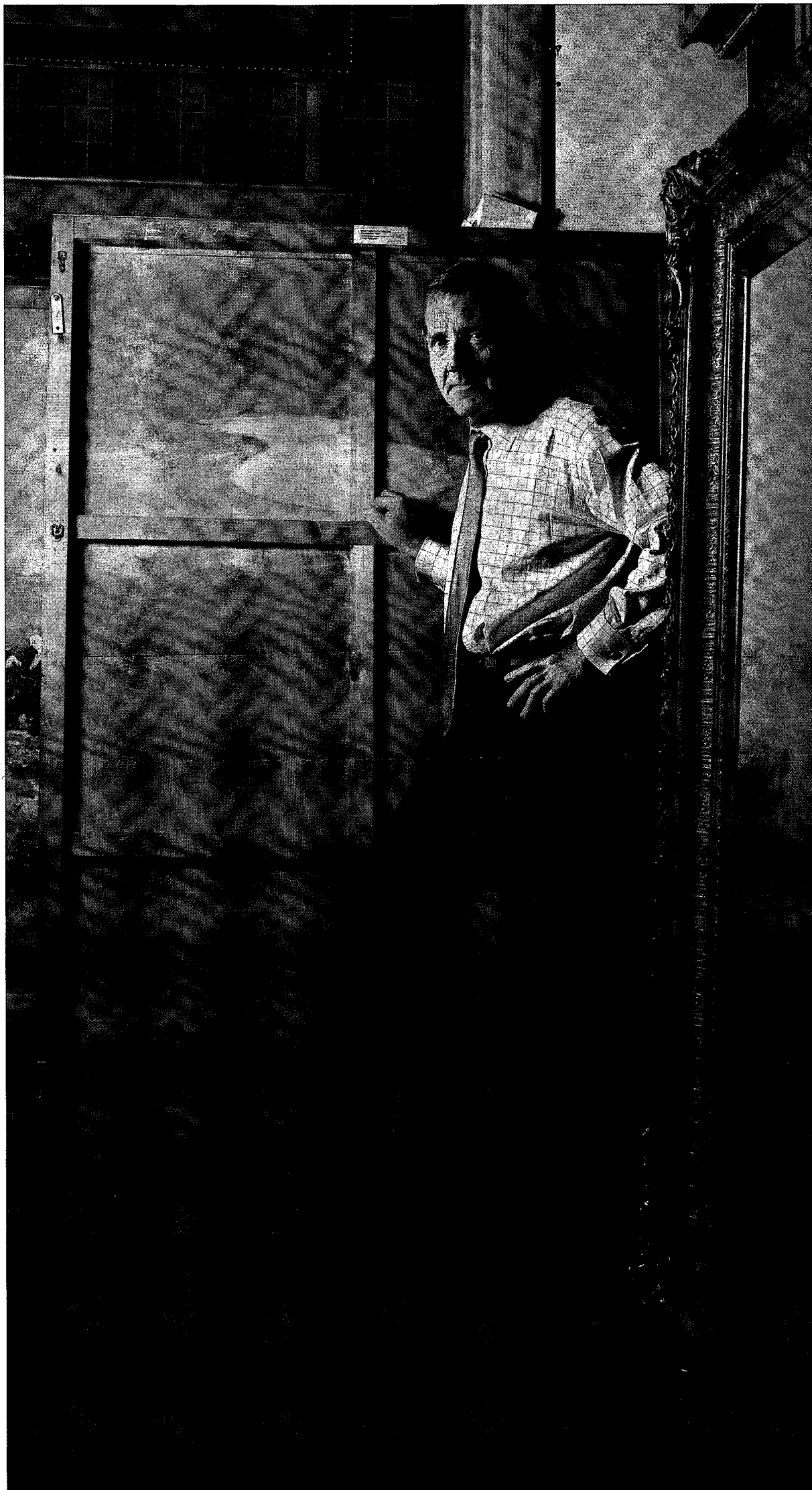
Sherman recalls one singles match when Capon chased a shot so ferociously he ended up with his ankle wedged in the back fence. Sherman had to rescue him, breaking his racket in the process.

The food critic

Last year Capon shocked some of Sydney's foodie mafia by daring to declare — at the launch of *The Sydney Morning Herald's* Good Food Month, held at the art gallery — that there was an awful lot of pretentious rubbish written about food. It's not a statement he retreats from, saying, "The era of the celebrity chef deserves to be short-lived."

So what sort of food does he like? Past comments suggest he's a fan of plain, old-fashioned, masculine fare — the sort of food served up at a minor English public school — or even an Aussie meat pie. Heaven forbid, protests Capon.

Now Capon describes his taste in food as "eclectic, like my reading". He likes food, he says — everything from fish and chips to Asian. But he hates pomposity. And he prefers good company to swanky food.



Right

Edmund Capon at the
Art Gallery of NSW.
"I don't play roles. This
is who I am."