

THE LANGUAGE OF INHERITANCE

SHERIDAN PALMER PAYS TRIBUTE TO KENNETH MYER, WHOSE LIFE AND CONTRIBUTION TO THE LIBRARY HAVE BEEN MEMORIALISED IN A GROUND-BREAKING AUSTRALIAN TAPESTRY

BELOW LEFT
John Young and Cheryl
Thornton at the Australian
Tapestry Workshop, 2011
Courtesy John Young Studio

IN 2010 NEILMA GANTNER, BAILLIEU MYER and Marigold Southey, together with younger members of the Myer family, commissioned a tapestry for the National Library of Australia commemorating the life and work of Kenneth Myer (1921–1992), Chair of the Library from 1974 to 1982. The tapestry, which was unveiled on Lower Ground 1 in December 2011, was designed by the artist John Young and woven at the Australian Tapestry Workshop in Melbourne. As an institution, the Library played an important part in Myer's professional life, especially in his pursuit of knowledge, his assiduous attention to information technology and the modernising of bibliographic processes. Over the 21 years in which he was associated with the Library, he was integral in steering its digital future.

Many threads make up a person's life. For a polymath, philomath and an extraordinarily forward-looking philanthropist such as Ken Myer, a tapestry is perhaps the perfect medium in which to memorialise his achievements, legacies, aesthetics and passions. To him the world was an exciting, information-laden map and he approached business and life with vigour, a relentless curiosity and an unusual grace. He was a global and urban navigator and facilitator and, whether on the seas or tracking urban development or in forests of eucalypts or the halls of art,

culture and science, Myer moved quickly and confidently across many fields of enquiry and social landscapes. He was a consummate observer of public affairs and a tenaciously dedicated businessman for whom success was a by-product of expertise, skilful timing and a keenly perceptive view of the world—he introduced the parking meter to Australia and conceived and built satellite shopping centres, including Chadstone, Northland and Doncaster. He always aspired to the ultimate state of accomplishment, which is perhaps why science intrigued him and why he supported the Howard Florey Institute and genomics with such enormous enthusiasm.

To bring the inner and outer worlds of Ken Myer into a visually articulated whole, artist John Young chose a double-ground format and multiple dialogues to capture and condense the 'spirit of the man'. In the centre of the tapestry we find a composite portrait reflecting the three defining ages of Ken Myer: as a 13-year-old boy, a young naval officer and the older patrician. These are surrounded by 11 vignette *leitmotifs*—those recurrent themes or images that illuminated his character and motivated his life and work—forming a didactic jigsaw of eucalypts, cotton flowers, his favourite camellias, an eighteenth-century Japanese scroll and silk brocades. Together with an upper frieze of text, each image represents his deep interest in the sciences or the arts and is set upon a timeless background of a moonlit Japanese landscape.

As Young says: 'Making art not only means to recollect stories, but to reawaken an intrinsic ethical impulse in the present'. Born in Hong Kong, Young moved to Australia in 1967, where he read philosophy of science and aesthetics at the University of Sydney before turning to painting and sculpture. His work is concerned with trans-culturalism and humanitarianism and, having 'moved' through several cultures and straddled the 'active principles' of both the East and West, he was well positioned to interpret and translate Ken Myer's life. The result is a beautifully modulated and elegant work that





involved a close working relationship between the artist and the weavers at the Australian Tapestry Workshop, each seeking to render a remarkable life into a unified and visually consummate woven picture.

The ‘language of inheritance’, as Peter Doherty said in his Kenneth Myer Lecture in 2001, is complex, both materially and biologically. Ken Myer was predestined as the eldest son of Sidney and Merlyn Myer to inherit the mantle of the Myer firm. He came to that duty when he was 13 years old and his father died. Groomed at home, at school and in the navy, his values became strenuously exacting, and William Wordsworth’s line, ‘The child is the father of the man’ holds resoundingly true for Ken Myer. Inheriting privilege and position, and spending a childhood shuttled between two continents—America and Australia—he developed a bi-cultural view of the world and how progress might be measured and achieved.

As with any remarkable person, paradoxes exist and the artist instinctively followed these. For most of Ken Myer’s life, he displayed a

profound sense of duty, an exhaustive work ethic and a deep sense of humanitarianism, gained largely from his Russian-born father Simcha, better known as Sidney. But another side co-existed when Ken worked and walked with nature; whether it was planting trees at Penders, gardening, learning about the biogenetics of cotton, or trout fishing in New Zealand and Alaska, his love of the bush or the snow country was an essential counterbalance to the intensity of his business life. At the family’s country property Booroola, Ken’s passion for trees provided a sanctuary from the rigours of the commercial world and, as his biographer Sue Ebury points out, the image he held on to during his five years with the Royal Australian Navy or when he was becalmed in the Coral Sea at night, was that of the tree, a symbol of both land and home. Snapshots of the mottled bark of the *Corymbia maculata* and the leaves of *Eucalyptus grandis* border the lower edge of the tapestry.

Woven across the top of the tapestry are selected keywords that signify the interests

ABOVE
John Young (b. 1965), artist
John Dicks, Milena Paplinska,
Cheryl Thornton, weavers
Finding Kenneth Myer 2011
wool and cotton; 230 x 302 cm
Gift of the Myer Family through the
Tapestry Foundation of Australia

BELOW
Kenneth Myer and family at
Booroola in *The Many Lives of
Kenneth Myer* by Sue Ebury
Carlton, Vic.: Miegunyah Press,
2008
Australian Collection
Courtesy Neilma Gantner and
the Kenneth Myer family





ABOVE
 First Meeting of the Council of
 the National Library held at
 Parliament House, Canberra,
 October 1960
 black-&-white print
 15.4 x 20.3 cm
 Pictures Collection
 nla.pic-vn4550510

BELOW LEFT
 Henk Brusse for the National
 Library of Australia
 Kenneth Myer Addresses the
 Audience at His Farewell
 Ceremony, Canberra,
 5 February 1982
 black-&-white negative
 6 x 6 cm
 Pictures Collection
 nla.pic-vn4350698

BELOW RIGHT
 Henk Brusse for the National
 Library of Australia
 Portrait of George Chandler,
 Allan Fleming, Kenneth
 Myer, Harrison Bryan and
 Harold White at the Farewell
 Ceremony, Canberra,
 5 February 1982
 black-&-white negative
 6 x 6 cm
 Pictures Collection
 nla.pic-vn4350667

and qualities most precious to Ken Myer. The Japanese word *iki* translates as a sophisticated manner, an aesthetic and philosophic state of harmony found within a mature culture, which is why he loved Japan and what

he found with Yasuko, his second wife. As Koichi Tsukamoto says, quoted in Sue Ebury's biography:

There are two kinds of Australians, one is ... white in their mind ... Europe is the centre, but the others, like Ken Myer, are members of Asia, their roots are in Asia.

Ken respected Eastern cultures for their instinctual ability to find a balance 'between holding on to what is best from the past' and 'a vision ... about the future'. In the latter part of his life he came to understand the counterpoise between reflection and action, and that life must be balanced in opposition. His 'reposing restlessness', as Davis McCaughey described it, characterised Ken's intellectual curiosity in both the detail and the large picture, and his yearning for a state of repose, which he sought in the sensual elements of nature.

One of the more difficult parts of the weaver's job in creating a tapestry is to accurately colour code the artist's vision and translate each detail into the weft and warp of the loom. With 11 specially dyed strands of wool and cotton,

including two newly developed colours, the weavers Cheryl Thornton, John Dicks and Milena Paplinska, under the guidance of Sara Lindsay, began the weaving from the bottom up, working the intricate shades in segments and rolling the tapestry as they progressed. With no room for error and unable to see the totality of their work until it was finished and the threads of the loom cut and tied, this tapestry, with its complex layering of image over image, proved one of the most challenging ever to be made at the Australian Tapestry Workshop. It is a testament to the collaborative skills of the weavers, a world-renowned workshop and an artist who has perceptively captured the quintessential markings of an innovative idealist.

The tapestry, which floats like a *Ukiyo-e* landscape, memorialises a man who lived in the present, admired the past, yet looked to the future. For many who knew or worked with Ken Myer, he was something of a modern-day Medici, one who vigorously imbued the science and cultural landscape with his ideologies and wealth. He saw the digital age as an optimum necessity in a globalised world and his commitment to technological progress never waned, whether it was at the National Library of Australia, the Howard Florey Institute, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the National Gallery of Victoria, the Victorian Arts Centre, the CSIRO, the National Capital Development Commission or his family flagship Myer. It is as a generous visionary, a driving and altruistic force who nurtured cultural exchanges and implemented economic and cultural advancements that Kenneth Myer will be remembered. Indeed, this beautiful tapestry reflects the understated exterior of a man whose vision was for the people of Australia.

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