



Edmund Capon in his study . . . 'an instinctive mess'
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With a view to the east

A voyeur's guide to personal rooms. In the first of this occasional series, BERWYN LEWIS talks with the Art Gallery of NSW's Edmund Capon in his 'nest'

EDMUND Capon's study or "nest" is testimony to his scholarly interest in Eastern art and oriental studies and his fluency in Mandarin and in Chinese calligraphy.

As director of the Art Gallery of NSW his room is surprisingly light on paintings.

"It's a very instinctive and untidy mess," Mr Capon said, though he claims he knows exactly where each book is in the piles on the floor.

"All I've got to do is crawl around and find it," he said, sitting on the 18th century library steps chair at his desk.

His guided tour begins with a towering bookcase of volumes on the Far East and the dynastic history of China.

"All these books and catalogues are about China, Japan and Korea, mainly China. Europe is upstairs," Mr Capon said with a wave towards another thoroughly book-lined room upstairs.

To one side of the room a bookcase cabinet is stacked with issues of *Oriental Art* which Mr Capon edited from 1974 to 1982. Above the mantelpiece is a print by an English artist, Patrick Caulfield.

On the other side of the

mantelpiece is his resource library — everything from *Burke's Peerage* to a galaxy of Chinese dictionaries and encyclopaedias, slide collections and guide books. The fireplace is home for dozens of scrolls of modern Chinese paintings and red boxes filled with articles written or collected by Mr Capon — the pieces he "needs but seldom can find".

Another wall of his study displays more of his collection of modern Chinese paintings. His most treasured piece of calligraphy, a simple hanging, bears two huge characters: *Mo* ("the surname of a great Confucian philosopher of the 4th century BC") and *Zhuang*, the great Taoist philosopher.

Mr Capon claims he is "a bit of everything: Australian, Irish, Buddhist, Confucianist, Taoist — and a giraffe collector".

He has an extensive collection of giraffe statues, a Brett Whiteley giraffe, a giraffe ashtray for his ever-present cigar, a Royal Doulton giraffe plate, a giraffe jigsaw and a 17th century Italian drawing of a "cameleopardis" (the original name for giraffes).

Dish draining racks containing his collection of 5000 slides

of Chinese art are stacked on the floor.

While working in his study Mr Capon listens to opera on compact disc or watches "footie" on a small television set perched on a corner of his desk.

He is the author of *Princess Of Jade, Art and Archaeology in China* and *Chinese Painting* and he is correcting the proofs of his book on the Tang Dynasty to be published by Orbis, London, in September.

He is also researching and writing a series of three, one-hour documentaries which he will present, called *Meishu — Travels in Chinese Art*.

Mr Capon welcomes children and dogs into his room.

"It tends to lend to the general atmosphere of intellectual squalor. It's normally thick with cigar smoke," he said.

"I come straight in here when I come home before I move out into the big world of the rest of the house. I do all my basic scholarly and research work here. I can also indulge myself, looking at a Chinese book out of one corner of the eye and the soccer on the telly out of the other."