

Mora: a lover of art beloved by all

By MICHAEL SHMITH
and REBECCA LANCASHIRE

The visual arts community yesterday paid tribute to the respected Melbourne art dealer and fabled restaurateur Georges Mora, who died in an Elsternwick hospice on Monday, aged 78, after a short illness.

Mr Mora ran Tolarno Galleries in South Yarra (and, before that, in St Kilda, where he also started Tolarno Bistro).

His connections with the Melbourne art scene go back 40 years, to when he migrated from France (where he had fought in the Resistance) with his young family.

He quickly established one of Melbourne's first commercial galleries and showed immediate and unswerving support for contemporary art in this city, as well as importing important shows by French masters.

"He was a person everybody in the Melbourne art world knew very well," the director of the National Gallery of Victoria, Mr



James Mollison, said yesterday. "In this difficult political world, Georges had the remarkable ability to remain a friend and supporter of all factions. . .

"That, I think, is the most remarkable thing Georges achieved. He was a great lover of art and food and artists and people. We all had enormous affection for him."

A former director of the National Gallery, Mr Patrick McCaughey, now the director of

the Wadsworth Athenaeum Gallery in Hartford, Connecticut, said: "Georges was wonderful. He was an art lover — the highest calling you could have. He was completely without malice, which was rare in Melbourne. He lived through great changes in the Australian art world — from the bohemian Melbourne of the 50s, with Mirka (his first wife) decorating every surface that wasn't tied down. Then he opened his own gallery at Tolarno."

Georges Mora championed many Australian contemporary artists, including Juan Davila, Tim Johnson, and his widow, Caroline Williams.

John Brack, one of the many local artists exhibited by Mr Mora, said yesterday: "He was really a kind of emissary from the continental world. He wasn't interested in getting rich out of selling paintings; he was very genuinely in it for the art."

Another artist, Mr Charles Blackman, first knew Mr Mora

when he worked as a chef in his East Melbourne restaurant, Cafe Balzac. "Georges brought with his European culture a sense of the future and no prejudices," he said.

A Melbourne writer and publisher, Ms Maria Prendergast, had lunch with Mr Mora once a month for 23 years. She said: "He was one of the first people to bring an international awareness to the art world in Melbourne . . . He was an urbane, charming and warm man; a total professional who brought an elegance and a sense of sophistication to the art world. He evoked love as well as respect."

Georges Mora is survived by his widow, Caroline Williams, and four sons, three from his first marriage to the artist Mirka Mora.

● A memorial tribute to Georges Mora will be held on Friday 26 June at noon at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Dallas Brooks Drive, South Yarra. This would have been Georges Mora's 79th birthday. PAGE 14: Obituary.