

Visual arts

Mr up-and-running eases off

By GEOFF MASLEN

A FRIEND once described Bob Edwards as a cross between Benny Hill and Field Marshal Montgomery. The reference was to Edwards' good humor and a joviality masking an iron resolve to get the job done.

"Bob who?" most people would probably say — even the 10 million Australians who visited the most famous blockbuster art exhibitions held in Australia. For although Edwards kept a low profile as head of Art Exhibitions Australia (AEA) — the body responsible for arranging the exhibitions — he was the key figure behind them. During his two spells as AEA chief executive, Edwards helped organise *The Gold of the Pharaohs*, *The Entombed Warriors from China*, *The French Impressionists*, as well as Monet, Rembrandt, Van Gogh, Renoir and Matisse exhibitions.

Patrick McCaughey, former director of the NGV, says Edwards enjoys international credibility among museum directors and curators that few Australians have had.

"The fact Australians can now see shows of Matisse and Van Gogh and God knows who else is because of what Bob has done. More than any other single person, he has raised the standard of exhibitions in Australia."

Now, after years of negotiating with galleries around the world, Edwards has stepped down. At the age of 65, however, he has certainly not retired. Indeed, following a recent lunch in Melbourne to mark

his departure from AEA, he headed to Geelong as a consultant in the project to establish a Guggenheim art gallery there.

The luncheon crowd included federal Arts Minister Julian McGauran, National Gallery of Victoria director Gerard Vaughan, State Librarian Fran Awcock, plus a couple of dozen other leaders from the arts, business and industrial worlds.

Speakers recalled how the 50 major exhibitions Edwards helped bring to Australia had generated a turnover of about \$75 million, plus \$25 million worth of private sponsorship. That's a \$100 million return on a one-off \$1 million investment from the Fraser Government in 1980.

Apart from his work in Geelong, Edwards has been appointed an adjunct professor at Curtin University, in Perth, as well as helping organise shows for the new National Museum of Australia whose council he chaired for six years. He retains links with the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra's Old Parliament House where he was also chair of the board.

After the then International Cultural Corporation of Australia — renamed AEA — was founded, Edwards became chief executive. Five years later, he was hired by the Victorian Labor Government to take over the Museum of Victoria.

He proposed relocating the museum to the south bank of the Yarra, near the National Gallery. When that proved too politically ambitious, he suggested splitting the

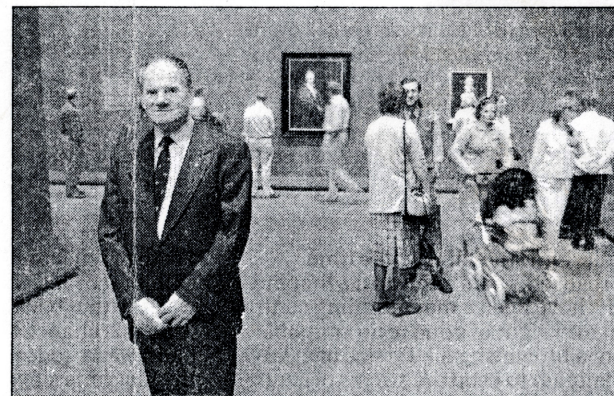
collection and setting it up at different venues. The popular ScienceWorks was built at Spotswood, and Labor agreed to a new museum further along South Bank.

Architects were hired, plans drawn up, foundations laid and construction begun. But the incoming Kennett Government in 1992 scrapped the scheme and announced the museum would be located on the Exhibition Building site. That decision cost more than \$20 million and was 'the end of Edwards' dream.

Exhausted from his efforts, he quit — to return to the AEA and the global wheeling-dealing.

FOR SOMEONE forced to leave school in Adelaide aged 15 to work on his family's vineyards, Edwards has an astonishing record of scholarly and public achievements. He began by conducting important work on early Aboriginal sites, spending months at a time over several years living with the Walbiri people in Central Australia where he was adopted into one of their kinship groups. Working among the Aborigines, he developed special techniques to photograph their early art and his illustrated reports stimulated its conservation.

"There was all sorts of evidence that Aboriginal art was very ancient," Edwards says. "But most Europeans believed the origins of cave art derived from France. It was supposed to have arrived in Aus-



Man of the people: Bob Edwards at the National Gallery of Victoria during the 1997 Rembrandt exhibition.

Picture: MARK WILSON

tralia in the last few hundred years and my claims that it was thousands of years old were regarded with great suspicion because I did not have a degree."

In the late 1960s, on a dig in the Northern Territory with Professor John Mulvaney, Edwards uncovered clear evidence that Aboriginal art was of enormous antiquity. He later became deputy principal of the Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and helped formulate programs to preserve Aboriginal sites. His studies in the 1970s of the rock art at Kakadu resulted in creation of the Kakadu National Park and its subsequent listing as a World Heritage site.

Edwards became a fellow of nine international scientific societies, with more than 100 articles and papers in anthropological and archaeological journals as well as several books to his name. He has been awarded an OA and an honorary Doctor of Laws.

Looking back, he says he has always preferred to be an initiator.

"Some people are there for the long haul but I like to get things up and running, then leave, so I don't become a crutch. Better to stimulate a project and let other people get the satisfaction from developing it. That's a procedure I've adopted many times — with the Aboriginal Arts Board, with the recording of Aboriginal sites, with all the art exhibitions — to demonstrate that these things could be done."

So will he ever slow down? Edwards says he still has a great deal to do, including finishing writing his studies on Aboriginal rock art and collating thousands of photographs.

"I want to use my experience and knowledge in whatever way I can," he says.

Which is the reason he agreed to help the people of Geelong review their cultural assets and perhaps get a Guggenheim gallery established there. That, and the fact that after 50 years of hyperactivity, he cannot abide the thought of sitting still.