



Left, Edwards at the Matisse exhibition at the Queensland Art Gallery. Top, a 16th century canteen from the Süleyman the Magnificent exhibition. Right, a jade burial suit from Imperial China.



CHINA CULTURAL RELICS PROMOTION CENTRE, TOPKAP SARAYI MUSEUM

PHOTOGRAPHY BY FIORA SACCO



Dr Robert Edwards has brought most of the recent blockbuster art exhibitions to Australia and has been instrumental in securing government recognition and protection of Aboriginal art and culture. So why haven't we heard of him before?
By GEOFFREY MASLEN.

Master of Arts

*For all experience is an arch wherethro'
Gleams that untravelled world, whose margin fades
For ever and ever when I move ...*

— *Ulysses* by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

The gang attacked Bob Edwards just as he had almost crossed Red Square. He was heading for Moscow's State History Museum when he was surrounded. At least 10 of them – all street kids – moved in close, jostling, pushing, shouting. Their hands frisked him, trying to open his jacket and attempting to wrench the two bags and the cameras he was carrying from his grasp.

Edwards wears well-cut suits and looks like a jovial bank manager, if that is not a contradiction in terms. He must have seemed an easy

mark to the gang, but he fought back fiercely. Concerned by the lack of security at his hotel, he had decided to carry his money, passport and all the important papers with him. So he vigorously resisted the attackers, hitting out with the bags while trying to break free.

He would certainly have lost the struggle and his belongings had two policemen not arrived. As they ran up, the youths took off leaving Edwards shaken but unhurt. It was his first visit to Russia and he was there to negotiate a loan from the museum of a major exhibition to show 1,000 years of Russian gold and



Edwards helped bring the famed Entombed Warriors from China exhibition (below) to Australia in 1983.



silver. Undeterred by the attack, he pressed on and conducted the negotiations as if nothing untoward had occurred ...

A YEAR LATER, with temperatures more than 20 degrees below freezing, Edwards was back in Moscow. This time it was to help pack the 300 priceless objects the museum had agreed to lend and place them in an armoured truck. He climbed aboard and as the small convoy drove off, Edwards saw that Red Square was crowded with Russians celebrating the October revolution – and the return of democracy. As he later remarked, it was like marching side by side with history.

With an armed escort, the truck went north to St Petersburg on the first 800 km leg of a trip that would bring the treasures of the tsars to Australia. Travelling night and day, the convoy turned west from St Petersburg and on to Vyborg near the border with Finland. There, Finnish police took charge. At Helsinki, the truck was loaded on to a big passenger ferry and, surrounded by other armed guards, was carried down the Baltic Sea to Lübeck in northern Germany.

From Lübeck, Edwards rode the truck as it was escorted by German security police to Cologne and then on to Frankfurt, where the collection was finally put on a plane. The biggest and most expensive exhibition of antique gold and silver objects – the first to be allowed out of the new Russian republic – was at last on its way to Sydney.

Few of the 150,000 people who saw the show in Australia in 1992 knew that to get so many precious pieces out of the State History Museum had involved Bob Edwards in detailed negotiations with government and museum officials from four nations – and the use of security police in three European countries.

Although the collection was indemnified for tens of millions of dollars by the Federal Government, it insisted Edwards be present at all times during the trip. Yet despite the danger and the complex route – there were doubts whether the gold pieces would have got through Moscow airport safely – this was one of the relatively simple challenges Edwards has faced.

When he returned a collection of Renoir paintings to their various owners after the tour of Australia earlier this year, there were 34 stops in the US, France, Spain and

Britain and he was on the road or in the air for five weeks. But even that marathon pales beside the complexities of organising the current exhibition of works by the famed French artist Henri Matisse.

Initiated by the Queensland Art Gallery, the show has been 10 years in the planning. With gallery director Doug Hall and his deputy Caroline Turner as key players, Bob Edwards helped negotiate the loan of the 270 paintings, drawings, prints and sculptures from 54 public galleries and private collectors in six countries. It was, he says, like organising 54 separate exhibitions.

The logistics of arranging the loans and the multi-million-dollar indemnification from the Federal and two State governments – not to mention flying 26 couriers with the works to Brisbane from all over the globe – seems all the more amazing when one realises that Bob Edwards has a staff of seven.

*I cannot rest from travel ...
For always roaming with a hungry heart
Much have I seen and known; cities
of men
And manners, climates, councils,
governments.*
– Ulysses

SMALL NUMBERS or not, in his two spells as head of Art Exhibitions Australia over the past 15 years, Edwards has organised the biggest and best blockbuster exhibitions to have come to this country. They include Gold of the Pharaohs, the Entombed Warriors from China, the French Impressionists and, more recently, the Monet, Van Gogh,

Renoir and Matisse exhibitions. Coming up over the next two years are the first full-scale retrospective of the work of Tom Roberts and a remarkable show of paintings by Rembrandt.

The 39 major exhibitions the AEA has brought to Australia have been seen by 10 million people and have generated a turnover of \$65 million,

along with \$18 million worth of private sponsorship. The cost of mounting the Matisse exhibition alone is \$4.5 million, so 2,000 Australians a day will have to pay to see it if AEA is to recover the outlay.

For most visitors to AEA events, it would be a case of Dr Bob who? But within art gallery and museum circles in Australia, and around the world, Edwards's reputation is extraordinary.

"He is known by most of the people who work in the internationally important institutions," says Simon Levie, a



European art consultant and director for almost 15 years of the famous Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. "Bob is a dear friend and a man I admire very much. Apart from a deep understanding of Aboriginal art and culture – about which he speaks very movingly – he has a broad knowledge of art in general."

According to Patrick McCaughey, the flamboyant former director of the National Gallery of Victoria, Bob Edwards is "a splendid person of super-human powers who seems immune to jet lag". Speaking from the Wadsworth Atheneum Gallery in Connecticut, US, where he is director, McCaughey says Edwards enjoys an international credibility among museum directors and curators few Australians have had.

"The fact you now see shows of Matisse and Van Gogh and God knows who else is because of what Edwards has done," says McCaughey. "More than any other single person, he has raised the standard of exhibitions being seen in Australia."

Apart from an uncanny ability to establish warm relations with people in every walk of life – "He is living proof that to have a friend, you have to be one," says Joseph Brown, one of Australia's most noted collectors and dealers – Edwards's greatest attribute is an irrepressible enthusiasm coupled with a drive to succeed.

"Bob is a cross between Benny Hill and Field Marshal Montgomery," a friend once observed, referring to the ever-present good humour that masks an iron resolve.

Here is someone who was forced to drop out of school at 15. Yet he has been recognised with an Order of Australia, awarded an honorary Doctor of Laws, appointed curator of anthropology at the South Australian Museum, was deputy principal of the Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, founding director of the Aboriginal Arts Board, inaugural executive director of the International Cultural Corporation (now the AEA), first director of a newly amalgamated Museum of Victoria, and is now, once again, head of AEA.

In more than 30 years of public life, he has accepted an astonishing array of appointments to government committees and the councils or boards of public organisations. He is a fellow of nine international scientific societies, has published more than 100 articles and papers in anthropological and archaeological journals, as well as several books, and has the unenviable task of currently chairing the council of the National Museum of Australia in Canberra.

So much for being deprived of a tertiary education ...

*How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use!
As tho' to breathe were life – Ulysses*

BOB EDWARDS was born in Adelaide and went to a boys' technical high school, but had to leave at 15 to work on the historic family vineyards of Marion and Seaview at McLaren Vale. He recalls once being sent by his father to apply for a cadetship in the State Agriculture Department. Treated brusquely by its director and told there was no position for him, he decided never again to be so humiliated. "I vowed I would never apply for a job. If anyone wanted me to work for them, they would have to ask."

In his early years, Edwards became a horticulturalist and eventually employed a large staff in extensive fruit growing, market gardening and winemaking. At the age of 30, after being invited to take the post, he was appointed marketing director for the South Australian fruit industry and was responsible for planning and supervising annual sales of \$4 million of produce locally and overseas. He instituted the first industry market survey and developed a stabilisation plan for the orderly marketing of successive fruit crops.

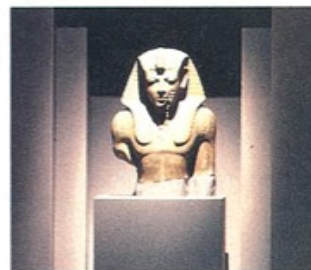
From an early age, however, he had been fascinated by Australian history and pored over books and maps and manuscripts. As a young man, he joined expeditions to different regions across South Australia to study sites linked to Aboriginal prehistory. He became friends with Professor John Mulvaney, an archaeologist at the Australian National University, and worked with him excavating cave sites.

Old photographs show him among the Warlpiri people at Yuendumu in Central Australia, where he was privileged to be adopted into one of their kinship groups. Unlike the portly figure of today, he was slim and curly haired. Thirty years on, though, he looks remarkably youthful and still retains his great zest for life.

As Queensland gallery director Doug Hall says, "Bob is like the family Labrador who always greets you with infectious enthusiasm. But beneath that charm is someone with enormous intelligence, a tremendous background in a range of cultural areas – and one of the best networkers you will ever find."

"In terms of Australian cultural policy,"

"Bob Edwards is like a cross between Benny Hill and Field Marshal Montgomery," a friend observed, referring to the ever-present good humour that masks an iron resolve.



Funeral masks from the 1988 Gold of the Pharaohs exhibition.



he adds, "over the last few decades, Bob Edwards has been a critical influence in raising awareness among governments and their agencies about Aboriginal material culture, developing new museums, the importance of touring exhibitions, and what it all means to Australia."

Late in 1965, Edwards became curator of anthropology at the South Australian Museum. Just prior to the appointment, he had led a six-month field investigation to the Northern Territory to locate and evaluate Aboriginal art and sacred sites in remote parts of Arnhem Land and Central Australia. He developed special techniques to photograph and record Aboriginal art and his illustrated reports and books stimulated public interest in the conservation of Aboriginal heritage.

"There was all sorts of evidence that Aboriginal art was very ancient and one of the simplest was the fact that cave and rock paintings had been found in Tasmania and on the islands of Bass Strait," he says. "I had postulated that the tradition must have been taken there by the people migrating across the land bridge, which was intact 15,000 years ago. But most Europeans believed the origins of cave art derived from France and that the technique had spread down through Spain, North Africa and South Africa.

"By the time the idea had reached Australia, it was supposed to have been in the last few hundred years. My claims that

the art was very ancient were regarded with great suspicion because I did not have a degree. I had a hard time for years – not that I was thought a crackpot, but my credibility was under question."

Then, on a dig with Mulvaney in the Northern Territory in the late 1960s, Edwards uncovered a rock that had dropped off a cliff face millennia before. It carried carvings of emu and kangaroo tracks and had fallen into a campfire whose charcoal was carbon-dated and found to be 10,000 years old.

"The evidence was overwhelming that Australian Aboriginal art was a separate development of enormous antiquity. And while dating at other sites later pushed cave painting back beyond that 10,000-year point, my main contribution was to demonstrate that this was an issue worth studying. It was terribly important, not just for archaeology, but for Aborigines to be able to say, 'Our art, our heritage is among the oldest in the world.'"

Edwards later became deputy principal of the new Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in Canberra and used his networking skills and ability as a communicator to formulate programs for the preservation of Aboriginal monuments, antiquities and sites. It was largely through his efforts that protective legislation was enacted in most States.

One of his most important contributions, however, was a study in the early

1970s of the rock art at Kakadu on the South and West Alligator rivers east of Darwin. His work resulted in the creation of the huge Kakadu National Park and the area's subsequent listing on the World Heritage List.

Meantime, he had married his wife Cath and while Edwards was away, often for months at a time, it was Cath Edwards who looked after their four sons, kept house and awaited his return. When he did come back, Cath helped him with his work, spending entire weekends in his office typing up his notes and letters. If one person has contributed most to Bob Edwards's career, it is Catherine Edwards.

*This is my son, mine own
Telemachus,
To whom I leave the sceptre and the
isle,
Most blameless is he, centred in
the sphere
Of common duties, decent not to
fail ...
He works his work, I mine – Ulysses*

WHAT IS it that drives one human being to follow knowledge like a sinking star, someone who, like Ulysses, cannot rest from travel while others are content to sit at home or work in the one job all their lives? "I tend to be a starter, an initiator,"

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Bob Edwards says. "But I don't stay on so I become a crutch for the whole subject. Better to stimulate a project and let other people get the satisfaction of developing it. It is a procedure I've adopted many times – with the Aboriginal Arts Board, with the recording of Aboriginal sites, with exhibitions; to demonstrate that these things could be done."

In 1975, Edwards was appointed founding director of the Aboriginal Arts Board under the newly formed Australia Council. The board comprised Aboriginal people from across Australia and its role was to develop and implement an entirely new arts program to advance Aboriginal arts and culture – from drama and dance, to music, painting, sculpture, crafts and film. During the next five years, the board, with Edwards directing, organised the first exhibitions of Aboriginal art, along with musicians and performers, ever to go overseas and the 17 shows travelled to 48 countries.

Hank Ebes, a Dutch-born Melbourne businessman and art dealer, says it was through Bob Edwards that his fascination with Aboriginal art began.

"What he has done to promote the art of Australian Aborigines around the world is enormous," says Ebes. "I can't speak highly enough of him, yet he's always in the background. If there's a big exhibition, it is others who take the glory at the opening, but it is Bob who has done

the hard work getting the paintings here."

The experience Edwards gained in organising international touring exhibitions led to a career shift in 1980. Not surprisingly, when the Fraser government was looking around for someone to head a new body to manage cultural exchanges, it was him they asked.

The International Cultural Corporation of Australia was set up as an independent company with a \$1 million seeding grant from the Federal government – the only public subsidy it has ever received.

Its role was to liaise with the State museums and galleries, and the various government departments and agencies, to manage international exhibitions. Over the next 15 years, the corporation – later to become Art Exhibitions Australia – brought a series of spectacular shows to Australia: from Chinese paintings of the Ming and Qing dynasties, to costumes from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, from Japanese masterpieces to Leonardo da Vinci's anatomical drawings.

Then, in 1984, Bob Edwards was invited to take charge of the Museum of Victoria and its newly amalgamated natural history and science wings. He remained a director of the International Cultural Corporation of Australia while starting at the museum in 1985, immediately shaking the dust off the run-down Swanston Street treasure-house and planning an ambitious new institution.

Although the museum undoubtedly had the greatest collection of artefacts in Australia, it had suffered from 50 years of government neglect. Edwards proposed shifting the museum to the south bank of the Yarra, near the National Gallery and the arts complex, and creating an antipodean version of the Pompidou Centre in Paris.

When that scheme proved too imaginative for jaded political palates, he put forward a plan to split the museum's huge collection into several sections and locate them at different venues across the State.

Eventually, a highly popular science centre was built at Spotswood, near Williamstown, and the Labor government

Edwards left staff at the museum feeling cynical. Even he couldn't overcome political ineptitude. After 10 years, and as many changes of government mind, it is in a worse state than when he arrived.

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agreed to build a big new museum further along the south bank. Although architects were hired, plans drawn up, foundations laid and construction begun, the incoming Kennett Government in 1992 scrapped the scheme and announced that the museum would be located instead on the Exhibition Building site. The decision not only meant the loss of more than \$20 million that had already been spent, it was also the end of Bob Edwards's dream.

Perhaps suspecting that this might happen, Edwards had quit the museum to return to his old post at Art Exhibitions Australia. He had been probably the most dynamic head of any public institution in Victoria's history, squeezing at least a decade's work into his five years at the museum and wreaking more changes than any of his predecessors over the previous 130 years. But, despite his undoubted skills at managing people and his drive and enthusiasm, Edwards left many of the staff at the museum disillusioned and cynical. He had seemed to offer so much, yet even he could not overcome the collapse of the Labor government and the State's finances.

Ten years, and as many changes of government mind, have left the Museum of Victoria in a worse state than when Edwards arrived.

*But something ere the end,
Some work of noble note,
may yet be done*

*Not unbecoming men that strove
with Gods*
— Ulysses

NEVER ONE to look back, Bob Edwards is on the move again, preparing plans for more great exhibitions. He rejects criticisms that the day of the blockbuster is over, or that the international shows brought out here are subject to extravagant hype.

"It is something of a treadmill because the public does expect each exhibition to be better than the last," he says. "But you have to think how difficult it is for a gallery with a limited collection and limited funds to sustain an ongoing program. The cost of acquiring art is so enormous that for a modern museum to attract an audience and give people insights into the world of art, it must bring some of the best of that art here from the international network of galleries and museums."

There is another point. "Why," he asks, "should Australians be denied access to the world's heritage because some believe they should only see what is in a local gallery? I don't think that's acceptable. On my last trip to America, several gallery curators were amazed at our attendance figures for the Renoir exhibition which attracted 380,000 people. They said that had the pictures stayed on the walls of their museums, perhaps 20,000 people would have seen them. 'In

a way,' they said, 'Australia can be an extension of our audience and it is much more satisfying for us to feel that 380,000 people have had the chance to appreciate these works.' I thought that was quite a generous attitude."

Despite his tendency to hop on an aeroplane at the drop of an entry ticket, Edwards declares that if he never saw another aircraft it would be too soon. Yet he will be off again overseas shortly, negotiating with museums and galleries in Asia, Europe and America to bring some of their treasures to Australia.

So what does he get out of all the time and effort he puts in?

"It's the feeling you get as an anonymous person when you mingle with a crowd at a museum on a Sunday afternoon, who are enjoying something you made possible. There are times when a gallery might have up to 7,000 people visit an exhibition on a Sunday. Hearing their comments, feeling that they are inspired, stimulated ... It's a very personal response."

"Life has been good to me, so I feel I have the chance to give something back for people to enjoy. I've also had years of experience at this game and it would seem silly to waste it if I were simply to retire and sit around at home."

Geoffrey Maslen is a Melbourne-based writer. The Matisse exhibition opens at the Australian National Gallery in Canberra on May 27. It then moves to the National Gallery of Victoria on July 19.



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