



AG SA

Issue 52
Spring 2023



Bob Edwards with members of the Royal Family, photos: Edwards Family archive

Dr Robert (Bob) Edwards, AO

When considering the inspirational and transformative figures of Australian cultural institutions, none could compare to the charming, tactful, and visionary Dr Robert Edwards, AO. He made a tremendous contribution, not only to the way Australians countrywide engage with and experience art, culture and history, but also to the international reputation of Australian institutions abroad. Despite this, his immense influence was mostly unnoticed by the public, as Edwards's commitment was not to personal advancement, but unwaveringly to the common good.

Edwards was essential to the development of the Australian cultural sector from the 1970s. Notably, as Chair of the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council, he participated in the Piggott Report, which recommended the creation of a national museum. While his recommendation was not adopted at the time and languished in the desk drawers of Canberra, Edwards was key to keeping the dream alive, and amongst other achievements, such as being instrumental to the foundation of the National Portrait Gallery, he became the chairman of the newly inaugurated National Museum in Canberra in 1990.

Bob Edwards cultivated several lasting friendships internationally, placing Australian art galleries and cultural institutions on the world stage. In 2023 the esteemed visual art critic John McDonald wrote of Edwards's ability to bring major works of art to Australia: 'One thinks of Matisse's grandson, Claude Duthuit, who arranged for the landmark 2011 survey of Matisse's works on paper to be held in Brisbane, *solely* because of his friendship with Bob'.

McDonald further notes that Australia is often considered 'too distant and obscure' by art journalists and curators in Europe and America, and that Edwards sought successfully to challenge that:

Bob directly challenged this perception with influential museum directors, convincing them that Australia was

a worthy place to send major works and exhibitions. He stimulated their curiosity, brought them out on memorable trips, and showed consummate hospitality. They went home with a very different idea of this country and a new willingness to work with local institutions.

As a founder and director of Art Exhibitions Australia (AEA), Edwards brought many significant international exhibitions to Australia. During this time he never forgot his hometown of Adelaide. He was instrumental in ensuring that AGSA was included in the tour of many blockbuster exhibitions. In the seventeen years that Edwards was at the helm of AEA (1981–98) AGSA received fifteen major exhibitions. He also gifted works of art to AGSA, including a Hans Heysen drawing and James Doveton Stone painting.

Edwards was key to global and national recognition of Aboriginal art, and he broke ground in post-colonial Australia by elevating Aboriginal culture to its rightful place as an integral part of the nation's heritage. Edwards's experience in researching Aboriginal cultural material was first recognised by his appointment as Curator of Australian Ethnology at the South Australian Museum in 1965. He was instrumental in the appointment of Darby Ross Jampijinpa as the first curator of the Yuendumu Men's Museum in 1971. Perhaps most notably, Edwards was key to the founding of the aforementioned Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council in 1975, ensuring the body's commitment to Aboriginal art and artists, not only as ethnography but as a significant agent for change and development of the sector.

With the loss of Bob Edwards, Australia has lost a gentle, magnanimous giant of our cultural institutions. Though his contribution to the field remains largely unsung, the shapes of our cities' landscapes, and the nature of the public's free engagement with the arts, was immeasurably transformed by his endless passion and influence. The Art Gallery of South Australia wishes to provide its heartfelt condolences to his family.