

BETTY CHURCHER AO

1931-2015



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Painter, teacher, art critic, television host, author, scriptwriter and, of course, gallery director, Betty Churcher played a central role in promoting the visual arts in Australia. Even in the last years, she showed no signs of slowing down as she published five books and gave interviews and lectures around Australia. She is remembered at the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) for not only her role as director, but also for how rigorously she researched the topics which were the subject of her later work in television and writing.

Betty Churcher's faith in and support of staff and her openness to new ideas characterised her approach to leadership. She demonstrated great trust in her colleagues and her commitment was returned in kind. People were free to express ideas, and there were some radical ones, but Betty always showed bravery in encouraging and challenging her staff and the public to see art and art museums in new ways. She is remembered as intelligent, charming, courteous and committed and she approached her work with an infectious vigour and determination. This resolve carried her through life.

As a child of the Depression and a young woman (her father believed 'education spoiled a girl'), her schooling almost came to an abrupt end after Year 10. However, Betty was fortunate to find a passionate ally in her headmistress at Somerville House in Brisbane, who fought for her to complete her senior studies. Betty then went on to further her education in London and to forge a path for women to take senior positions in the arts in Australia. She was the first woman to head a tertiary institution and the first female director of any state gallery and of the NGA.

Betty was a pioneer. Between 1972 and 1975, she was an art critic for *The Australian* newspaper. She was Dean of the School of Art and Design and taught Art History at the progressive Phillip Institute of Technology (now part of RMIT University). Importantly, she became the first female director of a state art gallery when she was appointed Director of the Art Gallery of Western Australia, serving from 1987 to 1990.

She was subsequently appointed director of the NGA in 1990 and her vision to make art accessible to all drove new strategies and new approaches. During her seven-year tenure as director, Betty's contributions to developing the National Gallery and to promoting understanding of the arts in Australia were great. She not only loved building the collection – most notably in securing Arthur Streeton's *Golden Summer, Eaglemont* 1889, because it was the last of the truly iconic Heidelberg School paintings to remain in private hands – but also thinking about what a young national gallery should and could be doing beyond the realm of the nation's already established state galleries.

During her time, she brought the world's very best art to Australia thanks to her charm and tenacity and, for it, was labelled 'Betty Blockbuster'. It was an epithet that began a little ambiguously but soon became one of justified praise as she brought record crowds to the NGA. She worked successfully with Chairman Kerry Stokes, whose marketing and media experience provided a perfect complement.

What the National Gallery could not buy it would borrow. Her response to detractors of this idea was that audiences would come to see the blockbuster and stay for

the permanent collection. Her consistent aim was to give people the confidence to enjoy art, to see its relevance and to broaden its audience. But it was not just about popularising art; she wanted to speak to visitors, not speak down to them. As Edmund Capon once put it, she ‘embraced both the scholar and the public at large’.

These blockbusters were events that attracted people from around Australia and did wonders for Canberra tourism. They included *The Age of Angkor* (1992), *Rubens and the Italian Renaissance* (1992), *Rembrandt to Renoir* (1992–3) and *Matisse* (1993). These were important shows lent by major institutions from around the world, including our own region, but the first one that could truly be called ‘ours’ (that is, it was not a packaged show but was curated by professionals here) was *Surrealism: Revolution by Night* (1993). Also under Betty’s reign, Turner’s two great oil paintings of the burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons came together for the first time outside America in the seminal 1996 exhibition *Turner. Of Rubens and the Italian Renaissance*, Betty recently said ‘It was almost too difficult to do, but not too difficult to do. And we did it’. This persistence, this obsession, her drive to do what was right despite resistance, was what spurred her to accomplish the impossible.

But it was not all about the blockbusters. Shows such as the insightful and poignant 1994 exhibition *Don’t leave me this way* showed real courage in tackling the challenging topic of HIV and was the first to do so at a national gallery anywhere in the world. Betty also initiated the building of a dedicated space for major temporary exhibitions, opened the year after her departure from the Gallery. And, perhaps most importantly, the world’s estimation of Australian visual arts went up during her time. As Neil Macgregor, Director of the British Museum and former Director of the National Gallery in London, said of Betty in a tribute recently published in the NGA’s *Artonview*:

In her time as Director of the National Gallery of Australia, Betty Churcher became for people in the arts world wide, *the* representative of the new Australia, and has brought the Canberra gallery into the mainstream of international exhibitions. She has come close to ousting the koala bear as the nation’s symbol abroad; if (perhaps) a little less cuddly, she is just as much loved, and much more highly respected.

Betty’s executive assistant at the time remembers Betty fondly as ‘a great storyteller’:

Whether it was at the end of a busy day in the late afternoon in her office overlooking Lake Burley Griffin when the early evening light would transform Mount Ainslie into an Arthur Boyd painting or walking through the galleries, always

at a fast clip and with purpose, and watching Betty engage with visitors about a work of art they were looking at and in her utterly charming and inclusive way revealing a small detail that would bring sheer joy to their faces. Betty made the Gallery welcoming for visitors and was an inspirational communicator and leader and a fabulous person to work closely with.

Australia has produced many great arts administrators. Betty, however, was different and special. She studied art above all and developed those life-long skills which enabled her to articulate how a work of art was made. She was an associate and graduate of the Royal College of Art, London and gained an MA from the Courtauld Institute of Art at the University of London, but she used her artist’s eye in everything she did. A recipient of four honorary doctorates, she was a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities and Adjunct Professor of the Centre for Cross Cultural Research at the Australian National University.

After leaving the NGA, Betty maintained strong ties and could often be found in the aisles of the Research Library, hunting down and capturing words once remembered or making new discoveries to tell a story. She was an engrossing and informative storyteller and, while she was interested above all in making people curious about art, she never ignored the detail, the depth, the rigour and the authority one must bring to the tale. She went to great lengths even for the most simply told stories, such as her television shorts *Take 5. Take 5, Eye to Eye* and *Hidden Treasures* communicated her warmth and sheer delight in looking at art. These were the programs that secured her ‘household name’ status.

Always the educator, Betty wrote several books, including *Understanding Art*, *Molvig: The Lost Antipodean*, *The Art of War*, and her beguiling personal art journals *Notebooks* and *Australian Notebooks*.

Betty most admired art that was created from ‘an absolute, sheer necessity’. The unwavering passion that artists bring to their work is precisely what Betty brought to her lifetime of achievement in the sector and particularly as an enthusiastic art educator. For her many accomplishments, she was awarded membership of the Order of Australia in 1990 and became an AO in 1996.

Until the end, Betty continued to research and write and, with the help of family, finalised her third ‘Notebook’, to be published posthumously. Her lifetime of educating visitors to the NGA, and those with whom she connected via television, constitutes a powerful legacy.

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