

Ms Mari Ann Lewis

The degree of Doctor of Fine Arts (honoris causa) was conferred upon Mari Ann Lewis in 2001.

Citation

Chancellor, I have the honour to present Mari Ann Lewis for the conferring of the degree of Doctor of Fine Arts (honoris causa).

Ann Lewis is being recognised for a lifetime of nurturing, promoting and exhibiting the work of Australian artists. Her remarkable career began in the in the 1950's when she studied art history as a non-matriculated student.

She first became publicly recognised in the 1960s as co-founder of Gallery A in Melbourne and director of the Gallery in Sydney. Her aim was to provide exhibition space for Australian artists.

Through this commercial enterprise, many Australian artists gained international recognition, especially in the United States, and American artists were exhibited extensively at Gallery A. In 1972, she was elected to the International Council of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, became its Vice-President in 1993, and for twenty-eight years therefore has been an ambassador in the United States for the arts in Australia.

In Australia in the 1970s, she became prominent in arts administration. She was one of the first people appointed to the Visual Arts Board, and later became its Chairman from 1980-83. She was a director of the Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Company, and, in this role, worked to provide exhibition spaces and marketing strategies for indigenous art. Indeed, she was one of the first people to recognise the importance of its developments and thus to draw attention to its potential.

At this time too, the University benefited from her generosity. She made available to the Slide Library of the Power Institute, thousands of slides which recorded every painting and sculpture shown at Gallery A during her years there. These are the basis of a significant research collection. Mrs Lewis also became a founding member of the John Power Foundation for the Fine Arts, which is a body of friends of the Power Institute.

When, in 1982, the National Gallery opened in Canberra, Mrs Lewis chaired the Founding Donors campaign. This group mobilised the private support needed to augment the public subsidy. She has remained a strong supporter of the Gallery's programs, and now serves on its Council.

Despite her many public activities, Mrs Lewis does not seek the limelight. She has generously and privately supported many projects and individual artists. When a particular board of which she was a member got into financial difficulties, she solved the problem herself on condition that her help was never revealed.

If we look closely at the beginnings of almost every major initiative in the visual arts in Australia during the last thirty years, Mrs Lewis's influence is evident. She has worked quietly and constructively in the service of the creative artistic future of this country.

She has great organisational skills and oversaw national touring exhibitions as Chair of the Australian Exhibitions Touring Agency. I am told that this was a project particularly dear to the heart of a girl from Moree. That same body extended its influence to the Venice Biennale where Ann had the rare distinction of serving twice as Commissioner for Australia in the 1990's.

She is a passionate enthusiast, with a remarkable eye for art, and she has devoted herself to enabling artists to develop their talents, and the public to appreciate their work.

Chancellor, I have great pleasure in presenting to you, for admission to the degree of Doctor of Fine Arts (honoris causa), Mari Ann Lewis, administrator par excellence, patron of and ambassador for Australian art and artists. I invite you to confer the degree upon her.