

The recipient of the inaugural Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art Medal is a man whose extraordinary vision for the future of the Gallery turned our gaze towards the Asia Pacific region, and ultimately led to the creation of the Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art. Here, Director **Chris Saines, CNZM**, gratefully acknowledges this remarkable man and his significant contribution.

The Gallery MEDAL



This spring, we honour the extraordinary vision and dedication of the late Richard WL Austin, AO, OBE (1919–2000), a former Chair of the Queensland Art Gallery Board of Trustees, by awarding him the inaugural Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art Medal for distinguished and outstanding service. The medal honours Austin's far-sighted and enduring achievement, turning our gaze toward the Asia Pacific region by variously supporting, initiating and urging, from 1989, a Japanese–Australian exchange exhibition of contemporary art; from 1992, pushing for the Six Old Kilns project and the Kenneth and Yasuko Myer Collection of Contemporary Asian Art; and, from 1993, the Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art — with each marking a signal moment in our recent history.

During his term as Chair of the Board (1987–1995), Richard (Dick) Austin profoundly influenced the Gallery's development as it expanded into its new Queensland Cultural Centre building. Fluent in several Asian languages as a result of his career in the Department of Foreign Affairs, and a serious collector of traditional Japanese and Australian art, his appointment as Chair — which coincided with that of Doug Hall, AM, as Director — signalled a major shift in the institution's direction. From the outset, Austin actively encouraged the Gallery to take a more serious and engaged account of historical and contemporary Asian art, just as Australia was forging closer links with the region.

Looking back at the last 25 years, it is clear that Richard Austin's leadership was instrumental in shaping and building the Gallery's now internationally renowned collection of Asian and Pacific art. As Chair, in concert with the Board, Director and staff, Austin pushed for exchange exhibitions with both Japan and China. He visited Japan twice with Hall in the late 1980s and, using his extensive network of government and corporate contacts, succeeded in securing over half a million dollars from six Japanese companies. These monies were put towards a newly established Exhibitions Development Fund, directed at bringing international blockbuster exhibitions to Queensland.

Austin and Hall were further responsible for instigating an event that would showcase the contemporary art of a region that was, at the time, vastly underrepresented in major public galleries across Australia. 'The First Asia-Pacific Triennial of Art' (APT1) was launched in 1993, successfully materialising Austin's tireless efforts to promote a dialogue between the Gallery and the art and artists of East Asia and the Pacific Rim. APT1 was the first exhibition in the world to focus exclusively on the contemporary art of Australia, Asia and the Pacific, and it attracted over 60 000 visitors. It placed the Queensland Art Gallery on the international map and now draws more than half a million visitors.

In recognition of Austin's distinguished service, his remarkable foresight and his skill as a wordsmith, the Gallery published *View from the Chair: Speeches of Richard WL Austin* in 1997, following the second Asia Pacific Triennial exhibition the previous year. Little could we grasp at the time how strong that wave would turn out to be: the APT was initially planned to occur on three occasions, its continuation subject to review. Over the years that followed, the Triennial's spectacular rise in critical and popular acclaim, as well as its escalating importance within artistic circles, has entrenched it as the Gallery's flagship program.

Looking back at the breadth and weight of his influence in the history of our institution, we believe that Austin's invaluable legacy deserves to be honoured again, taking into account the immense significance of his vision to the Gallery's future and the enduring momentum it inspired: for example, the strategic vision for QAGOMA for the years 2014–19, recently adopted by the current Board of Trustees under the leadership of Professor Susan Street, AO, is 'To be the leading institution for the contemporary art of Australia, Asia and the Pacific'. In effect, Austin's legacy lives on and flourishes in the present-day life and future direction of the Gallery.