

# Life after Mollison at the ANG

PAT GILMOUR\* reflects on next month's change of command at the Australian National Gallery which puts a woman into the nation's top art job

On February 2, Betty Churcher will follow the Founding Director, James Mollison, into Australia's top art job at the National Gallery in Canberra. Hailed as "a giant among directors", Mollison's 17-year reign has been described as "a hard act to follow" and one journalist reporting the new appointment was patronisingly moved to ask: "...Can Churcher cope?"

In fact, as the myth of Mollison is gradually disentangled from the reality, his act may not prove as hard to follow as all that.

Successful women, it can be argued, need to be a great deal tougher and more highly qualified than men to be appointed to comparable positions. While Mollison has few academic qualifications and has said he was originally appointed Acting Director of ANG "because Sonia McMahon [wife of the then Prime Minister, Billy McMahon] liked me so much", Churcher has excelled in every discipline she has tackled. Moreover, her career — as the first woman head of an Australian tertiary art institution (the School of Art and Design at Phillip Institute of Technology in Victoria) and first woman director of a state gallery (in WA) — has been achieved in addition to rearing four, now adult, sons.

From the beginning, her path has been strewn with honours. Taught art at Somerville House in Brisbane, Churcher won a scholarship through the Young Artists' Group of the Royal Queensland Art Society which took her to London in 1952. She was awarded the Princess of Wales Scholarship as the most outstanding female entrant to the highly competitive Royal College of Art and emerged in 1956 with the coveted Drawing Prize and the Major Travelling Scholarship as well, a grant which made it possible for her to undertake intensive study in Europe before returning to Brisbane. Following many years in high school and teacher education in Queensland, she returned to London in 1977 to study art history at London University's Courtauld Institute and polished off an MA degree in half

the normal time. An acclaimed author, her *Understanding Art* (which, in 1974, won the award given by *The Times* of London as the "best information book") provided a morale-boosting model in the war against cultural cringe by integrating Australian examples into a world overview of all the arts. In 1984, she published her substantial scholarly biography of Jon Molvig, *The Lost Antipodean*.

So what will Churcher inherit from Mollison at the ANG?

Without a doubt, his greatest legacy arises from his energetic determination to extend beyond parochial nationalism, allowing his impressive multi-media representation of Australian art to be seen alongside the art of the rest of the world. He also introduced to Australia — and reinforced by his catholicity — a greater understanding of the fact that art does not consist exclusively of edge-to-edge oil painting but is essentially a communication in emotions and ideas embracing the complete range of media.

It has been no mean feat to sustain such a program in the face of the gallery's current council, chaired by Gough Whitlam, which has been described by Mollison himself as a group of persons "unable to hold their place in a serious art argument" and by Daniel Thomas, president of the Art Museums Association, as "the worst governing body of any art institution in Australia".

Yet at a time when the Government's paltry allotment of \$3.2 million removes any ability Australia once had to compete in the market for modernist paintings — a Manet, a Picasso and Van Gogh's *Iris*, all of relatively minor significance, having changed hands in recent times for \$US14 million, \$US29 million and \$US53.9 million respectively — Mollison's openness to art has permitted Australia to excel in a number of less costly areas. These have included some magisterial Asian textiles, soon to be exhibited, and an in-depth representation of international artists' prints and illustrated books, several aspects of which are of world class.



The breadth of Mollison's collecting policy has not been without its problems, however. Even in the halcyon days of the 70s when money flowed a little more freely and went much further, the policy of collecting 35 "great works" to illustrate "decisive moments" in art before 1850 was intellectually untenable. But even when funds evaporated, Mollison was unable to let go. The threadbare results can be seen in Gallery 1, where the plaque dedicating the space to Loti and Victor Smorgon (in recognition of a gift of \$1 million) commands nearly as much attention as the pictures, the majority of which would not rate a second glance in a European or American gallery.

Galleries 1, 2 and 3 are consequently already scheduled for reorganisation. With any luck, this will see *Blue Poles* — a picture about boundless energy and illimitable space which paradoxically needs to be contained — displayed, at last, to proper advantage, instead of being stuck like a postage stamp on unsympathetic wastes of bush-hammered concrete.

Hanging pictures was never Mollison's strong suit: his widely publicised valedictory rearrangement of the galleries of Australian art inspired so much muttering