

## A TWENTY-YEAR RELATIONSHIP

### L. Gordon Darling in conversation with Roger Butler, Senior Curator of Australian Prints and Drawings, 2003

Gordon Darling, Chairman of the Australian National Gallery Council (June 1982–December 1986), first donated funds for the acquisition of contemporary Australian prints to celebrate the opening of the Gallery in 1982; then, in Australia's bicentennial year 1988, he established the Gordon Darling Australasian Print Fund with a capital grant of \$1,000,000.<sup>1</sup>

**Roger Butler** *Your initial gift of \$10,000 in 1982 was directed towards the acquisition of contemporary Australian prints, an already generous donation which you increased a hundred-fold in 1988 in setting up the Gordon Darling Australasian Print Fund. Why did you choose contemporary Australian prints?*

**Gordon Darling** I think I was finally convinced by James Mollison. We were discussing what area of Australian art would most benefit and he made the point that the ability to draw well was a characteristic of great artists. Following on from that it seemed appropriate that a fund should be established to encourage young Australian artists to create quality prints. Their acquisition would be a valuable contemporary supplement to the Gallery's already pre-eminent Australian print collection. At about that time I visited the Royal Academy in London to see a Cezanne exhibition — half of the exhibition consisted of his works on paper and the other half, his paintings. It hit me then exactly what James had said, and confirmed for me how the fund could help young artists in Australia. That's how it developed.

*So it was partly to do with the collection, and building a national collection, but also to do with encouraging Australian artists.*

Absolutely. It was building on what the British Museum calls a 'critical mass'. And there was the fascination of encouraging young artists. I had been told by Fred Williams just before he died that this was a responsibility we should take very seriously; and it was seeing the exhibitions of contemporary art sponsored by Philip Morris also emphasising the importance of young artists. As a young national institution it seemed logical to me.

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<sup>1</sup> Since 1989 acquisitions of contemporary prints post-1960) have been purchased through the Gordon Darling Australasian Print Fund. These acquisitions have been wide ranging and include work of established artists such as Bea Maddock and John Olsen, younger artists such as Bronwyn Piggott and Ken Orchard, and those who were new to printmaking such as Mike Parr. Selective acquisitions from alternative print workshops have continued. In collaboration with the former Senior Curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art, Wally Caruana, and continued by his successor, Brenda L. Croft, a unique collection of prints by Indigenous artists has also been established, now numbering over 1,000 works from 1968 to the present. This collection includes Koori artists such as Karen Casey who works in Melbourne, as well traditional artists such as Banduk Marika from Yirrkala and Bede Tungutalum from Nguuu, Bathurst Island. A concerted effort has been made to acquire prints by first and second generation Australians and, more recently, produced by migrants from Asia.

In 2002 the Gordon Darling Australasian Print Fund, in conjunction with the National Gallery, acquired the Australian Print Workshop (APW) Archive(2), consisting of some 3,000 workshop proofs. The APW (formerly the Victorian Print Workshop) fosters the development of printmaking as a vibrant and progressive art form. Since its inception in 1981, the APW has archived impressions of prints produced at the workshop, retaining two workshop proofs from all editioned and project based work. The archive is national in its scope, containing works by almost all major Australian artists who have produced prints. The Gordon Darling Fund is also providing for the APW collection to be fully catalogued and digitised.

*What were your first impressions of the Gallery?*

Remember that the Gallery had yet to open. I had little knowledge of it before I arrived. I'm still amazed that I was invited to be Chairman. I had collected Australian art myself and, as a result of that, the Chairman of BHP asked me to be on BHP's art committee when their new building in Melbourne was being constructed. We put Australian art into the offices of all the senior people in BHP — replacing the photographs of blast furnaces. Later on we did a similar thing in BHP House in Brisbane.

I was really a novice when I arrived at the Gallery, but James took me under his wing. I soon realised that when we opened we would have the most important collection of Australian art on our walls, on day one. I realised too that we also had blank walls —and that meant funding. Those were the two first impressions. I had been on corporate Boards before of course, but this was a whole new experience for me and I felt very under-equipped for the task. So I bought myself a round-the-world air ticket and I went to see the directors of the seven leading art museums in the Western world to ask: 'How does your Board work?'; 'What is the responsibility of Trustees?'; 'What is the relationship between the curators and the administration?'— questions like that. At the end of the tour I could tap into the experience of seven world-class gallery directors.

*You've done the trip, and you've got all the information: Was there already a Council in place, or did you have to assemble a new Council?*

I joined Dick Crebbin's Council in February 1982, and became Chairman in June. Because it took a year longer than expected for the Gallery building to be completed, there was a great changeover of Council members whose terms had expired in the year I was appointed and in the following year.

*The Council you ended up with seemed to be a very harmonious one, a very hard-working one; and many of them are still friends of the Gallery. So it was more than just a coming together to be a Council of an art gallery. There was something more to it?*

I was very fortunate in the then Minister for the Arts, Ian Wilson. When he invited me, and I got over the shock of it, I said, 'If you agree, I think the way we should work is this: I will choose the people who will work for me; if they will work for me, I can work for you, and you have the right of veto.' So I chose people from all States, of both sexes and with different skills, people I knew would work for me. We started off in harmony and we kept in harmony.

*Artists and art historians were Council members then.*

Yes they were; and on reflection: Where would the National Gallery have been before it opened without Fred Williams? Where would it have been before that in the planning stages without Sir Daryl Lindsay and Sir William Dargie? It's important to pick the right people.

*Was there much contact still with Sir William?*

No; by that time he had hung up his keys after a very long and active involvement. His influence, and that of Daryl Lindsay of course who died in 1976, was very considerable. Nearer to my time it was Fred Williams. The Council benefited very much from Fred's ability to be very logical and very clear in what he expressed.

*James used to tell the curators that he was educating the Council, that our presentations were a way of instructing them in art. Did the Council members feel that?*

I believe they felt that with the curator and the Director both recommending a work of art, who were they to disagree. I was fortunate in having active and knowledgeable collectors on the Council, but they didn't try to second-guess the Director or the curator. I remember a couple of occasions, though, when the curator and the Director had different views on a proposed acquisition; and I just suggested that it should be resubmitted when there was more clarity.

*Did the Council in those early years talk much about access to the collection?*

That came a bit later; primarily we were concerned with filling the gaps. In my time we did no more than talk about a travelling exhibitions program. We were not ready. The early Annual Reports show that we were lending about 400 to 500 works in any one year. We simply didn't have the number of works then to let them out — whereas Brian Kennedy is doing a fantastic job with travelling exhibitions and the partnership program with other galleries.

We did start bringing touring exhibitions into the Gallery. The first one opened in September 1983, The Entombed Warriors. It was doing well in Perth, and at a cocktail party at the Gallery given by Bill Hayden, who was then Foreign Minister, I said to the Chinese ambassador, 'What a wonderful thing to have The Entombed Warriors in Australia. Why doesn't the exhibition come to Canberra?' We'd been open less than a year! But The Entombed Warriors came to Canberra, and Prime Minister Bob Hawke opened it. I was told afterwards by Daniel Thomas that it was not a visual arts exhibition, and he was very doubtful whether it should have come to the Gallery at all. But I reminded him that it brought us the most wonderful publicity and a great number of visitors; and I think Daniel has since forgiven me.

*That was the first time we were faced with the problem of no dedicated gallery space for temporary exhibitions.*

That's so; but when the building was designed, more than ten years before we opened, I'd say the idea of the 'blockbuster' as we know it had never really been formed. Nevertheless we persevered. Thanks to David Jaffe we got the Courtauld's The Great Impressionists in 1984 after it had been shown in Japan; and as a result of record attendances we were able to buy Cezanne's Afternoon in Naples. Then about seven months later we showed Twentieth-Century Masters from The Metropolitan Museum of Art. I remember James Mollison and I were sitting in the Metropolitan's coffee shop with Bill Lieberman — by that time James and Bill were very good friends. James had a list of paintings which he wanted to include in the exhibition: I sat silently until about the end of the lunch, then I said, 'Bill, I think everything that James has asked for has gone over your shoulder; what are you going to give us?' He said, 'Don't worry, it will work out.' And of course we ended up with a wonderful exhibition of the Met's treasures — not one hundred per cent of what James had wanted, but substantially so. Those exhibitions enhanced our already high public profile in Australia, and we joined the international circuit.

*Was your Council affected by government intervention in relation to acquisitions?*

After the opening I was very pleasantly surprised at the enthusiasm for the Gallery from both sides of the House, because there had been a degree of grumbling beforehand about expenditure on one thing or another! On such occasions, when there is a successful opening, everyone wants to climb on board. So really, from the opening onwards, I believe we always had the support of both sides of the House.

We gave ourselves a short-term target of getting the collection to its best possible shape by the Bicentenary in 1988. I had persuaded Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser to give us a grant of \$27 million over a period of three years. He announced it at the opening. It was cancelled by the succeeding Hawke government — who gave us more than \$27 million in the end over the same period!

The need to fill spaces on the walls was a major reason for instituting the \$2 admission charge in 1982 — which some forty per cent of our visitors were not required to pay. I had to give of my very best explaining in the curators' room why it was necessary to have an admission charge at all!

We concentrated primarily on the Australian collection and on the introductory gallery, where James hung significant works from important moments in the world's art — and showed that you really could mix great art.

*That policy of having small groups of works of art representative of different times and cultures has dropped out now to some degree. It had started to drop out even in the early eighties. Why do you think that happened?*

As a non-professional I won't attempt to speculate, but I do think that in any new establishment a collection policy evolves with experience and opportunity. There's no point having a list of artists or works that you want but perhaps can never get. To some degree I think that was partly the reason; another reason was that if you were buying art from the northern hemisphere, you were then, and you still are paying a great deal more than if you were buying Australian art. We did have some constraint in that regard.

*The opening was an extraordinary event; but it must have been even more extraordinary to be actually overseeing it all as the Gallery's representative.*

I was very fortunate because I had a man called Jim Scholtens, the protocol guru, who briefed us on what was expected at a Royal opening ceremony. We also had the benefit of a couple of visits from Bill Heseltine, the Queen's private secretary. We all took it very seriously.

There was a dress rehearsal with ninety members of the staff on duty. The stand-in Queen was a well-known member of the finance department, and the Duke of Edinburgh was played by the building manager. We walked them through the Gallery and took them upstairs in the goods lift because the passenger lifts were not yet operational. In the Australian galleries we introduced little groups representing the artists and donors who would be there on the night. The dress rehearsal gave us confidence, and at the end of that day I felt there were ninety people who knew what to do — now it was up to me!

The Queen of course made it incredibly easy. What really thrilled everybody after the formalities were over, after she had been upstairs and looked at the Australian collection, and after the artists and donors had been presented, the Queen mingled with the guests and stayed forty-five minutes over time.

When we were discussing what the Queen might like to see in the way of Australian art, some bright spark came up with her interest in horses. We had nothing like a Stubbs, but we did have a horse upside down in mid air — not that we needed to introduce Nolan's Ned Kelly paintings through the horses. The Queen was very interested in the series and spent some time discussing the work with Sid Nolan. When James introduced Harold Hughan to the Queen, she asked, 'How do you get that wonderful colour in those pots?', and he told her. Then she said, 'At what age were you Mr Hughan when you started?'; and he said, 'Oh about seventy.' The Queen responded that now she had something to look forward to. She was terrific. Rather than just meeting the artists, she made a point of conversing with them and, of course, with Lyn Williams and her daughters (it was so sad that Fred was not there), and with people like Joe Brown and Rudy Komon — a whole cross section of the arts community in Australia.

The successful Royal opening and its attendant publicity got us off to a great start, and it was not difficult for the National Gallery to establish itself very quickly in the eyes of all Australians — the nation's new cultural flagship had arrived on the shores of Lake Burley Griffin.

There were some reservations about the style of the building's architecture, but it looked so marvellous floodlit for opening night. I've always thought of the Gallery and High Court buildings as a couple. I visualise the High Court as an upright male, with the Gallery as the woman lying on the lawn looking at the lake, the trees and the grass. That's how you should feel about the building I think.

By the end of our first year over half a million people had visited the Gallery. A similar number came in the second year; and Canberra had an increase in tourism of something like fifteen per cent. Hotels told us, 'People are staying an extra night now.' Canberra was rapidly becoming a cultural centre as well as a political centre.

*At that time the idea was expressed of the Gallery as a centre of excellence for the nation — not just in its collections, but in education and in conservation too — the leading institution in Australia which would help to form an Australia-wide professional museum structure.*

That was very much James's vision; it was the message that he got through to each section in the Gallery, and the standards that he set were standards of excellence. I certainly became a believer very quickly that the Gallery would not only be a place to look at art, but it would also be a place that would stimulate the arts in Australia.

*What were your first impressions of James?*

James lived and breathed the Gallery; his whole life was devoted to putting together a wonderful collection for the opening. Recognition of what James has done is probably still fifty years away. One day someone will pull out Michael Lloyd and Michael Desmond's book on the Gallery's international art collection and be amazed to see what James had actually acquired before we opened, let alone after we opened.

I didn't really know how he was going to feel about a director of BHP, who clearly was not well versed in the visual arts, coming on board at a very critical time just before the opening. There was a cautious beginning when both of us were trying to work out how we were going to get on with this other person who would be very important to us. I do believe that the relationship between the Chairman and the Director has to be in sync. - like the two wheels of a bicycle. From day one we started to get to know each other and, as I said, James took me under his wing. My art education was a continuing process. On our first visit to New York for AFANG<sup>2</sup>, I

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<sup>2</sup> The American Friends of the Australian National Gallery (AFANG) was incorporated in December 1982; tax exempt ion status was granted in November 1983. Since 1984 AFANG has supported the National Gallery greatly through funding and the donation of works and by participating in cultural exchange. There are 33 trustees in 2003.

said to him, 'I really need to know something about contemporary art'; and he said, 'All you need to do is go to the permanent floor of the Whitney, spend an hour and walk around there.' Then, 'The next time you go out, you go to the permanent floor of the Whitney and walk around for an hour. And the third time you go out, you go to the permanent floor of the Whitney ...' By the time I had spent three hours there I could identify artists and had started to see that actually their works looked different. All that helped and I think brought us closer. Added to which, from my early days as Chairman I visited Canberra every fortnight. It was essential to have an understanding of what was happening; there was so much happening that we had an agenda meeting every two weeks. So James and I saw much more of each other than is possible today for a Chairman and Director. That helped our relationship very much.

### *How did AFANG start?*

It started because I was keen to find a way to capture some of the goodwill that existed in America for Australia; and not tread on the toes of the State galleries in the process. So I examined the possibility of setting up a Foundation for the Gallery in America – with an American tax number so that American citizens who gave cash or works of art to the Gallery would qualify for a tax deduction in the USA. I asked Council member Robert Piper (then a senior partner in the Adelaide law firm of Piper Bakewell and Piper) to go there to see what he could do; and Bob came back with the tax number. Next we had to persuade a number of distinguished Americans to become trustees to a Gallery they had never visited, which was brand new, and hadn't got a track record. We explored possible links -they might have served in the South West Pacific during World War II; they might have a daughter married in Cairns; they might be the CEO of a company that has a large operation in Australia...

We reminded them of the great start their National Gallery had, when Paul Mellon gave \$800 million to get it off the ground. Well, we were not quite so fortunate, but we suggested that a group of trustees could assist our National Gallery in a significant way by providing introductions to like-minded people who might feel disposed to recognise their goodwill for Australia. Thirteen distinguished Americans formed the first AFANG Foundation in 1984. Their Chairman was Richard M. Paget (of the well-known management consultant firm Cresap McCormick and Paget). Dick had just finished doing a survey of the US Navy for the President; he had also come to Australia to carry out a consultancy for BHP. So he was a very suitable eminent person to chair the first group.

*AFANG has had a rocky road, one would have to say. Is that because there hasn't been the amount of American interest in Australia that one would have hoped for?*

During the eight years of my involvement with AFANG (1983-92) we achieved considerable support – over \$4 million in works and cash, which would be worth much more today. But it didn't happen by accident. James and I visited America twice a year. Appointments to see potential donors sometimes took eighteen months to arrange – it took us eighteen months to get to see David Rockefeller, and it took twenty minutes with him to get Robert Natkin's *Beatrice* – that was in 1989. We

received wonderful support early on from Benno Schmidt of New York, with three works by Russell Drysdale including *The drover's wife*, and two by Sidney Nolan. The five paintings were presented as a token of the many friendships that Benno and Nancy Schmidt made during their time in Esperance, Western Australia, when they gathered their great collection of Australian art.

This combination of James and yourself - James the intuitive one, very much to do with the appreciation of art; you working very much according to the business model, knowing how to go about approaching things like tax file numbers, making contacts, making appointments - that seems a rather unique combination.

It worked; and the third member was Pete Horgan (the President of BHP in New York). Pete would arrange the appointments, and James and I would come along and do our Gilbert and George act: I would talk about the Gallery and its place in Australia, its importance; then James would talk about the collection.

### *What about corporate appeals in Australia?*

One of the things I was asked to do as Chairman was to organise an appeal in the first year. That's unheard of, I thought. Anyway we had the appeal. The economy was in recession, but Kevan Gosper (who was then Chairman and CEO of Shell in Australia) led our national appeal and did the most intensely active job you could expect of any Chairman. He had high-powered committees in each State and we managed to scrape in over \$1 million for acquisitions. Really the timing was desperately wrong and it was too early for us to demonstrate what we were doing as a National Gallery.

Far more natural, in fact brilliantly successful, was Ann Lewis's Founding Donor appeal. I was very keen that, by the end of our first year, people walking into the Gallery should see a board with a great many names inscribed on it of people who had supported us – not a board with one name on it, of one person who had given, say, a million dollars.

So I suggested to Ann that we might invite people to be Founding Donors, to donate a minimum of \$1,000 – and would she please form a committee and head it. She said she would. A couple of weeks later I rang and asked, 'How are you going; and how's your committee?' She said, 'Oh, fine.' When I asked who was on the committee she said, 'Just me.' And she raised over \$500,000, which was remarkable. About eighteen months later, when the appeal had closed and we had a celebration at the Gallery, with Ann and all of her family and a large contingent of Founding Donors, I thanked them and said, 'Nobody will ever get their name up in the Gallery again for a thousand dollars. But your children and your grandchildren will walk into this Gallery and they'll see your name. It's there because of your belief in the Gallery in the early days.'<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See 'Benefactors', this publication pp. 395-398.



*Let's continue about money and the next appeal you were involved with, that you gave money to.*

That's a different story. Gough Whitlam was Chairman of the Council then; it was not long after my retirement as Chair and I felt that I wanted to do something for the Gallery at that time, so I told James that I would increase what I had already given to bring it up to a million dollars. Simple as that.

*It launched the Australian National Gallery Foundation.<sup>4</sup>*

Well yes, that was the occasion, and my name was honoured as past Chairman of the Council; but I was not involved with the Foundation in any practical sense other than writing the cheque. We started the Print Fund with a million dollars; the value of investments is now over \$2 million; and since we started we have acquired some 5,000 prints.

*I remember in the discussions when the Fund deed was being formulated you made the point that the money was not to be a substitute for the government allocation. So we have still been able to buy with the government funding - we have used that particularly for nineteenth - and early twentieth-century prints up to about 1950-60. The Print Fund comes in after that. The deed actually says that the purpose of the Fund is to acquire works; but through our other more recent activities like the web-based work, symposiums, the Gordon Darling Fellowship and now the Graduate Internship<sup>5</sup>, the Fund is making sure that the collection is widely known and is being well-documented. That didn't happen so much in the early years when we concentrated far more on acquisitions. Now we are spending forty to sixty per cent on acquisitions and funding the other projects as well.*

*You always hoped that the Fund would encourage others to establish similar funds in other areas.*

That was at the back of my mind. I hoped that perhaps other Gallery departments would be able to capture the interest of people who would fund them. I believe in the tremendous potential of targeted funds. I was thrilled to see the credit line for the NGA Photography Fund donated by Dr Peter Farrell. I think that if donors can focus on one area of the collection, they can extend or develop a special interest, and the curators are able to plan ahead. It's good from both their points of view.

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<sup>4</sup> The National Gallery of Australia Foundation, a company limited by guarantee under the Corporations Law, is a non-profit organisation established to support the National Gallery through the raising of funds to further the Gallery's broad objectives.

<sup>5</sup> To celebrate the 10th year of the Gordon Darling Australasian Print Fund, in 1998 a program of funding 4-month fellowships was for the study of contemporary Australasian prints located within the National Gallery. A further initiative, the Gordon Darling Graduate Internship, was offered in 2001. The 2-year fixed term contract is conceived as a training position, bridging the gap between graduate study and a full-time curatorial career. The recipient is located within Australian prints, Posters and Illustrated Books section of the National Gallery's Australian Art program.

*Your own interest is very 'hands on'. I mean you want to see the things I've been acquiring. For a curator it's wonderful to have that rapport – between the donor and the spender.*

What Marilyn and I have enjoyed, and still do, are our two Fund meetings a year, where you have a selection of acquisitions for us to look at. That gives us a sense of involvement which we really appreciate. Most people who are actively engaged elsewhere and haven't the time to do more than write a cheque and leave it to the recipient to decide how it will be handled perhaps miss out a little – but it's great for the Gallery, of course. As it has turned out, my own experience and timing has been different, and involvement with the print collection has become a major source of enjoyment.

*Do you remember at around the time of your original gift of \$10,000, when I was very young and naive, I bought some Redback posters and one was anti BHP. We had a bit of a discussion about that.*

I remember suggesting that it should be paid for out of the government grant!

*Which is what happened. To put up something like that to you was in someways pretty silly. On the other hand I had the idea, too, that art should be acquired if it was needed within the collection. I guess the only occasion, also very early on, when I had doubts about whether it was appropriate to use the Fund was the first time I bought prints from Papua New Guinea, and James said to me, 'You're going to have to show these to Gordon.' We brought them in to the Boardroom and opened them up, and you said, 'Oh that's Kauage. I used to have him up in my office in Papua New Guinea; he used to hang behind my desk. '*

I would buy those prints and give them to the children of our three managers up there. When a child was born or something like that, I'd give them a Mathias Kauage print.

We were rowing in unfamiliar waters when we started. Now I think one would have to say that the relationship between us has developed into something which is very unusual. The great thing is that you were the original curator and you are still running the show. The team has been together for twenty years. That's long enough to make an impact. The direction has always been steady; the purpose has always been clear; and the steps have been progressive. We've accelerated lately. I think Brian Kennedy's support and encouragement has been a big factor in what you have been able to achieve in the last few years.

*Certainly there's been a move towards making the collection more accessible, not only through exhibitions, but on line<sup>6</sup>. One of the things that I find extraordinary is how I have been able to suggest things, like putting prints on the web, and you've always been incredibly enthusiastic.*

I think part of the reason is that Marilyn and I go overseas four or five times a year, and we believe that Australian galleries must think of themselves in a global environment, not just a national environment. When you came up with the web recommendation we were very excited at the prospect; and now absolutely thrilled with what has been achieved in the last two years for what is, in real terms, an incredibly small amount of money. People around the world can see the world's pre-eminent collection of Australian prints.

*The other thing that has happened over the last several years is that printmaking by Aboriginal people has become a major focus. It's one of the areas in printmaking that has really moved ahead in Australia. You have been so supportive there – not just within the Gallery, but also trying to get Aboriginal prints into the British Museum and into Singapore.*

It's very dear to my heart; and I think you are probably responsible for making it dear to my heart. I'm still conscious of the fact that James Mollison became interested in Aboriginal art before the Gallery opened and was instrumental in the steps that had to be taken before Aboriginal art could become a part of our Australian collection.

*We bought the first Aboriginal prints for the collection in 1982 or 83. There's been such a change since that time, from very simple prints to now quite complex and large-scale works. We were very lucky that even when the first prints were being produced we managed to acquire examples that show new interests and new materials as the Aboriginal people were first using them.*

Was it luck? Or was it Roger Butler recognising that this development was going to happen, supporting it, urging and encouraging the printmakers and helping them – enabling the Gallery also to get a really good cross section of what was being produced. When Marilyn and I have visited workshops –whether in the Northern Territory or in Melbourne, at your urging – we have been really fired by what is happening and fortunate to talk with some of the Indigenous artists themselves. It has all helped to give us an understanding and an enthusiasm for Aboriginal printmaking. As a result I have now given prints to the Singapore Art Museum and we are hoping to fire their enthusiasm in the same way.

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<sup>6</sup> [australianprints.gov.au](http://australianprints.gov.au)

*There's a great interest. You are almost a crusader now in terms of making sure that outside cultures both in Asia and in Europe recognise the quality of our Indigenous art.*

It seems to me that with Aboriginal prints – which is a new art, which is affordable, which is available, which is attractive – we have one way of taking Australian art to the world. I very much hope that two years down the track in Singapore they will be saying that they must now have prints by white Australian artists as well. The same applies to places like the British Museum. They have such a huge collection and are so much admired that people are queuing up to offer things, but if we are determined to get in I believe we can. When we talked with a group of BM staff in the print room at the Museum they were saying, 'We need to get a critical mass, around which we will build the collection.' They then sent me a catalogue of their Scandinavian collection – and that critical mass was 8,000 prints.

*That's a critical mass indeed! In the past, because there were no collections of any Australian prints in Europe, people there really didn't have the chance of thinking about them. At least now with our collection on line and a small group of prints in the British Museum opportunities are growing.*

*Going back to the time when the actual deed was written in 1989, it defined the collection as the Gordon Darling Australasian Print Fund. The Gallery has always been interested in Australasia as a concept. Daniel Thomas was very interested. In the late seventies he went to New Zealand and acquired our first contemporary New Zealand works. He bought quite a collection of New Zealand prints too and always encouraged me to think 'Australasian'.*

*So the Fund gave us the opportunity to acquire works from Papua New Guinea and from New Zealand, and now we are moving slowly towards Southeast Asia.*

*Ten years ago the Australia Council's workshops or studios were all in Italy, or Green St in New York, or in London. Now there's a genuine move for artists to actually be involved in Southeast Asia. I think that will be a major thrust for us in the next few years, not quickly – you can't all of a sudden go out and buy Southeast Asian prints. But points of contact can be made where there haven't been points of contact with Australia by printmakers; or exchanges can take place. We can start working along those lines and see what develops.*

It's the forward-looking approach that I like; it follows on from the way you have progressively increased the Oceanic component of the collection – to a stage where everybody around the table at Fund meetings is comfortable with it and likes it.

Our personal initiative is in Singapore. The timing is very interesting because since the Ken Tyler workshop opened there in April 2002 I think there will be an explosion of interest in prints in Singapore. As a result of that, in the next few years we will have the opportunity to cautiously move ahead in that area as well. I can't get over the fact that Australian art is virtually not represented in Southeast Asia, or Asia itself. Anything we can do to start the process, to get people talking about it, to get people viewing it and enjoying it, is going to be beneficial for the relationship

between Australia and the region.

*You said you came to the Gallery with no art qualifications; you were obviously very interested in art; and there was the BHP collection – but would I be right in saying that your interest in art has really blossomed in the last twenty years?*

You're probably right. When you reach the stage in life where you think about retirement, in the sense of ceasing to be an active businessman, it seemed to me that what I should be doing was something I already liked doing, and where I had a little bit of experience. Maybe I could develop it further. All that coincided with the time that Marilyn and I started our life together. Ten years later the National Portrait Gallery was operating and the Gordon Darling Foundation was well established<sup>7</sup> — the two providing valuable support in parallel with the continuing development of the Print Fund's activities. Art has given me an absorbing, active and totally enjoyable interest.

*Your whole strategy of lifting the professional standards of art administrators and curators has come to be especially important to you in the last few years, whether through the Gordon Darling Foundation's graduate school, through the people you've brought to Australia, or through assisting Australians involved in the visual arts to travel overseas.*

It's a much broader canvas than it was twenty years ago. The alternative to not enabling visual arts people to gain a broader professional understanding is going to be that somebody outside the industry with a business degree will come in and be the CEO. In my view that's retrograde. So there's a real challenge ahead and the opportunity to open the windows of people's minds –those who are going to be the next generation of directors.

*If you had become Chairman of something else in 1982 not to do with art, your life may have been very different indeed.*

It was the nicest invitation that I've ever had; and the most unexpected one.

**Interview conducted at Gordon Darling's residence in Melbourne, April 2003  
Published in Green, Pauline, *Building the collection*, National Gallery of Australia,  
Canberra**

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<sup>7</sup> For the National Portrait Gallery and the Gordon Darling Foundation, see Daniel Thomas, *The Gordon Darling Foundation: Ten Years*, Melbourne: The Gordon Darling Foundation, 2001.