

Mr Edmund George Capon AM OBE

The honorary degree of Doctor of Letters was conferred upon Edmund George Capon AM OBE by the Chancellor Her Excellency Professor Marie Bashir AC CVO at a special ceremony held in the Vice-Chancellor's office at 3.30pm on Monday 24 September 2012.

Citation

Presented by the Vice-Chancellor and Principal, Dr Michael Spence

It gives me great pleasure to commend Edmund Capon to you for admission to the degree of Doctor of Letters (*honoris causa*).

Edmund has distinguished himself through his outstanding contributions to the promotion of art and culture in Australia and overseas, which has influenced the thinking and general well-being of the wider community.

Edmund was Director of the Art Gallery of NSW for 33 years, during which time he turned the Gallery into a major centre of Asian art, mounted major exhibitions that set new standards and purchased a number of signature art works for the Gallery that enhanced the stature of art in the community.

Edmund graduated with a Master of Philosophy in Chinese art and archaeology (including language) from the School of Oriental and African Studies at London University. He also studied 20th-century painting at the Courtauld Institute of Art, and from 1973-1978 held the position of assistant keeper, Far Eastern Section at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

In 1978 he left London to take up an appointment as Director and Chief Curator of the AGNSW, on the recommendation of the NSW Premier, Neville Wran. In the years before and after his appointment, Edmund published several books and catalogues on Chinese art, including *Princes of jade* (1974); *Art and archaeology in China* (1977); *Qin Shihuang: terracotta warriors and horses* (1982); and *Tang China: vision and splendour of a golden age* (1989).

He also wrote and presented a television documentary entitled *Meishu: Travels in Chinese Art*, and developed the AGNSW as a centre for Asian art display and education, culminating in the opening of a new Asian art wing in 2003. This was followed in 2010 by the *First Emperor* exhibition, featuring a collection of China's famous entombed terracotta warriors. In 2011 the Gallery held a major exhibition of the work of Pablo Picasso.

In the best traditions of curatorship, Edmund embraced bold and often risky subjects. "Personally, I'm for more risk," he told an interviewer. In 2005 the AGNSW presented a major retrospective of the work of photographer Bill Henson - three years before the photographer was engulfed in controversy about the use of children in artworks. When asked whether he would have mounted it in the wake of the scandal, he replied: "absolutely."

During his tenure, Edmund wrote widely on the works of Western artists, ranging from Caravaggio to Giacometti and the Australian contemporary artist Jeffrey Smart, and enhanced the Gallery's collection with the purchase of several major works.

Edmund's contribution to the enhancement of art has been recognised through multiple honours. In 1994 he was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) "in recognition of service to the arts, particularly as Director of the Art Gallery of NSW". In 2000 he was awarded a Chevalier of the *Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* from the French Government. On 1 January 2001 he was presented with the Centenary Medal "for service to Australian society and the arts". In 2003 Edmund was appointed an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) by the United Kingdom government "for services to the promotion of British art in Australia".

I present Edmund Capon for admission to the degree of Doctor of Letters (*honoris causa*), and I invite you to confer the degree upon him.