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Daniel Thomas AM testimony

Daniel Thomas AM, for International Relations award, by ICOM Australia, 2010.

Daniel Thomas is one of the most distinguished long-serving figures in both the Australian art world and in Australian art museums. Although known universally for his outstanding contributions to the collection, interpretation, exhibition and public knowledge of Australian art, it is less well known among younger generations of his colleagues today how outstanding has been his commitment to knowledge of international art and Australia's museum networks with the wider world over five decades.

Daniel Thomas returned to Australia (after a degree in history at Ariel College, Oxford) around the time of the Olympic Games in Melbourne, in 1956. Having used his vacation time while studying abroad to tour the world's outstanding museums across Europe, Daniel came back to Australia with a love of art and a desire to work in an Australian state gallery at a time when there was scarcely a developed 'profession' in the field in Australia.

Daniel Thomas's sense of both the overwhelming quality of past centuries of achievement in art, and the challenge of experimental art of the modern movement and contemporary art, was perhaps imprinted in addition by his having encountered the distinguished refugee artist from the Nazi-closed Bauhaus, Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack, who had been among uprooted intellectuals and artists on the legendary 'Dunera' shipment of Jewish refugees to Australia; Hirschfeld-Mack was given refuge employment at Daniel Thomas's school, Geelong Grammar School, in his formative years before leaving for tertiary study in England. These various strains proved to be persistent throughout Daniel Thomas's life and work in art museums: a love of the past; a relentless curiosity about the challenges of modernity and the present; a fascination with the world and non-western, older cultural traditions alongside those that had emanated from Europe; a sense of irrepressible internationalism, as well as a deep love of Australia, its built environment and landscapes (and increasingly in later life, its Indigenous heritage); a desire to keep feeding connections between all of these spheres, closing the gap between 'quality' and parochialism, between a respect for local cultures and a need to address the most ambitious standards anywhere in the world; and a commitment to keep interconnecting all these zones to expand Australia art museums' capacities and practice, and to keep spreading knowledge of Australian art out into the world, across the

country and further afield internationally, through museum networks he nourished across five decades.

Daniel Thomas's appointments, over five decades, include: Professional assistant, then curator and Senior Curator, Australian art, Art Gallery of New South Wales (1958-78); and (while still serving as a curator) as an art critic, Sunday Telegraph (1962-66 and 1968-69), for the Sydney Morning Herald (1970-75) and for The Bulletin (1976-77). He was Senior Curator then Head, Australian Art, at the National Gallery of Australia in its crucial pre- and post-opening years (1978-84), when the NGA set new standards and benchmarks for the collecting, interpreting and exhibition of Australian art. He moved to become Director of the Art Gallery of South Australia in his last position in art museums (1984-1990). After his retirement he was appointed Director Emeritus (1991 ff).

In the 1970s' 'golden years' at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, when the Captain Cook Wing was opened and the Sydney Opera House was under construction, international visitors, and especially passing museum curators, started to pay visits to Australia – as did contemporary artists, able to visit the country in a short time at last with the rise of high-speed jet travel. Daniel Thomas became an internationally famous information source, host and first-encounter guide to international visitors coming to Sydney with an interest in art, culture and our major cultural institutions. While a specialist in Australian art, he attended to all exhibitions coming from all parts of the world, travelled internationally on a regular basis, and kept up with international networks and colleagues as he travelled. He became one of the most distinguished and respected 'ambassadors' for Australian art and art museums in many parts of the world.

He was Australia Commissioner for Australia's re-entry to the Biennale of Venice (in 1978), and in the period of Gough Whitlam's early recognition of the People's Republic of China, curated what was the second-ever exhibition (after a Canadian contribution) of art from another country to appear in China in the whole period of Chairman Mao's China: The Australian Landscape (travelled to three cities in China, in 1975). Always hospitable to visiting contemporary museum colleagues from all over the world, Daniel Thomas hosted a range of visiting artists and curators accompanying the latest exhibitions from the USA, UK and Europe. He hosted artists such as Christo and Gilbert & George – stars of early John Kaldor Art Projects (beginning with Christo's *Wrapped Coast* in 1969). Daniel accordingly was commissioned to write the catalogue essay for the first Kaldor Art Project to travel in the reverse direction: *An Australian Accent* (Ken Unsworth, Mike Parr and Imants Tillers) shown in the USA in 1984.

Daniel was President of the Art Museums Association of Australia in the late 1990s, and has in recent years served on the board of the National Portrait Gallery.

To colleagues who have known Daniel Thomas since the 1970s, and worked with him in various positions in art museums, he is known and respected for the determined internationalism of his vision as much as for his expertise in Australian art. He also has been unusual among his art museum colleagues in working collaboratively with science and history museum colleagues to advance professional training, development and those international connections and networks throughout Australia.