

The National Portrait Gallery in Canberra is a collection of portraits of prominent Australians (by birth or association) who are important in their field of endeavour or whose life sets them apart as an individual of long-term public interest. The collection was established in May 1998, and until 2008 was housed in Old Parliament House and in a nearby gallery on Commonwealth Place. On 4 December 2008, its purpose-built permanent home was opened on King Edward Terrace, Canberra – beside the High Court of Australia – by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd.

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History[edit]

In the early 1900s, the painter Tom Roberts was the first to propose that Australia should have a national portrait gallery, but it was not until the 1990s that the possibility began to take shape.

The 1992 exhibition *Uncommon Australians* – developed by the Gallery's founding patrons, Gordon and Marilyn Darling – was shown in Canberra and toured to four state galleries, igniting the idea of a national portrait gallery. In 1994, under the management of the National Library of Australia, the Gallery's first exhibition was launched in Old Parliament House. It was a further four years before the appointment of Andrew Sayers as inaugural Director signalled the establishment of the National Portrait Gallery as an institution in its own right, with a board, a budget and a brief to develop its own collection. The opening of displays in the refurbished Parliamentary Library and two adjacent wings of Old Parliament House in 1999 endorsed the Gallery's status and arrival as an independent institution.

While the spaces of Old Parliament House proved adaptable to the National Portrait Gallery's programs, its growing profile and collection necessitated the move to a dedicated building. Funding for the \$87 million building was provided in the 2005 Federal Budget and Sydney-based architectural firm Johnson Pilton Walker was awarded the job of creating the Gallery, with construction commencing in December 2006. The new National Portrait Gallery opened to the public on 4 December 2008.[1]

The building[edit]

Won through an open international design competition by Johnson Pilton Walker in 2005, the 14,000 square metres (150,000 sq ft) building provides exhibition space for approximately 500 portraits in a simple configuration of day-lit galleries.

The external form of the building responds to its site by using the building's geometry to connect with key vistas and alignments around the precinct. A series of five bays, each more than 70 metres (230 ft) long, are arranged perpendicular to the Land Axis referring to Walter Burley Griffin's early concepts for the National Capital.

The National Portrait Gallery features a sequence of spaces leading from the Entrance Court

defined by the two large cantilever concrete blades on the eastern side of the building, through the foyer to the fantastic gallery spaces. Each gallery receives controlled natural light from translucent glazed clerestory windows and views to the outside.

In April 2019, the Gallery was closed for several months for rectification work to maintain the integrity of its building. The Gallery reopened in September 2019.

The permanent collection[edit]

In 2020, the National Portrait Gallery's permanent collection stands at approximately 3000 portraits across a range of mediums – including photography, painting, drawing, multimedia, sculpture and textiles – and continues to grow through an acquisition and commissioning program tied to a judiciously applied collection criteria.

The National Portrait Prizes[edit]

The Gallery's National Photographic Portrait Prize (NPPP) is a highlight of the Australian arts calendar. Judges select 40 to 50 finalists from thousands of entries from across the nation, with these comprising the annual NPPP exhibition. 2020 also sees the arrival of the inaugural Darling Portrait Prize for painted portraits, featuring a AUD\$75,000 winner's prize. The Darling Prize exhibition's March opening means it joins the NPPP in the Gallery's autumn calendar, with the two exhibitions presented in tandem as the Gallery's inaugural 'National Portrait Prizes'.

The inaugural prize was awarded to Anthea da Silva for her portrait of dancer and choreographer Elizabeth Cameron Dalman.[2]

Previous exhibitions[edit]

Some of the temporary exhibitions displayed at the National Portrait Gallery include:

Eye to eye (2019)

The Look (2019)

Women in Vogue (2019)

20/20 (2018)

So Fine (2018)

Starstruck (2017)

Dempsey's People (2017)

The Popular Pet Show (2016)

Tough and Tender (2016)

Sideshow Alley (2015)

Bare: Degrees of undress (2015)

All that fall (2015)

In the flesh (2014)

Arcadia: Sound of the sea (2014)

PROMO: Portraits from Prime Time (2014)

Glorious: Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee (2013)

Paris to Monaro (2013)

Richard Avedon: People (2013)

Elvis at 21 (2013)

Elegance in Exile (2012)

Beyond the Self: Contemporary Portraiture from Asia (2011)

Inner Worlds: Portraits & Psychology (2011)
Martin Schoeller: Close Up (2010)
Present Tense: An Imagined Grammar of Portraiture in the Digital Age (2010)
Portraits + Architecture (2009)
Vanity Fair Portraits (2009)
doppelganger (2009)
Open Air: Portraits in the landscape (2008)
Animated: Self Portraits Online (2008)
Hall of Mirrors: Anne Zahalka Portraits (2007)
John Brack Portraits (2007)
Reveries: Photography & Mortality (2007)
Truth and Likeness (2006)
Rennie Ellis: Aussies All (2006)
Clifton Pugh: Australians (2005)
Cecil Beaton: Portraits (2005)
KYLIE: An Exhibition (2005)
The World of Thea Proctor (2005)
To look within: Self Portraits in Australia (2004)
Australia and the Nobel Prize (2003)
Australians in Hollywood (2003)
Max Dupain: The Vintage Years (2003)
POL: Portrait of a Generation (2003)
Rarely Everage: The Lives of Barry Humphries (2002)
Bill Brandt: A Retrospective (2002)
Nolan Heads (2001)
Tete a tete: Portraits by Henri Cartier-Bresson (2001)
Mirror with a memory: Photographic portraiture in Australia (2000)
Glossy: Faces, Magazines, Now (1999)