

Legacies of beauty

UWA graduate Dorothy Erickson was the first graduate to be awarded a Fine Arts doctorate from UWA. Her thesis has now been turned into an impressive book from UWA Publishing.



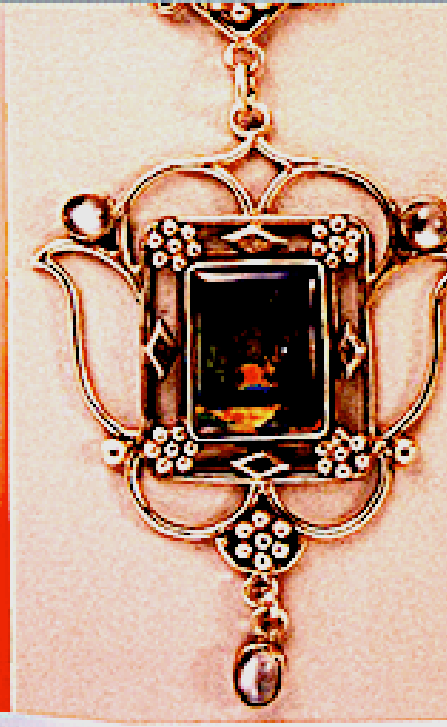
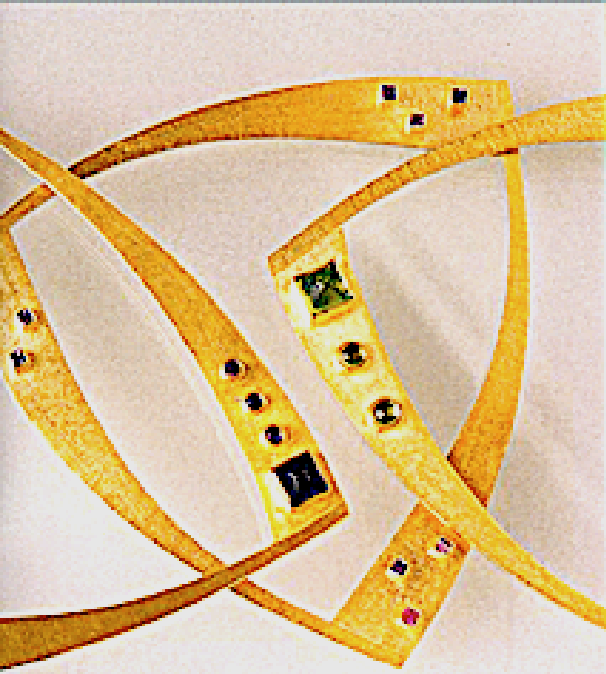
Renowned naturalist, painter, author and historian, the late Rica Erickson, once observed that what set her apart was tenacity, good luck and a determination to grab every opportunity that came her way.

Her daughter UWA graduate Dr Dorothy Erickson, echoes these sentiments when describing a career that saw her exchange teaching for creating jewellery as one of the nation's most successful practitioners. With solo exhibitions in locations as diverse as Japan and Germany, London and Vienna, her work is represented in major collections in Australia and overseas.

Dr Erickson continues to be inspired by the metals that won Western Australia its first fortune in the 19th century. However, there have been challenges aplenty along the way, including illness that robbed the graduate of the ability to manipulate metalsmithing tools for several years. Undeterred, she invested her extraordinary energy in research, enrolling in a Masters degree in Fine Arts that evolved into a PhD in the late 1980s.

Photos from *Gold & Silversmithing in Western Australia: A History*, UWA Publishing





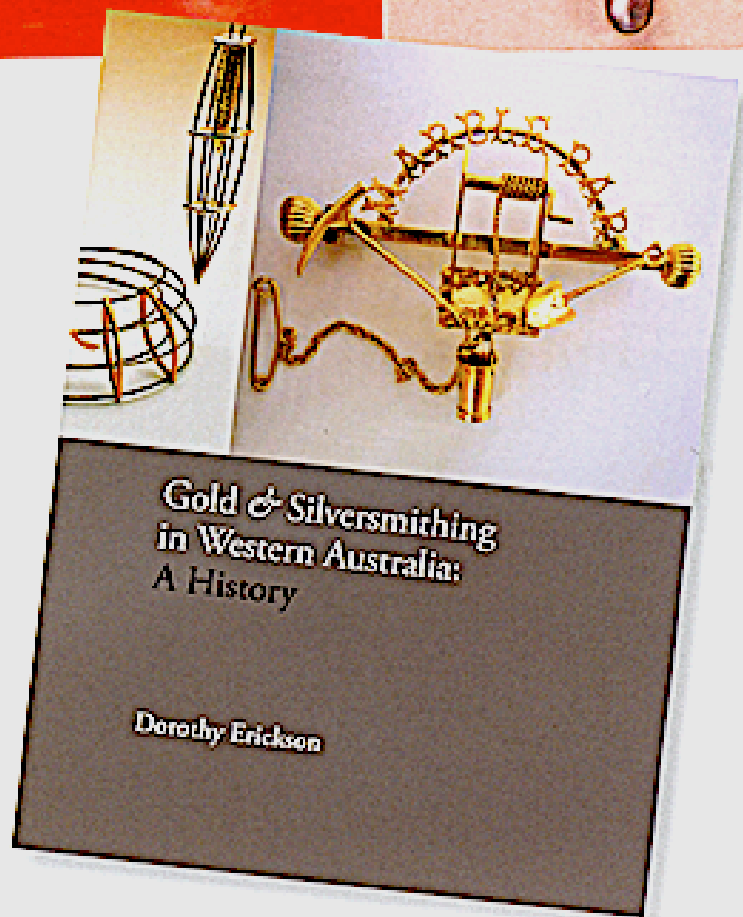
Becoming the first person to be awarded a Fine Arts doctorate from UWA, Dr Erickson then rewrote her thesis material for a more general audience. Recently, *Jewellery and Silversmithing in Western Australia: A History* was launched by UWA Publishing at the Art Gallery of Western Australia as part of a national jewellers' conference. The lavishly illustrated work will also be launched with accompanying exhibitions in Melbourne, Adelaide, Sydney and London (where her work is included in the Victoria and Albert Museum collection).

"Becoming an artist of any sort is not for the faint hearted," observes this graduate who was made an Honorary Fellow of the Craft Council she helped to found. "You need stamina, charisma helps, along with a dealer, sponsor or gallery to promote you. Ambition and belief in self are essential if you are to last the distance. If you have the vision and tenacity, some cash for the materials and a dose of good luck, anything is possible."

If the essence of the outback – its spaces and extraordinary colours – are reflected in jewellery described as "visually dramatic yet stunningly elegant" it is little wonder. Dorothy Erickson grew up on a Western Australian farm and was introduced to the natural world by her mother, Rica.

"My mother taught us by correspondence and we did the required week's work in two days, so we had the other five to roam around investigating things. As you can imagine, nature study lessons with my mother were fun. I was given a glass and a piece of cardboard and sent to catch insects which went into her killing jar and were then sent to an expert in Queensland, who named a number of bees for mother, one for father and a wasp and a bee for me!" recalls Dr Erickson.

"Painting wildflowers was one way to win pocket money at the local show and one of us four children



usually won the prizes. We also made toys and puzzles for children at Princess Margaret Hospital. I won a State award at eight and had to come down to Perth to give a radio interview. It was a flood year and water came up through the floorboards of the truck as we drove through creeks on our way to Perth...."

Later, she was sent to board at Methodist Ladies College, and went on to train as a teacher. Returning from a trip to England, she studied design and later taught at the WA Institute of Technology, holding her first solo exhibition in 1976. Since then she has had 35 solo shows in Australia and Europe and her work is in state galleries, the National Collection, the Victoria and Albert Museum and galleries in Europe. She formed the WA Jewellery Group that is now incorporated into the Jewellers and Metalsmiths Group Australia.

"I was lucky," she muses. "I was an early starter in the modern jewellery revolution and gained acceptance and contacts, showing in the world's best galleries, which is why I now use my contacts to help others worth promoting."

Jewellery and Silversmithing in Western Australia: A History tells the story of many talented gold and silversmiths who have lived in Western Australia. It places the jewellery and silver plate, the craftspeople and the owners, within the stylistic, social and economic milieu in which their works were created. Pride in local materials, imagery and expertise are threads running through the narrative.

"The best work of each era takes its place in the international arena, being not only of its place, but also of its time," says Dr Erickson.

In recent years the graduate has been able to resume creating and exhibiting, along with a busy schedule of writing, researching and running a heritage consultancy with Robyn Taylor (awarded the second Fine Arts PhD from UWA). She is the author of several books including *A Joy Forever: the Story of Kings Park* published in 2009.

"The thing about WA jewellers is that we punch above our weight," observes Dr Erickson. "Since the 1890s there have been craftspeople of quality working here. Most have been outgoing and entrepreneurial and since 1900 there have been metalsmiths who considered themselves artists in that they also painted, sculpted and designed. James Linton and his son Jamie Linton were the best known silversmiths in Australia in their day. Our work in Western Australia is often described as more graphic than the work done in other States."

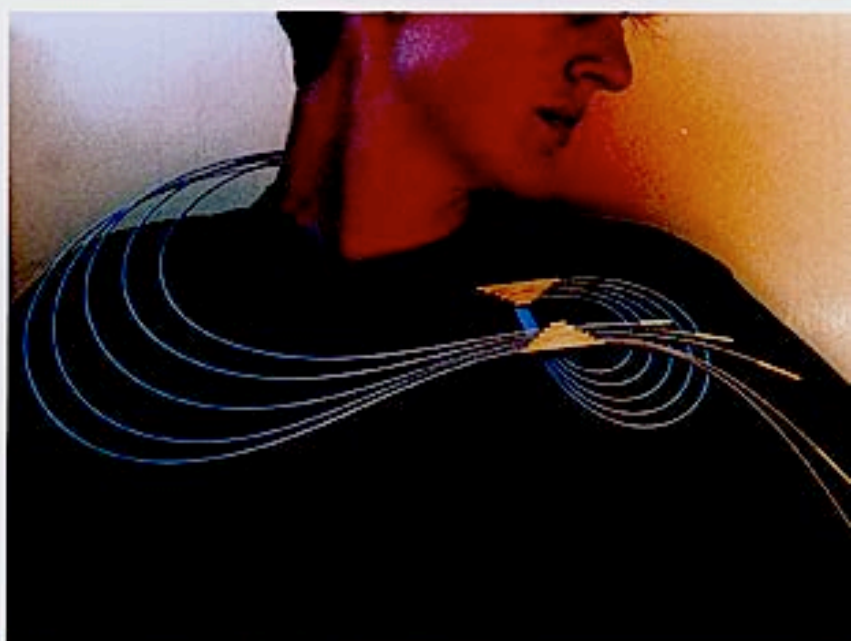
She muses that perhaps the fact that her grandfather had a gold mine at Broad Arrow sparked an enduring interest in precious metals.

In the book she writes: "From 1895 to 1915, Western Australia had its first golden period for art. Prosperity brought an influx of artistically inclined people...They formed art societies that influenced practice and prepared a small clientele to purchase artwork. ...Local art circles flourished in an international age when decorative arts were eagerly pursued..."

"The mining boom of 1955-75, which reproduced the turn-of-the-century excitement, coincided with a new international craft revival. The influx of population lured by mining made sure that this arrived promptly in Western Australia...In the 1970s art schools were as popular as they had been at the turn-of-the-century and crafts flourished..."

What of the future?

Dr Erickson is currently working towards a solo exhibition in Slovenia and a group exhibition she is curating to accompany the UWA Publishing book launch in Melbourne, Adelaide, Sydney and London.



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"I want to create some extraordinary new works while at the same time making more conventional pieces to support the art 'habit'," she says. "I have become seduced by precious stones which I use as a painter's palette, so luckily, given the price of gold, these do sell. Meanwhile I am also adding a few larger works to my Seashore Collection for the solo shows in Ljubljana and for the group show to promote the book in London in 2011.

"On the research side I am working on a dictionary of artists, artisans, designers and makers of portable cultural heritage in Western Australia from 1829 - 1959 and updating my history of design in Western Australia ready for publishing."

The UWA publication *Jewellery and Silversmithing in Western Australia: A History* is available at the Co-op Bookshop and other major booksellers.

For information on other recent titles from UWA Publishing, go to: www.uwap.uwa.edu.au

Previous page: James Linton Peacock Pendant, sterling silver, gold, carbuncles, opal c1913

Above: The Peacock necklace by Dorothy Erickson in stainless steel, goldplated silver (Wendy Ramshaw's collection)

Inset: PhD graduate Dr Erickson at her graduation