

# Curtin alum inducted into the Design Institute of Australia Hall of Fame

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Internationally acclaimed artist-jeweller, historian and author, Dr Dorothy Erickson, has been honoured with an induction to the Design Institute of Australia (DIA) Hall of Fame.



Dr Dorothy Erickson as used in POST Newspaper

Dr Erickson has had a dazzling 50-year career, decorated in awards and recognitions spanning pages, but her beginnings at Curtin were surprisingly humble.

She boasts more than 40 solo and 350 group exhibitions worldwide and is the fourth person from WA to be inducted in the DIA Hall of Fame, and one of only three jewellers or silversmiths to receive the honour.

Looking at her lifetime of accomplishments, it's hard to imagine such an incredible career started in a rustic maintenance shed as she undertook the first jewellery course ever offered at Curtin.

"I was part of the first intakes to Western Australian Institute of Technology (WAIT), before the Bentley Campus was even built. We started in the Old Perth Technical School buildings in what is now Northbridge," Erickson says.

"It was the first fine art tertiary course available in WA after the shut down during the [Great] Depression of 1929-35, so there were a number of mature-aged students eagerly enrolling – [it was] our first chance for tertiary art education in Western Australia."



One of Erickson's pieces: "Fulfillment" from the Klimt Collection, 2005, ring, 18ct gold, iolite. Collection of the National Museum of Switzerland, Zurich.

While she worked as a primary school principal full-time, Dorothy took night classes and holiday courses working towards a jewellery degree. At the time, a jewellery degree was not actually on offer, but the rules were more flexible and the Head of Curtin's Art and Design department created a course for Dorothy to major in.

"We were a hardy and pioneering lot and I became the first graduate jeweller," she says.

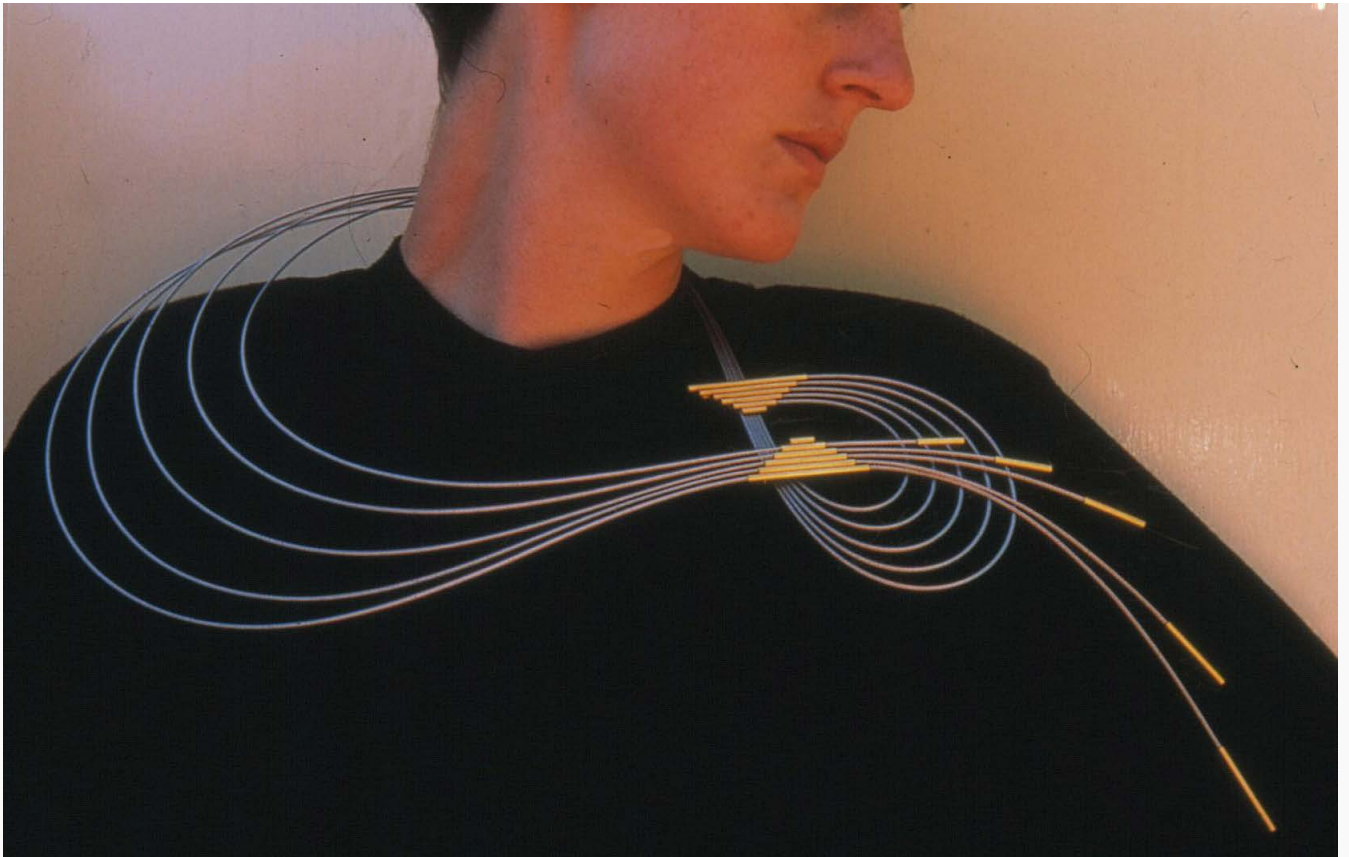
This mindset came in handy given the university's studio was not yet fully set up.

"Trying to get the casting machine working, it flung an ounce of my gold into the ceiling," she recalls.

"Quite memorable I assure you, as we could not recover it."

Erickson eventually left her teaching role after being offered a Resident Graduate Craftsman Scholarship. She began lecturing at WAIT in 3D Design Jewellery and Silversmithing while still working towards her degree. She ended up sitting some units with students she had taught in other classes to complete her course and was soon awarded her BA.

"Lecturing at WAIT gave me a status and a useful set of contacts that enabled my career to blossom internationally in a short time span."



An earlier piece: "The Peacock", 1983, multi-positional body piece, stainless steel cable, gold-plated silver, Ramshaw/Watkins Collection, London.

Two of those contacts were made when Erickson went to London to study jewellery further. Her old WAIT course coordinator asked her to find an Artist-in-Residence for the studio while she was there. She managed to persuade Wendy Ramshaw and David Watkins, two artists in high demand, to uproot their family and move to WA for six months.

“They had refused all previous offers, so this really put our new institution and course on the world map. They were craft royalty,” she says, explaining that David was the model maker in Stanley Kubrick’s classic film *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Befriending the duo turned out to be good for Erickson as well as the University, as the friendships opened doors all throughout Europe. She was invited to exhibit across the continent, including at the most prestigious jewellery museum in the world: the Schmuckmuseum in Pforzheim, Germany.

Erickson then made another fortunate friendship in Austrian artist jeweller Erika Leitner, whom she met at the World Craft Council Conference in Vienna when she was invited to speak about her work. Through Leitner, she held a phenomenally successful solo exhibition at the prestigious Galerie am Graben.

“The gallery only held six exhibitions a year, and I was the first Australian [to exhibit], which gave me an international profile very quickly,” she says.

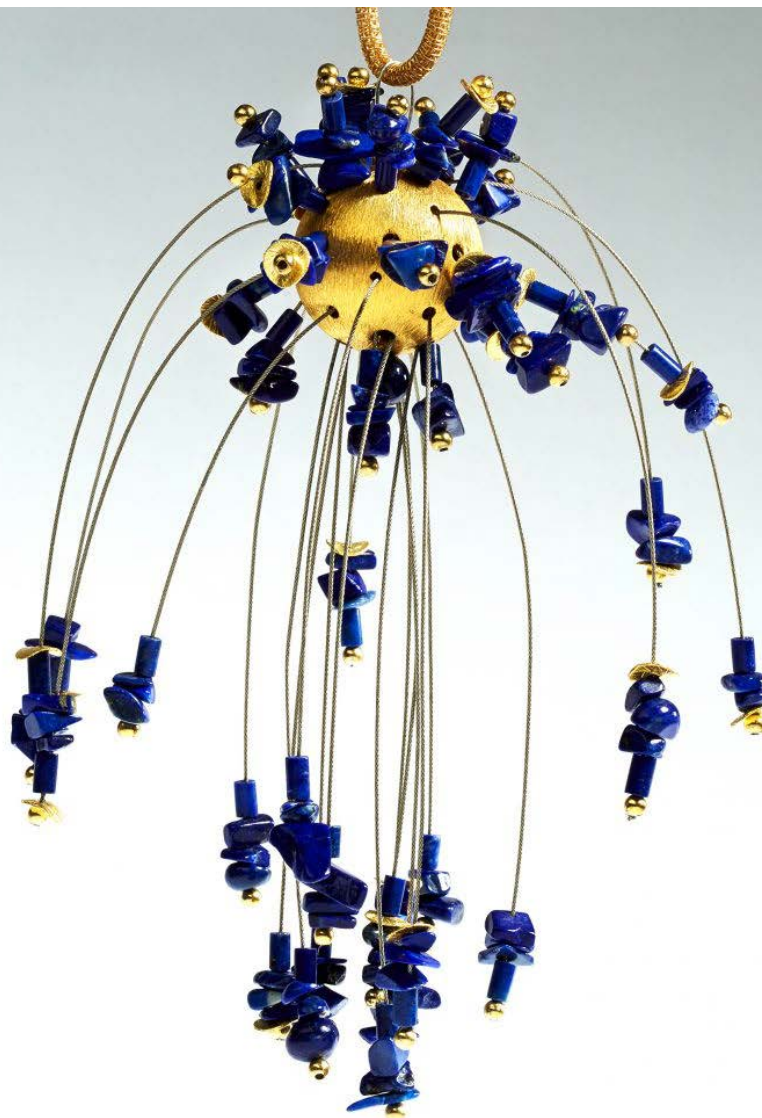
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“Dampiera ball”, from the Wildflower Collection, 2014, goldplated-silver, steel cable, lapis lazuli  
Photograph Robert Frith.



Various awards followed, and Erickson began splitting her time between working in Leitner's studio school in Austria, exhibiting in Australia and Europe, and assisting her WAIT students. She started the Western Australia Jewellers Group, which later became part of the National Jewellers and Metalsmiths Group Australia and also earned a PhD in Art History.

"I turned the PhD into my book *Gold and Silversmithing in Western Australia: a History* that has become the reference on the subject for anybody internationally who wants to know about Western Australian jewellery."

Today, you'll find Erickson's works in most state galleries in Australia, the National Gallery of Australia, the Schmuckmuseum in Germany, the V&A in London, Dallas Fine Arts Museum in the US and the Swiss National Museum in Zurich.

While she still exhibits, she has moved into writing in recent years. Her book, *Inspired by Light and Land: Designers and Makers in Western Australia 1829-1969* was shortlisted for the Premier's Book Award in 2016.

"I enjoy researching and writing to be able to educate people, particularly those [living] on the East Coast, on the history of art and design in Western Australia."

WA is a big influence in Erickson's art and jewellery as well.

"The main inspiration for many years was the Western Australian landscape and then I moved to making kinetic works that reflected the movement of native birds when worn on a moving person," she says.

"This then moved to reflecting the movement of life in the rockpools on the periphery of the continent.

"My current work is based on Western Australian wildflowers – particularly those my mother painted and my most recent exhibition was a joint one with paintings by my late mother and my jewellery based on these, called, 'Her Mother's Daughter'."

Her mother Dr Rica Erickson was an esteemed naturalist, writer, historian and botanical artist, with over 20 published books to her name and paintings in collections in the USA and the UK. Erickson says she's "someone to try to live up to".



Erickson's most recent works are inspired by Western Australian wildflowers. Like this piece: "Grevillea paradoxa" from the Wildflower Collection, 2012, necklace, steel mesh, sterling silver, 18ct gold, tourmaline, rhodalite and goldplated brass balls. Exhibited in Artistar Milan Design Week 2016.

Looking to the future, Erickson hopes to keep her mother's memory alive by finishing a book on women artists in WA that her mother had dreamed of writing but had not managed to get to before she died aged 101.

"She published her last book at [age] 98 and won her last state award at 99," Erickson says.

Truly her mother's daughter, Erickson is not showing any signs of slowing down her work. She's currently starting her own website, writing three books, raising money to print two of the books and searching for a gallery to host a fiftieth year retrospective exhibition in 2022.

"I just hope to be able to keep my health long enough to finish the books exhibit once COVID19 is over," she says.

"Having been through two recessions, I know what devastation it causes in artistic circles. I hope I'm not forced to retire."

For anyone hoping to follow in her footsteps, she has some practical and worldly advice.

"To my younger self, I would probably say: just carry on and continue to help others when you can, for they will repay you fourfold one day.

"To emergent jewellers: make sure you have an adequate financial base before going out on your own. Work for others, build up your skills base and accumulate a nest egg to make an impact when you do put together a first major collection. Prior to that, work on a few special pieces to win some of the prizes on offer as it always looks good on a CV.

"Be kind and support others as one day they may be in a position to support you."

Erickson's induction ceremony into the DIA Hall of Fame was postponed due to COVID19 but she's looking forward to it taking place once large gatherings are allowed again.