

Erica Persak

Clarrie Neal

Erica Persak was born in Creek Street, Riverstone in 1955 to parents Stanislaw and Tatjana who had arrived from Europe in 1949. Riverstone is a small town in the Hawkesbury district, an area rich in the history of early Australian settlement, yet in the 1950s and 1960s the existence of museums in this area was limited. Erica attended the Riverstone Public School for her primary education and completed her secondary education at the Riverstone High School. Erica, a good scholar, always displayed a keen interest in history and in particular ancient history.

She left home to attend the Australian National University in Canberra, ACT where she pursued her interests in classics and history and graduated with an Honours Degree in history in 1977. Her major at University was on the US anti-slavery movement between 1830 -1836.

During her university career she developed a keen interest in research and decided to take up studies in the field of librarianship. She undertook a course in children's librarianship where she developed an interest in children's books; she recalled her most challenging and most humorous tutorial presentation was on the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears, and how this simple fairy tale was re-interpreted in the late 19th and early 20th century.

It was during this time that the National Gallery of Australia was being built in Canberra and she watched its construction with interest. When Erica completed her graduate diploma in librarianship in 1979, she was offered positions at both the National Library of Australia and the National Gallery. For reasons she cannot explain she accepted the position at the National Gallery. Her first duties were to catalogue the Gallery's collection of illustrated and artist's books.

In 1980 she transferred to the Registry Department to work on a computerised collections management system. She recalls how nervous she felt the first time she handled an extremely valuable piece of art, it was the Henri Matisse painting of 'The Abduction of Europa'.

On a private trip to America in 1981 she visited a number of US art museums to investigate their computerised collections' management systems. She resigned from the Gallery in 1982 and went to America to work in the Arizona State Art Museum. While there she developed an interest in native Indian culture and spent every opportunity she could learning about and visiting cultural sites.

She returned to Australia in 1984 to accept the position of Registrar at the Art Gallery of Western Australia. This was an exciting and turbulent period for Erica, as besides working with Elizabeth Churcher, she had contact with the entrepreneurs Alan Bond and Robert Holmes A'Court who at the time had both established significant art collections.

Erica returned to Canberra in 1993 to take up the position of Registrar of the National Museum of Australia. In 1996 Erica received her Graduate Certificate of Management Studies from the University of Canberra.

In 1997 after an absence of 15 years she returned to the National Gallery to take up the position of Registrar of Collections. In 1999 she was appointed General Manager of Collections Services, embracing the fields of Registrations, Conservation, Library Research and Photographic Studies. She is also responsible for programs that enable state and regional galleries to borrow items from the National Gallery for their own exhibitions.

On the 16th December, 2006, Erica was presented with her Diploma of Fine Arts certificate and intends to continue studying for her Doctorate degree.

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PS. Erica has returned to Western Australia and is now the Curator for business magnate Kerry Stokes' private art collection.

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2000. Betty Churcher, Erica Persak and Margaret Whitlam at the National Art Gallery.

Photo: Erica Persak Collection