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Museum of Contemporary Art director Liz Ann Macgregor to step down

By [Linda Morris](#)

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Liz Ann Macgregor was largely unknown when she was appointed director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in 1999, attracting more attention for her Scottish accent, red hair, tartan skirts and Dr Martens Boots than her vision for the gallery.

More than two decades later, when Macgregor steps down from the position in October, she will leave behind what was pre-pandemic one of the most visited contemporary art museums in the world: one that has staged, particularly in recent years, a run of first-class exhibitions.

[Liz Ann Macgregor has announced she will step down as director of the Museum of Contemporary Art.CREDIT:WOLTER PEETERS]

Known for the strength of her enthusiasm and charisma, Macgregor is credited with pulling the institution back from bankruptcy and cultivating the public conversation about contemporary art.

During her reign, Macgregor implemented free admission, attracted millions in philanthropic donations, oversaw a major redevelopment, championed Indigenous art – including overseeing a world-class survey of bark painter John Mawurndjul in 2018 – and lobbied the government to invest in the arts in western Sydney, controversially becoming then Premier Mike Baird’s ambassador for western Sydney and backing the relocation of the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta.

While Macgregor was forced to share the limelight with the influential Edmund Capon, she held her own against the late director of the Art Gallery of NSW, and became a force to be reckoned with in Sydney’s arts scene.

In recent weeks, Macgregor has been outspoken about the role artists and arts have to play in times of crisis, chairing the federal government’s taskforce to roll out a support package for the arts sector. She also curated the museum’s major recent exhibition of Australian Chinese artist Lindy Lee, a show that reflected Macgregor’s interest in contemporary art that has a strong sense of identity.

Announcing her resignation on Wednesday afternoon, Macgregor said she wanted to allow for a new director to lead the post-pandemic recovery. She intends to return home to visit family in Scotland, including her elderly mother, who is aged 86.

“It’s the 30th anniversary of the museum this year, I’ve been 22 years as its director, it’s time,” Macgregor said. “The museum is in a great position. We’re coming out of COVID. I want to spend some time with my family in Scotland.”

[Liz Ann Macgregor at the MCA in 2012.CREDIT:JAMES BRICKWOOD]

Macgregor said she started to contemplate drawing her tenure to a close two years ago. "It's a funny feeling but it feels right. It's a relief in fact."

Her history at the MCA has been colourful. There were public spats with the then Lord Mayor Frank Sartor when an international design competition held in 2001 proposed replacing the neo-classical building with a glass structure – publicly derided as a gigantic Ikea coffee table – sitting over the existing MCA building.

The plans went nowhere but Macgregor secured one-off government funding and Telstra sponsorship to provide free admission, saving the institution from insolvency by dramatically boosting visitor numbers.

Six years later, Macgregor coaxed David Coe and Simon Mordant – two of Sydney's richest men – to pledge \$5 million each towards a more modest refurbishment but that project floundered when the global financial crisis hit.

Mordant took over as chairman and he and wife Catriona pledged \$15 million towards the \$53 million redevelopment which got underway in 2010 and opened in 2012.

Her mantra, since driving an art bus around Scotland, has been to make challenging art accessible. "Art is complex enough without using art jargon," Macgregor said. "Art theory is fine for a catalogue but not if you are trying to encourage people with not a lot of experience of art to visit."

National Gallery of Australia's Nick Mitzevich said he admired the "clear way she elevated the voice of the artist and always included that in her discussions, and stoushes". "Her vision was calibrated around giving artists a platform," he said.

Mordant was first to interview Macgregor, then director of Birmingham's Ikon Gallery, for the MCA position. He said he knew within two minutes that she was the preferred candidate. "She had the energy, vitality, and the vision," Mordant said. "She wasn't quite aware then that the institution was close to bankruptcy."

NSW Arts Minister Don Harwin said Macgregor had led the emergence of a great contemporary art gallery in Sydney and been an extraordinary contributor to the arts.

"She is a real thought leader and has also campaigned for more cultural investment in Western Sydney," he said. "While her eventual return to Britain has been anticipated, she will be nevertheless greatly missed."

MCA chair Lorraine Tarabay said there would be an international search for a new director. With the pandemic closing museums across the US and Europe, there could be a unique chance to attract high-profile talent to Australia to consolidate Macgregor's wins.