



Royal South Australian Society of Arts

A Brief History

This hand-carved wooden logo is on each of the banister posts in the Institute Building at the corner of North Terrace and Kintore Avenue. It refers to the South Australian Society of Arts (SASA), which was founded in 1856, using rooms in the Institute Building (est. 1861) on North Terrace. A more complex version of the logo is on the upper walls of the contemporary RSASA gallery (SASA became RSASA in 1935 when a Royal charter was granted by King George V.) The

building extension of 1907, on the north side, houses the Society's bespoke gallery and office on the first floor, and the stairway with these carvings was built to access the gallery.¹



Beginnings

Twenty years after the start of the colony, in the mid 1850s, there was a spark of a society of the arts in Adelaide, with an associated school of art, and links to the South Australian Institute.

London trained artist, engraver, and St Peter's College art master Charles Hill ran a private school of art from his home in Pulteney Street from 1855. In discussions with his friends and associates in 1856 he decided that there was a need for an arts' society. A meeting at his school, on Wednesday 15 October 1856, presented twenty-three propositions, which included a name (the South Australian Society of Arts), and the makeup of the committee; and there were intentions to establish a school and art gallery. It soon elected committee members as the executive, including the Governor as Patron (thereafter changed to President).²

The Society held its first exhibition in March 1857 in Parliament House, and was soon based in the rooms now used by the State Library administration in the Institute Building. The Society immediately offered significant prizes for competitions. By 1863 things were ticking

along: the 6th annual exhibition, held in its own rooms, allocated 24 prizes in guineas and included loaned works by ST Gill and Col. William Light, among others, from several private collectors.

Charles Hill was first head of its School of Design. Time was allocated from its early days to include female students on the same terms as the male students. The Society administered the School of Design from 1861–81. The School eventually moved out of Institute Building to the Exhibition Building in 1891.³ The School continues today as a faculty of the University of South Australia; it is the oldest, continuously operating art school in Australia. The modern-day RSASA continues to work alongside the contemporary South Australian School of Art through its Friends.⁴

By 1869 the Society's rooms were too small for its broad programme, so it ceased its annual exhibitions in its own space. The Society also administered the embryonic National Gallery of South Australia from c.1876 (est. 1881), holding its first exhibition in the Jervois Building in 1881, before its own building was established in 1900.⁵ In 1884 the Society was recognised by Parliament and affiliated into the Public Library, Museum, and Art Gallery of SA by Act No. 296.⁷ Tom Roberts' *Breakaway* was purchased by the state gallery from the 1899 Federal Exhibition at the Society (cat. no. 51, £220). Numerous purchases from those exhibitions, which ran from 1898 until 1923, formed the core of the Australian collection of the modern day Art Gallery of South Australia.

However, because of its lack of annual exhibitions and other administrative activities, there was a dwindling interest in the Society by the early 1890s. The depression in 1890 had an impact too, while the School of Design, Museum and the Art Gallery all became independent bodies. In 1892, Harry P Gill ARCA (then Director of the School of Design), with help from several of his artistic colleagues, and Deputy Governor Samuel Way were instrumental in reorganising and reviving the Society to the structure we know today. Since 1909, with Gill as the first artist as President, it has been managed by artists for its members.

The modern Society

19th century members included Alexander Schramm, Andrew MacCormac, Rosa Fiveash, Mortimer Menpes (as a student in the 1870s); Edmund Gouldsmith, Harry P Gill, the Hambidge sisters; then from the early 1900s, Sir Hans Heysen, James Ashton, Hayley Lever, Bessie Davidson, Henri van Raalte, John and Doreen Goodchild, Horace Trenerry, Sir Ivor Hele, and Nora Heysen; and mid-century Dorrit Black, Rex Battarbee, Albert Namatjira, Ivor Francis, Jeffrey Smart, Jacqueline Hick, Ruth Tuck, Lisette Kohlhagen, John Dowie, Geoff Wilson and Gordon Samstag. Today RSASA represents 330 members and has 100 Fellows.

Since 2002, the RSASA has run the biennial *Youthscape* art prize and exhibition for artists 15 to 26 years old to provide young artists with a venue to showcase their artworks and to assist them in their careers of art practice. The First Prize from the M & M Carbins Trust is \$5,000.

The Society has a close relationship with the Adelaide Central School of Arts where, thanks to sponsorship from the M & M Carbins Trust, they offer two annual \$5,000 awards to first-year students, and a residency of up to \$20,000 in the Royal Academy (RA) in London to study/assist/curate with projects over a 2–3 month period. This is open to a final-year student up to the age of 30.

The Society also has close relationships with the Helpmann Foundation, Guildhouse and SALA Festival.

The Biennial RSASA/SALA *Characters of the Fleurieu* exhibition is held at the Signal Point Gallery in Goolwa. The acquisitive first prize is \$10,000 provided by the Kennedy Art Foundation.

The Biennial RSASA/SALA Portrait Prize in the RSASA gallery has an acquisitive first prize is \$10,000 provided by the Kennedy Art Foundation.

The annual Kennedy Art Prize (*Beauty*) is held in the RSASA gallery with a First Prize of \$25,000.

RSASA has four seasonal members' exhibitions each year and there are solo, group and historical exhibitions that provide a full calendar.

Endnotes

1. "The Society of Arts — Jubilee Celebrations", *The Advertiser*, 10 April 1907, p. 10.
2. *The Adelaide Observer*, 11 October 1856, supplement, p. 1; *The South Australian Register*, 11 October 1856, p. 2.
3. The Society used the Town Hall for two years (1869–70) before realising its prohibitive cost. The School of Design was a tenant in the Exhibition Building 1891–1963. See Christine Garnaud *et al*, "Afterword", *Adelaide's Jubilee International Exhibition 1887–1888* (Darlinghurst NSW: Crossing Press, 2016), p. 351.
4. Friends of the South Australian School of Art.
5. In 1880 Parliament gave £2,000 to the Institute to start acquiring a collection, and the National Gallery of South Australia was established in June 1881. It was opened in two rooms of the public library (now the Mortlock Wing of the State Library). See Margaret Anderson, History Trust of South Australia, "Art Gallery of South Australia", SA History Hub, History Trust of South Australia, <https://sahistoryhub.history.sa.gov.au/places/art-gallery-of-south-australia>, accessed 8 September 2020.
6. Journalist Richard Twopeny (1883) says the collection was started in 1876. In John Daly, "The Annual Exhibitions, 1857—", *A Visual History*, vol. 1, p. 64.
7. Jenny Aland, "Chapter Two: Charles Hill, Society of Arts & School of Design, 1850s–1880", *The South Australian School of Art: 150 Years shaping South Australian Visual Arts & Culture*, Digital copy of Typed Manuscript, p. 24.

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