

A monument to

High above the Speaker's Chair in the House of Representatives Chamber, keeping mute watch over proceedings, is the monumental ceramic Australian Coat of Arms. "The presence of the Coat of Arms," said the architect's original design brief, "is intended to be a clear yet subtle one, giving a quiet sanction to the vital importance of the proceedings within the Chamber's space."

The Coat of Arms also now stands as a quiet and lasting tribute to its designer, Gordon Andrews, who died in Sydney on 17 January 2001.



A ceramic prototype used in the fabrication of the Coat of Arms.

It took almost three years of collaborative work from 1985 to 1987 to design, fabricate and install the Coat of Arms in the House Chamber. Those years of work were typical of the massive 'behind the scenes' effort required for each of the major works of art and craft commissioned as an integral part of the design and construction of Parliament House.

Gordon Andrews was more than 70 years old when he was asked to design the Coat of Arms for the House Chamber. Born in 1914 in Sydney, Andrews worked in his father's engineering workshop as a fitter and turner and studied mechanical engineering at Sydney Technical College. According to his own account, it was only when he saw contemporary German design magazines in the 1930s depicting graphic design in Europe that he knew what he wanted his life work to be.

The breadth of Gordon Andrews' work as an Australian designer through much of the 20th century was achieved only by a handful of other participants in the design world in Australia. That design work included transport gliders in 1941; packaging and homewares for David Jones in 1949; trade exhibitions and furniture in the 1950s and 60s; Australian currency notes between 1963 and 1975; and signage for major buildings such as the American Express Tower on George Street in Sydney. This remarkable career earned him the gold medal for graphic design from the Design Institute of Australia in 1985 and election in 1987 to the coveted Faculty of Royal Designers for Industry, Royal Society of Arts in the United Kingdom.



The Australian Coat of Arms in the House of Representatives Chamber, designed by Gordon Andrews and fabricated by Rhyl and Rob Hinwood.

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Andrews was invited to design the Coat of Arms for the House Chamber because of the diversity of his design practice and his mature age. This was in contrast to other artists who were selected for particular commissions because of their youthful, emerging-artist status and likely fresh approach. The entire Parliament House Art/Craft Program was carefully structured not only to procure needed works of art for the building, but also to provide opportunities for Australian artists and craftspeople to work in new ways, different materials, and in new collaborative circumstances beyond the scope of their established practices.

The project's Art Advisory Committee, which included architect Romaldo Giurgola, believed passionately that the 'once-in-a-

a remarkable life

lifetime' nature of the Parliament House project should be harnessed to create unique opportunities for both emerging as well as established artists, craftspeople and designers. They wanted to demonstrate to Australians just what the country's artists and craftspeople could achieve in public buildings.

The architect's brief to the artist for the design of the Coat of Arms emphasised that it should belong to the wall rather than being an addition imposed on it. "All of the surfaces within the Chamber are designed to be simple and unobtrusive," the brief said, "in recognition of the fact that the room is a work-place in which the work of democracy must be the focus of attention rather than any opulence of the surroundings."

Responding to the architect's brief, Andrews explained his design drawings and vision by saying: "I trust that generally the rendering and model speak for themselves and need no more elaboration than these brief notes . . . Various textures will be developed to add interest to the flat open spaces and to produce a tone difference in some areas of the shield . . . I will test varying glaze brightness to define features. This change in light reflection would add lustre to details . . ."

The work required close collaboration between Andrews, Rhyll and Rob Hinwood of Queensland (who were selected to fabricate the work in ceramic) and the architectural team. Together they determined how the huge Coat of Arms (measuring 2.1 metres in width and 1.7 metres in height) would be 'read' from the floor of the Chamber and from the galleries, how it should be lit, and how each of the ceramic blocks could best be fabricated and installed.

The team faced considerable time-pressures due to the need to install the work using a very high scaffold platform prior to the installation of the final finishes of timber, fabric and carpet within the Chamber. As a further complication, the Hinwoods were asked to push the technical limits of mould-made ceramics, due to the large size of each of the ceramic sections of the Coat of Arms. When test-firing of prototype ceramic blocks resulted in

cracking, Andrews reluctantly accepted the need to reduce the largest ceramic sections of the work.

Throughout the fabrication process, architect Romaldo Giurgola insisted that the joint-lines between each ceramic block should be strongly expressed and should not be filled with mortar. This would reveal the true nature of the material from which the Coat of Arms was made and the similar detailing of architectural joint-lines in the surrounding *stucco lustro* on the structural beam and piers. However, when Andrews saw the final result, he wrote to Giurgola stating that the joint-lines were deleterious to the imagery of the Coat of Arms.

After viewing the final work, Andrews also indicated that he was thinking of changing the way in which the work should be accredited. But after Giurgola wrote back to Andrews expressing his admiration for the work, Andrews did not proceed with his request to change the attribution. In subsequent interviews in later years, Andrews acknowledged the work as one of his major design commissions.

The professional staff of MGT Architects, who worked closely with Gordon Andrews during those years, remember him with considerable respect for his passion for what he saw as the 'right' way to proceed.

The Coat of Arms in the House of Representatives Chamber will stand for the life of the building as a quiet monument to the success of the collaborative design process that was followed. It is also a unique monument to the designer who was one of the very first in Australia to demonstrate the myriad ways in which an artist can contribute to a country's 'cleverness' and to the vibrancy and elegance of its built environments.

Article by Pamille Berg, Partner, MGT Architects – the architects of Parliament House in Canberra. The building's Art/Craft Program is the most extensive ever commissioned for a single public building in Australia. Photos: MGT Architects



Gordon Andrews working on the Australian Coat of Arms for the House of Representatives Chamber.