

Occasional Address

Royal Exhibition Building, Wednesday 18 December 2019, 5.00pm

Professor Robyn Sloggett AM

*Cripps Foundation Chair in Cultural Materials Conservation
Director, Grimwade Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation*

It is an honour to be here tonight. Graduating is momentous, so first, congratulations to the graduates – for your hard work, your perseverance, and your contribution. And congratulations to your family and friends who supported you because of their absolute belief in your ability to get here. And to your teachers who have committed their lives to sharing their knowledge and experience in the hope that you will come to understand that learning is shared and never stops. Many of you may feel as if you have just finished a marathon. Or perhaps that you are at the edge of a metaphorical precipice staring into an unknown future. Many of you probably just want to party.

I think it is fair to say that you are graduating in uncertain times. You might assume that, as a member of a species numbering 7.9 billion individuals, there's safety in numbers, but levels of social angst are existentially high. Like many of us, you may feel that your future is not owned by you; you may feel captive to the economy, or worried about species extinction, or diminished by social inequity, or threatened by political instability, or just that no one will want to employ you, publish your book, listen to you.

Three generations ago, Australia's national angst was given a name, 'cultural cringe', by A A Phillips in the journal *Meanjin*. It was a concept that predominated in just about everyone's view of Australia. There was a cultural and epistemological pecking order based on proximity to Europe, extended English vowels ruled the airwaves, and public intellectuals felt the need to flee to London or Tuscany or New York in order to be proud and proper Australian intellectuals. This, in a country with at least 75,000 years of continuous cultural practice and accumulated knowledge that enabled adaption, innovation and survival to overcome the same challenges we face today; climate change, species extinction, sustainability. This, in a region that holds some of the world's most significant pan-continental epic sagas, encompassing song, dance, literature, music, in broad socio-historical narratives. Cultural cringe was really a crisis of authenticity.

Today, Australia is a much more confident country, in a much more confident region. This confidence was not gained by imprimatur from the United Kingdom or Italy or the United States. Australia became more confident because institutions like the University of Melbourne with the ability to utilize the best from Europe publicly acknowledged what was missing; the recognition of Australia's Indigenous inheritance, an understanding of Australia's place within Asia and the Indo-Pacific region, and an appreciation of knowledge that sat beyond the Western history of ideas. In short, Australia began to locate itself authentically in its history and identity. But there are two more important ingredients in this confidence; a humility in realizing and acknowledging what is lacking, and an empathy that seeks inclusivity in building knowledge as a joint, shared project.

Tonight, in this place, in this time, your predominate feeling should be one of absolute confidence. You have demonstrated that you can manage uncertainty. Your years spent

surviving on little sleep, managing shattering levels of stress and anxiety, drinking way more coffee than is healthy and still being able to present coherently in class, and finally getting the grades that now enable you to be here tonight to graduate, are all testament to this.

I hope that all of you hold confidence in yourself as a key achievement in your time at this University. I hope you temper this confidence with humility and with empathy; with an embedded understanding that your knowledge comes from generations of thinkers who have contributed to your education over millennia, in ways you may or may not yet be aware of. Above all, I hope that you now know you can take your place, authentically and confidently, in the chain of enacted knowledge that will make a difference to your lives, and the lives of others.

I am sure everyone here tonight will share with me in congratulating you on your graduation and wishing you all a confident, wonderful future. Thank you and congratulations.

Vice-Chancellor's Introduction

Today the University welcomes Professor Robyn Sloggett as guest speaker. Professor Sloggett holds the Cripps Foundation Chair in Cultural Materials Conservation, and is the Director of the Grimwade Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation.

She has studied art history and philosophy in the Faculty of Arts before graduating in Applied Science (Cultural Materials Conservation), and returning to Melbourne to complete her doctorate.

Her research interests include:

- *attribution and authentication of paintings;*
- *the preservation of cultural materials held in Australian Indigenous communities, and*
- *the development of national approaches to conservation in rural, regional and remote communities.*

In 2015 Robyn was made a Member of the Order of Australia 'for significant service to the arts in the field of cultural heritage management and preservation as an academic, conservator and adviser'.

Please join me in welcoming Professor Robyn Sloggett.