



# French revolution

**Jean-Hubert Martin in leading MONA into a brave new world, where it's time to adapt or die, writes REBECCA FITZGIBBON**

**T**ASMANIA is leading the world in heralding a new era of museum curatorship and it is happening just in time, Jean-Hubert Martin says. The Frenchman, who has been appointed international curator of the new exhibition *Theatre of the World* at the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA), warns that in two generations, museums will be empty of visitors unless they embrace change now.

Martin's experience qualifies his prediction.

After 40 years in the art museum industry, he has gained a reputation as a curator that controversially collapses categories and conventions while reorienting the art world's geographic axis points; placing famous artists alongside outsider artists, among objects and antiquities across millennia.

The former director of Paris museums including Centre Pompidou, Kunsthalle Bern and Musee National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie, as well as Dusseldorf's Museum Kunst Palast, Martin continues to break the art world's rules in Tasmania.

*Theatre of the World*, which opens today, is Australia's largest collaboration between a private and a public museum.

For the exhibition, Martin has gathered together more than 480 works, many never displayed before, from the remarkable and largely unseen collections of The Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG) and MONA.

*Theatre of the World* is a veritable "cabinet of curiosities"; a new style of museum curatorship by Martin with Tijs Visser, Olivier Varenne, Nicole Durling and the MONA and TMAG teams, that harks back to a simpler era, before the art world became so stuck in its ways.

MONA's enigmatic owner David Walsh was captivated by the 2007 Venice *Biennale Artempo* exhibition curated by Martin inside the Palazzo Fortuny, who

was already well regarded for staging *Magiciens de la Terre* at the Centre Pompidou.

The *Artempo* show was groundbreaking in both scope and scale, with Martin bringing together 50 artists from the art world's "centre" and 50 from "outside", including many far removed from what is commonly thought of as contemporary art.

In accordance with the reputations of both Walsh and Martin, *Theatre of the World* is not what you might expect.

And that's the intention.

Most museums make the same mistake, Martin said.

They create an entrance room with a long written description telling you what you should see and what you should think.

"It's all about looking. Not like you are taught usually in conventional museums, where the curators think they have to teach you the history of art, teach you about the historical context and then maybe you, poor visitor, have a chance to be enlightened and understand the work of art. Here the situation is absolutely reversed," Martin said.

"It's quite simple. You don't go to a music concert to learn about the history of music; you go to have pleasure. And you can connect to pieces of music that are three centuries away and nobody cares.

"It's a strange thing that in museums you are not allowed to do that. It's changing. The process is starting to evolve and to make these things possible.

"I like very much the way David sees things, because he's interested much more in creation, in the human mind ... how wide the human mind and creation can be."

Because of Walsh's unconventional approach, MONA is leading the world



in the new breed of museums, Martin said. This new trend is unpretentious and outrageous and Martin has even been warned his past projects as director of Museum Kunst Palast in Dusseldorf, Germany, were "dangerous".

"It is groundbreaking because we've been in this sort of rational system of museums for three centuries. It's the way things were collected before the museums were really created, but I think it's changing quite fast.

"This is a whole social evolution that means the museum cannot stick to the old system it has this compartmentalisation of the different categories."

Private museums are at liberty to take risks, and the biggest risk-takers include MONA and Germany's Museum Insel Hombroich in Neuss, Martin said.

They are at the forefront of this international revitalisation of the museum industry because they are free from the rigidity of institution and from reliance on government funding.

Enticing local people back to museums is integral to the survival of museums and it must be done with a fresh approach, showing a renewed respect for the intelligence of the audience Martin believes.

While the tide of change has started in the museum industry internationally, there is a bigger change coming, he predicts.

"It will change a lot, if they want to survive. Usually we know how to survive. Human beings know how to do that," he said.

The new approach to museum format will still value history but requires a new attitude towards talking about, teaching about and presenting art and history, Martin said.

"The first time I came to Australia was in 1982 and I visited the New South Wales Art Gallery. I was coming from the Museum of Modern Art in Paris and I saw exactly the same narrative, the same history, the same structure of collection; only the pictures were a little bit smaller than the ones we had in Paris.

"I thought, 'well I'm going to the other part of the world, so far from home, and I see exactly the same structure, the same story', and I knew perfectly what the curator was telling his board, that this

**6 The sensual experience is vital. We seem to have forgotten that all the sciences were built from our experience of the senses. 9**

painting was missing and he would like to purchase this one. I knew perfectly what he had in mind. I thought, there is something very strange about this."

But the need for change doesn't mean all museums should do the same thing, he admits.

"Some should adapt more than others. For instance, I don't think the Louvre should. It has this tremendous big collection showing the universal art, maybe they should keep more or less these categories, because they can show them with the best pieces, the masterpieces."

Museums have traditionally been directed by art historians and this is evolving also, which isn't always a good thing, he admitted, but art and history education is evolving enormously with the new generation of information technology. We don't have to relate historical education to chronology so rigidly any more.

"The whole idea of history as a chronology is also something that even for historians, in history as a science is put in question, is less interesting, or less important, than it was for the previous generations.

"The sensual experience is vital. We seem to have forgotten that all the sciences were built from our experience of the senses."

It seems like a brave new world, but this new movement actually looks back to the past, he said; at the Renaissance approach of combining "artificialia" together with "naturalia" for the tension and inadvertent connection of contrast. Combining the old and the new, the insider and the outsider and finding the commonalities.

"It was normal to put a very beautiful stone next to some sort of jewellery or piece of art. I think we are going back to this kind of appreciation and way of looking at things, more and more."

Visitors to *Theatre of the World* will be at liberty to create their own visual connection between taxidermic birds, ancient Chinese ceramics, World War I trench art, Egyptian stone carvings, Aboriginal bark paintings and shields, curiosities and contemporary artworks, along with more than 80 tapa barkcloths from across the Pacific.

Two major institutions are also sending significant works for inclusion. The National Gallery of Victoria is lending Pablo Picasso's *Weeping Woman* (1937) and the Art Gallery of New South Wales is sending Max Ernst's *L'imbecile* (1961), among other international pieces and commissions.

Australia's art and museum industries best take note. When Jean-Hubert Martin says Tasmania is a world-leader, our national museums are challenged to keep up with the "arts-end of Australia".

■ *Theatre of the World*, curated by Jean-Hubert Martin, combining the collections of MONA and TMAG, opens today at MONA and continues until April 8, 2013. [www.mona.net.au](http://www.mona.net.au)





ON SHOW: Just some of the art being displayed as part of the *Theatre of the World* exhibition currently showing at the Museum for Old and New Art



LEADER FOR CHANGE: Art museum curator Jean-Hubert Martin is making his mark at the Museum of Old and New Art





IMPRESSIVE RESUME: The *Biennale Artempo* exhibition curated by Martin inside the Palazzo Fortuny in Venice, Italy.