

## Interview with Mary Mulcahy July 2022



Mary Mulcahy with a Stephen Walker sculpture of a *Zygomaturus tribobus* (an extinct marsupial).

Friends Vice President Janine Combes caught up with recently appointed TMAG Director Mary Mulcahy to chat about her career before joining TMAG, her hopes for the role and relationships with the Friends.

### So, tell us about your relationship to Tasmania, Mary.

My parents were both born in Tasmania but at the time I came along they were living in and working in New Guinea. Our family roots go right back to the First Fleet on one side and the 1800s on the other so I feel a long-standing connection to this place. Some of my early family members represented the people of Australia and Tasmania in Parliament; others planned and built breakwaters and other public infrastructure.

I spent most of my childhood in Tasmania as well as my early working life. Some of my earliest memories are of visiting TMAG with my family. In particular, I was fascinated by the thylacine and the story associated with this amazing animal. I would gravitate to this display on each visit.

### What is the career path which has brought you to the role of Director of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery?

My mother says I was always interested in science. There was no one particular 'discovery' which started it; I just seemed to be interested in finding out about how things worked in nature. But in year 11 I also discovered that I really loved art so it was a close thing about which career path I would choose. I started a science degree at UTAS but in my early years I wondered if perhaps I might have chosen art instead.

In science I majored in geology and zoology and then went on to do honours in zoology. I've always had a particular interest in palaeontology as this is where zoology and geology come together.

After completing honours I worked with the Inland Fisheries Commission in Tasmania before being recruited to help fill a shortage of female maths and science teachers within the Education Department. My mum was a teacher so I thought I would try this out. I worked at Bridgewater High School, and this showed me the power of education to make a difference in people's lives.

While reading the Australian one weekend I saw an advertisement for a scholarship for a Graduate Diploma in Science Communication course at ANU. This seemed to be exactly what I was looking for— education and science rolled together. This study led on to an array of outreach science communication jobs working for Questacon and similar programs in New Zealand, Perth, Adelaide and Malaysia from 1994 to 2000. From there I went to the University of NSW running more science outreach programs and then UTS where I started working in the science faculty but then moved to communications and marketing roles for the whole university. My next career move was to CSIRO, and I spent 14 years working in various communications roles. The highlight of my time in CSIRO was leading the education and outreach team where I re-built and re-focussed my team and attracted over \$100 million in project contracts. I enjoyed managing a team and helping to re-build this part of the organisation after major changes had taken place.

When the job at TMAG was advertised I thought that this provided a focus for all my experience. Here I could bring my love of science, my passion for art and my experience in communication to the job. I wanted to come back to Tasmania at some stage to live and here was a job I really wanted. It felt like everything I had done prior to this could be brought together to perform this role. In all the years I was living elsewhere in Australia or overseas, each time I visited Hobart I would visit TMAG. It now feels like I have come home, not just to Tasmania but to this place.

### **Now you are in the role what is important to you to focus on?**

If I think back to the story of Benjamin, the thylacine that I visited at TMAG in my childhood I remember that TMAG is the custodian of memories and stories. All stories are located in a social context – in Benjamin’s case how we thought about animals like him then compared to now. I wish that I had asked my grandparents about the thylacine as they may have actually seen one in real life. This makes me think of the importance of TMAG and its collections. It’s not just about remembering – it’s about putting things in a context. It is about providing opportunities which can’t be provided by others. This happens through the natural science, historical and artistic collections we hold.

At TMAG memories, society, culture and science come together. It’s important to me that it is both a museum and an art gallery as I think having both aspects increases the power of how we talk about these stories – and which stories we can tell. We can put things in a historical context; we can challenge paradigms; present other views and generate dialogue. When I arrived at TMAG I really felt like I had brought things together – my passions, my interests, my skills and experience.

Another aspect that is important for me is focussing on the T in TMAG. We are the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. I want our collections, our research, our art to be available to anyone in Tasmania who has an interest in engaging with it. To be able to achieve this we need to partner with others. I admit that overcoming some of the old parochial lines is a challenge but we need to get past this to make what we hold as accessible as possible. This will mean using new technologies; working with other institutions, with schools, with the Friends and Foundation, with business and non-government organisations.

At TMAG we can do what others cannot do because of our unique position as the state’s public cultural institution. We can provide a depth of story. Art and science are both creative pursuits in the way they ask questions and in the variety of ways they use to try to answer these questions. At TMAG we have the opportunity to put artists and scientists into dialogue. We have opportunities to ask questions about big issues. I want to support my teams to do just this.

### **How do you see the relationship between the Friends of TMAG and your organisation going forward?**

I’m still getting to know my Friends but I can say that ‘everyone needs friends’ – even institutions. I see that the Friends and TMAG are part of an extended family. The Friends provide us with another valuable link out into the community. You help to promote and ‘talk up’ what we do but you also let us know how the things we are doing are being received out there in the community. It’s valuable to hear feedback from a trusted ‘family member’. I’m really looking forward to working with you all over the coming years.