



THE HONOURABLE DAME ROMA FLINDERS MITCHELL AC, DBE, CVO, QC (1913-2000)

Australia's first female judge, Roma Mitchell was a truly inspirational woman. Born in Adelaide, Roma lost her father when she was only four, when he died serving in WW1. He had been a lawyer, and from an early age, Roma decided that she would follow in his footsteps. Her mother, who had no formal training (and struggled to support Roma and her sister), encouraged the young Roma to follow her academic interests. Roma excelled at school and was also a keen member of the school debating team; she identified as being the spokesperson for her entire class. Awarded the school dux upon graduating, Roma won the David Murray scholarship to study law at the University of Adelaide, where she graduated as the outstanding scholar of her year in 1934. At that time, Australia was in the grip of the Depression and the outlook of securing a professional position—particularly for a woman—was bleak. Only 10 law graduates succeeded in finding employment in Adelaide that year: Roma was one of them (and, unsurprisingly, the only woman).

That year, she was admitted to the Bar and served as a barrister for the next 28 years. Aware that her gender might prejudice juries, Roma avoided criminal cases, and specialised in matrimonial law. Her excellent work did not go unnoticed and she eventually became a partner in a city law firm that she had joined—most unusual for the time. In 1962, Roma became the first Australian woman to be appointed Queen's Counsel (QC), a title that recognised her seniority and expertise, and it apparently sent "shock waves through the legal system"—merely because of

her gender! As a QC, Roma supported various legislative actions aimed at the greater equality of women, including equal pay and the introduction of women on jury panels.

In 1965, Roma was appointed a judge in the Supreme Court. One grasps the enormity of this when considering that by the time she retired as a judge 18 years later, she was still the only female judge in an Australian superior court. Roma was a pivotal member in several landmark cases, and contributed to numerous significant reports. She also lobbied for and chaired the Human Rights Commission. In 1983, Roma was appointed Chancellor of her alma mater, the first woman to be granted such an honour. In typical fashion, Roma relished the opportunity to encourage more female academic appointments. She held this position until 1990, and the following year, the tireless Roma was appointed the Governor of South Australia, another first, and a role she held until 1996. A much-loved figure, more than 2000 people attended Roma's state funeral, and numerous landmarks and statues stand in her honour.

"On the front of the brooch silver hair alludes to the legal wig. When I explored Dame Roma Mitchell's life, I thought of hair's symbolic associations with femininity and traditional female roles within society. In a way, Roma, who never married or had children, exchanged her own hair for the leadership and authority of the legal wig. A proverb engraved on the back alludes to the faith that underpinned Roma's career and a miniature gavel forms the pin clasp." **KATHERYN LEOPOLDSEDER**

Katheryn Leopoldseder, *Roma Mitchell hair brooch*, 2011. Nylon hair, oxidized 925 silver and stainless steel. 58 x 58 x 18mm.