Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, distinguished guests, graduates, families and friends, good evening.

For those of you who are graduating tonight and embarking on the next chapter of your lives, opportunity and adventure will often present itself when you least expect it.

In 1991, I was in St. Petersburg (then called Leningrad), when I first ventured into the Baron von Stieglitz School and Museum. Armed at the time with little more than interest and enthusiasm, I was working to put together an exhibition of Russian Avant-garde art to come to Australia. With a Russian colleague I was searching for a group of rare porcelain dishware that was designed by artists of the Russian Avant-garde after the Revolution of 1917, which I understood was in the Stieglitz Museum.

The museum is housed in a purpose-built edifice constructed in the late 19th century in a retro High Renaissance style. As many of its engineering and design students did not have the opportunity to travel outside of Russia, the founder, Baron von Stieglitz, had constructed rooms decorated in various styles. 17th century baroque and 18th century neo-classical style rooms lined the massive halls. The building even housed a complete replica of Raphael’s loggia at the Vatican in Rome.

As well, Stieglitz and his followers filled the rooms with over 30,000 examples of decorative arts and furniture as samples for students to study. Although many of the treasures of this collection were transferred to Hermitage Museum in the Winter Palace after the revolution of 1917, a huge collection remained in the Stieglitz building.

On entering the museum, we were greeted by a young curator who, it seemed, could not bring herself to tell us where the porcelains were located. It soon became clear that she was new and had no idea herself where to find the collection of cups, saucers and presentation plates we were looking for. To save the situation I suggested that my colleague and I would go to lunch and return in the afternoon, knowing that in the time I was away she would scramble to find the items we desired to see.
We returned in late afternoon to a winning smile and the confidence of now being able to show us the porcelains. Laid out on a special table were a collection of about 20 plates, cups and saucers all designed by different artists.

These items were made from blanks produced by the Imperial Porcelain Factory and had simply been recycled for use by the new regime. Some of the plates and cups still had the imprint of the Tsar’s double-headed eagle on the underside. The works are rare because at the time of their making, there were extreme shortages and very small editions were made, mainly just for display. Like many goods following the revolution, they existed only for the imagination of the possible, not for actual ownership.

After much discussion we achieved agreement that a selection of these could go to Australia for a major exhibition.

As the afternoon wore on, we were treated to tea by our host, who during our break, suddenly asked if we would like to see something in the collection that very few people had seen before. Of course we did! And with eyes lit up we followed the curator downstairs to a dark room decorated in Viennese rococo style and crammed with furniture.

There our curator opened the doors of a large cabinet, then asked for my help to pull out a cumbersome package wrapped in thick plastic. We carried the soft heavy bundle to a nearby table and gingerly unwrapped it. Inside was a collection of the most exquisitely woven and embroidered silks and satins decorated in silver and gold threads that could easily have graced some 18th century palace, but they were all decorated with the symbols of a brilliant sunrise topped with a hammer and sickle – a giveaway clue that these sensational fabrics were made after the Revolution. Many of the fabrics were lengths of only two or three metres, some a bit more.

Both my Russian colleague and I were intrigued. I asked what we were looking at. The curator replied that these fabrics were prototypes from Soviet mills, for the planned Palace of Soviets in Moscow - a building that was to house the Soviet Congress amongst other things.

The Palace of Soviets was ultimately the project of Joseph Stalin. Stalin’s plans were grandiose. To start with, the massive Church of Christ the Saviour in Moscow, built by the Imperial Regime in the 19th century to celebrate the victory over Napoleon, and which took 100 years to build, was demolished in 1935 to make way for the new edifice.
An international contest took place for the architecture of the palace and had entries from such luminaries as Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius. However, in the end Stalin chose a Russian, Boris Iofan, assisted by two other architects.

An already grand, neo-classical structure was enlarged by Stalin’s orders to rise 415 metres, higher than the Empire State building. It was to be topped with a 100 metre statue of Lenin designed by Vera Mukhina. The whole project was set up to prove that a government of the workers could produce something that would be greater than both the Eiffel Tower and Versailles.

The circular foundation of the building, made of concrete slabs and steel, was completed in 1939, only to be halted by World War II, at which time the steel was taken out and used for bridges and defences.

In the end Stalin’s grandiose project, fuelled by unmitigated lust for cogent symbols of power, ended in rubble. From 1958 to 1960 that rubble was cleared and the remains of the foundations served as the edges of a giant open air swimming pool, which remained in place until an almost exact replica of the original Church of Christ Saviour was rebuilt on the site miraculously in just five years between 1995 and 2000.

It is amazing that this herculean project now only remains as a memory in drawings and in the fabric samples we found at the Stieglitz museum plus a small maquette of Mukhina’s sculpture of Lenin, whose index finger alone was meant to be four metres long in the final sculpture!

I was stunned by what we discovered during this visit, but it was just one of many surprises I encountered on a number of trips to Russia.

These visits occurred because, during the 1980s, while doing research for a thesis on the subject of Minimal Art in New York in the 60s, I stumbled across references to Camilla Gray’s ground-breaking 1962 book: *The Great Experiment: Russian Art 1863-1922.*

This chance encounter spurred me on to find a way to go to Russia in 1990 to explore the possibility of presenting the wonderful artworks of the Russian and Soviet Avant-garde in an exhibition to tour Australia. That foray into Moscow and beyond resulted in two exhibitions from Russia, which came to Australia. The most recent, *St. Petersburg 1900,* came exclusively to Perth in 2005.
Although there had been a number of exhibitions of the Russian Avant-garde around the world by this time, this was the first exhibition outside of Russia to look beyond the European influences of Cubism, Futurism, the works of Gauguin, Cézanne, Picasso and Matisse, and consider the Russian roots of these key movements. The exhibition displayed Russian folk art, theatre designs and shop signs along side the art works they influenced.

In the course of developing the exhibition I learned a great deal about Russia and Russian art. Thus a chance discovery in New York opened a world to me and initiated what is an ongoing engagement with Russian culture, which has only grown over the last 28 years.

Opening doors of inquiry, like mine in Russia, can inevitably lead to adventure. As well, often great art, great books and great ideas allow us to extend our experience of the world through the minds of others.

In this age of great opportunity and equally great uncertainty as to what lies ahead, the wider our horizons are, the greater our curiosity grows, the more we are equipped to solve the problems of the future, many which may be without precedent. But perhaps more importantly, a sense of adventure can lead to big ideas and big results.

If I have learned anything during my brief time on this planet, it is that education is an important end in itself. As long as we keep learning, life has meaning. If we stop learning, we stop living.

Finally, for me, it is a great honour to be recognized by Curtin University. However, tonight you are the stars of the show!

Congratulations to you the graduates on your achievements so far. Now go on, get out there and have an adventure!

Thank you.

Alan R. Dodge AM
Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres