

Nora, Daughter of Hans Heysen

ARTIST IN HER OWN RIGHT

In this, the second of her articles on Nora Heysen, Christobel Mattingley tells of the hardest thing Nora ever had to do

Artist Hans Heysen and his wife Sallie had five daughters and three sons. Nora, their fourth daughter, had the closest bond with her father. In a 1965 interview with Hazel de Berg for the Oral History Collection of the National Library of Australia, Nora described how the children loved being in their father's studio:

We all used to settle down and lie on our tummies to draw, and how we must have annoyed him I hate to think now, always asking for more paint or 'Is this all right?'

The Cedars, the Heysen family home at Hahndorf in the Adelaide Hills, attracted many visitors. Among them were artists, South Australian and interstate, whose company and conversation Hans particularly valued. Once, when Will Ashton, Sydney Ure Smith and Lionel Lindsay were present, Nora remembered that 'Father



asked us children to bring out our work to show what we could do'. Nora's was identified as showing a gift, which Hans took pains to nurture.

Dame Nellie Melba, another visitor, saw a picture Nora had tackled—white apple blossom against blue sky, a very difficult subject—and thought it showed great talent. She gave Nora her first palette and Nora said, 'That started me off on oil painting, which I really wanted to do. Even at that age I wasn't content to paint with watercolours. I'm still painting on this palette today'. She also recalled:

above:
Sir Hans Heysen (1877–1968)
Study of Nora Heysen as a Child
c.1925
pencil on paper; 20.4 x 12.7 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an22290433

left:
Unknown photographer
Hans Heysen and Family
(Hans Heysen bottom row, second from left; Nora Heysen top right)
Courtesy The Cedars—The Hans Heysen Estate, Hahndorf, South Australia



above:
Nora Heysen (1911–2003)
Billai 1930
pen and ink drawing;
23.5 x 30.5 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an23217742

below right:
Nora Heysen (1911–2003)
Portrait of Adrian Feint 1940
oil on plywood; 89.0 x 66.5 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an7021886

go out with my father
d. Father used to ride
with his satchel on
and all his sketching
ed to have my little
with my satchel on my
d trundle along after
sometimes went for
ur or five miles and
hausted by the time I
e. I wanted to do oils
I found that more
etic. But by the time
I my oil paints out and
te fixed up, there was
with a finished picture.
' say 'What on earth

have you been doing? You haven't even got a
beginning yet!

Later, one of Nora's jobs was to milk the cows before going off by train to art school in Adelaide in the morning, and on return in the evening. 'My father was all in favour of this, because he said, "If you're going to be an artist you need to be healthy and physically fit" and how true. I'm thankful to this day because I have an enormously strong right arm a even to paint does take a lot o physical energy, to say nothin of carting around canvases and picture frames.'

At The Cedars, Hans grew a abundance of the flowers that loved to paint, especially dahl zinnias, delphiniums and fuch and revelled in the vibrance o petunias, phlox and cyclamen and the subtleties of scabious The garden was an enchanting place, rambling down below th house and Nora also delighted gathering flowers to paint. Sh was always interested in peop too, and used to ask her broth and sisters to sit for her, offer them a shilling, then quite a tempting sum. Like her father, she also found subjects amon local people. Her compelling 1 portrait of a Hahndorf girl, tit *Ruth* and now in the Art Galle of South Australia, is probably of her best known.

At 19, Nora was commission by Adelaide bookseller–publish

F.W. Preece to illustrate K. Langloh Parker's *Woggheeguy, Australian Aboriginal Legends*. The National Library holds the original artwork consisting of 26 striking pen, ink and wash drawings, which reveal Nora as already accomplished in draughtsmanship, with a fine sense of design and understanding of the human figure. This early work is little known as the book, long out of print, is now a collector's item.

In 1937, when she returned home from five years' study in England and Europe, Nora decided that two artists in one household was one too many and moved to Sydney. Hans Heysen nurtured Nora's gift lovingly, and Nora respected his wisdom and admired and understood his work. But she had a strong spirit of independence. She wanted to develop in her own way and her father encouraged her.

Except for a period in New Guinea as a war artist in the 1940s, Nora made her home in Sydney for the rest of her life. She made a circle of friends and, like her father, valued the friendship of other artists, particularly that of flower painter Adrian Feint. The



Library holds her very sensitive portrait of Feint, painted in 1940, showing him in pensive mood. She cherished one of Feint's paintings that hung in her dining room at The Chalet, her home in Hunters Hill. It can now be seen in her studio at The Cedars, which is open to the public.

Well trained by her mother, Nora was a good cook, presenting food with artistic flair. At my first lunch at The Chalet, I remember how she served each half avocado, decorated with an impatiens flower, vivid scarlet against the avocado green. Her teacake, made with fresh plums according to an old German recipe, was luscious. When she made it with dark grapes, she always arranged some elegantly on top.

After winning the Archibald Prize in 1938 with her portrait of Madame Elink Schuurman, Nora, the first woman artist to receive the coveted award, declared in an interview with the *Australian Woman's Weekly* in 1939,

Most artists can cook, even if all cooks do not paint. Artists learn out of sheer necessity during their student days when they are nearly always poor. It sounds a bit far-fetched to say being a painter helps one to be a cook, but probably the training of one's patience and of one's colour sense as a painter does help to produce masterpieces in the kitchen.

She disciplined herself to working hours for painting, preparing meals in the morning:

When working on a portrait I paint for several hours in the afternoon. But if I am painting flowers, I paint for perhaps eight hours, until the flowers, or I myself, have wilted.

She disclosed that she could not work with other paintings in the room:

Colour on the wall distracts me, so I hang only drawings in my studio. I change the pictures frequently. Whether they are masterpieces or only prints bought for a few shillings, I think all pictures should be changed from time to time. Otherwise we become so accustomed to them we fail to notice them, which is insulting to the artist, and deprives us of a great deal of pleasure.

On my first visit to The Chalet in 1979, among the paintings stacked against the hall wall was a portrait whose subject was



unmistakably the writer Dorothy Hewett. When I exclaimed at the likeness, Nora admitted with chagrin that it had not met with approval. So there it remained, an example of the problems and stress inherent in being a portrait painter and the profession's precarious nature. Nora also painted Dorothy's husband Merv Lilley, who addressed her as 'My dear flower painter'. This portrait, held by the National Library of Australia, is a powerful image of a working man in blue overalls, his strong face revealing a thoughtful, questioning mind.

Hans Heysen's final declaration of belief in his daughter Nora's ability as an artist and his faith in her judgment were revealed at his death. It had been his practice to keep all his field sketches, preliminary drawings, uncompleted work and experimental pieces. Now Hans entrusted Nora with the task of examining all his work in his studio and home and deciding what should be destroyed. He gave her absolute discretion and made provision for such unfinished work as she deemed fit to be given to the Art Gallery of South Australia, to assist artists, students and teachers in their training and studies.

The task was heartbreaking for Nora, evoking many memories. We can only imagine her feelings as she examined piece after piece, conscious of her father's dedication to his vision of the world of nature which he revered. She said, 'It was the hardest thing I have ever had to do in my life'. But she was conscious of his high standards and his own ability to assess when

Barbara Konkolowicz
Nora Heysen with Her Dog Bosie Feeding the Birds at Home, at the Back of 'The Chalet', 2 Yerton Street, Hunter's Hill, Sydney, 1999
b&w photograph; 23.2 x 34.2 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3301212



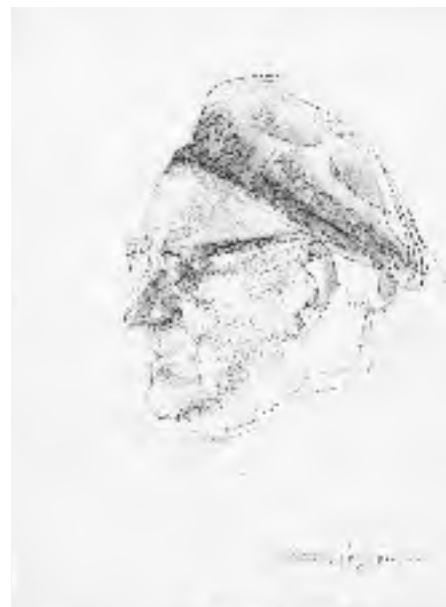
above left:
 Nora Heysen (1911–2003)
Portrait of Merv Lilley 1977
 oil on canvas; 112.5 x 82.5 cm
 Pictures Collection
 nla.pic-an22405557

above right:
 Nora Heysen (1911–2003)
Portrait of Hans Heysen
 crayon drawing; 39.8 x 29.9 cm
 Pictures Collection
 nla.pic-an5263452

an image worked, and also when he had failed to capture the essence of a subject to his satisfaction. She was fiercely protective of his reputation and determined that the value of his work should not be diminished by releasing pieces that did not meet his own expectations.

So, she culled conscientiously, and the rejects were consigned to the incinerator. Nora must have mourned, but as custodian of his work, she had fulfilled her beloved father's last wish.

When a retrospective exhibition of Hans Heysen's work was shown at Sydney's S.H. Ervin Gallery, I accompanied Nora to view it. It was a privilege to watch her response to paintings so familiar to her and to hear her comments as she relived times with her father in his studio and in the Hahndorf paddocks they both loved. When art historian Lou Klepac came to take her to an auction room to verify a painting attributed to her father, Nora's outrage was instant and her pithy dismissal memorable.



he painting was immediately withdrawn from sale.

It is difficult, as the child of a famous person, to make a name in the same field endeavour. It is even more difficult for a married woman with domestic responsibilities. Nora Heysen suffered the neglect common to most Australian women artists in the 1900s. When I interviewed her in 1979 for a film on women artists, she admitted to me that she had always had a problem with her identity as an artist in her own right. But after her early successes in the 1930s and 1940s, despite the lack of further recognition for decades, she continued, dedicated to her work, determined to be true to herself. Her vision, integrity, sensitivity and talent shine out from all her work. In 1998 she was finally recognised with an AM, Membership of the Order of Australia.

Even her father's work went through a period of eclipse, and she was deeply distressed that some of Australia's major galleries relegated his paintings to storage. It was Nora's wish that his place in Australian art would never be overlooked. Now, her reverence for her father and his work will be permanently remembered through a generous bequest that Nora made to the Library. This will allow the Library to highlight the importance of Hans Heysen and to promote the Library's holdings of Heysen-related material.

CHRISTOBEL MATTINGLEY, AM, DUNIVSA, first met Nora Heysen in 1979 and enjoyed her friendship until Nora's death in 2003