

An Exceptional Woman Among Others

GWEN RANKIN SHINES FURTHER
LIGHT ON THE LIFE AND WORK
OF ONE OF AUSTRALIA'S LEADING
FEMALE ARTISTS

Unknown photographer
Portrait of Hilda Rix Nicholas
c.1925
Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas
Manuscripts Collection
MS9817/10/2
Courtesy Bronwyn Wright /
Rix Wright Collection



IT WOULD BE MISLEADING TO DESCRIBE Hilda Rix Nicholas as one of the 'forgotten' women artists of Australia. Not only was her work justifiably admired in its own time but it has also continued to attract the interest of critics in the years since the artist's death in 1961. This interest culminated in 2000 with the publication of John Pigot's *Hilda Rix Nicholas: Her Life and Work*. In 2003, the artist's son, Rix Wright, donated to the National Library of Australia the extensive archive that had informed much of Pigot's research.

The story of the artist's life, comprehensively recounted by Pigot, needs no lengthy reiteration in this context. It is enough to know that Rix Nicholas travelled as a young girl with her mother and sister to Europe. Studying and painting in France and Morocco, she developed and fine-tuned a vibrant post-impressionist brush before relocating to Britain at the outbreak of the First World War. In a series of tragic events, Rix Nicholas lost her sister, then her mother to illness and her soldier husband in combat barely a month after their marriage in 1916. Out of the despair that threatened to overwhelm her, the latent nationalism of her upbringing was rekindled, and she returned to Australia in 1918, determined to celebrate 'the life and land from which our splendid men had come'.

E. H. Rix.

BACKGROUND

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BELOW

The subject of *Une
Australienne*, seen here
reproduced from a newspaper
clipping, was close friend
Dorothy Richmond
Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas
Manuscripts Collection
MS9817/12/2
Courtesy Bronwyn Wright /
Rix Wright Collection

The breadth of its compass gives Rix Nicholas' archive significance beyond any ongoing investigation of her life and work. This artist spent fewer than five years of her working life in a major Australian centre. Maintaining contact with friends and colleagues generated an abundance of correspondence, much of which focused on matters of interest to the wider artistic community. In the Library's collection, the voices of her contemporaries live on in their letters, locating the receptive reader vividly within the conventions and controversies of a period already fading into history. The spontaneity of communication between trusted friends pervades the archive, giving a lively immediacy to the boxes of art-related documents and newspaper cuttings that may otherwise have seemed dry and dated. People and places come to life, old photographs assume a new poignancy and the artist emerges as a vigorous and fully rounded personality, living within and constantly responding to the challenges of a dynamic and interactive social context.

Some letters, particularly those of Dorothy Richmond, Rix Nicholas' close friend and travelling companion, appear to have functioned in the first instance as a type of journal. Between 1924 and 1926, Richmond recorded the triumphs and vicissitudes of three years spent working in France and

Great Britain, weaving the more notable events into the tapestry of daily life in the manner of a born raconteur. The horrified reaction of the two Australian women to the work of the French modernists, for example, conveyed in Richmond's forthright prose, has a vitality lacking in more scholarly debate. Its authenticity is even intensified by Richmond's almost concurrent condemnation of the bathroom facilities (or lack thereof) in Rix Nicholas' Parisian studio. Richmond's diaries, the many letters she wrote to the artist after their return to Australia in 1926 and a number of her own articles, short stories and sketches paint almost as vibrant a picture of this woman as the remarkable portrait, *Une Australienne*, executed in the course of the French adventure and greatly admired when hung at the Paris Salon of 1926.

Another correspondent whose writing has survived



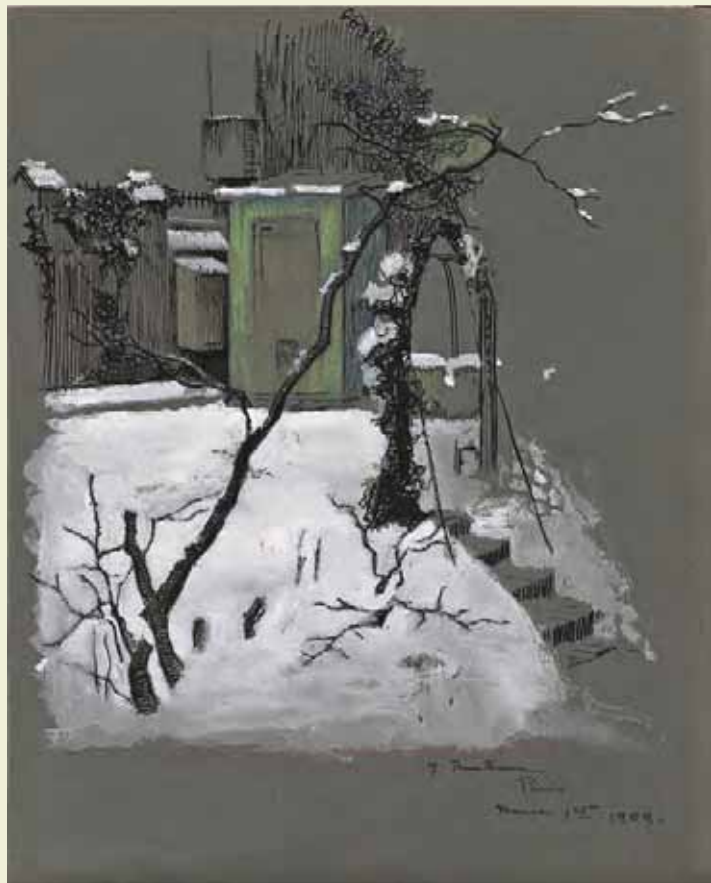
Hilda Rix Nicholas (1884–1961)
Selection of works from
'Scrap Album' ('my very
earliest drawing when a child
in Melbourne')
Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas
Manuscripts Collection
MS9817/18/1
Courtesy Bronwyn Wright /
Rix Wright Collection





to animate the archive was Henrietta Gulliver, foundation member of the Melbourne Society of Women Painters and Sculptors. Her letters, most of which were written after Rix Nicholas' second marriage to Monaro sheep farmer, Edgar Wright, undoubtedly helped to bridge the distance between rural New South Wales and the southern capital. They reveal a motherly concern for the younger artist, while maintaining a chatty but informative commentary on the day-to-day activities of Melbourne's artistic community and the state of the art market. Gulliver was an ardent, if sometimes judicious, advocate for the Melbourne Society of Women Painters and Sculptors, encouraging her friend's participation in its exhibitions and other initiatives, and keeping her abreast of art-related events. In October 1937, Gulliver reported with enthusiasm on an exhibition to which Rix Nicholas had submitted work, describing the show as 'much the best we've had' and adding that she hoped the society was finally 'on the upgrade'. 'John Rowell sold over £1,000 worth last week', 'Streeton is in hospital—very ill' and 'the Athenaeum is booked two years in advance' are only some of the snippets with which Gulliver laid siege to her protégée's physical isolation.

It is evident that Rix Nicholas appreciated this stimulus. She also recognised, as she wrote to the editor of *The Australian Women's Weekly* in the 1940s, that 'if a woman artist



is successful she is also practical'. Her own business acumen is demonstrated in a file of letters from a woman signing herself 'Peg', in which exhibitions, sales, fees, commissions and contracts are regular subjects of discussion. The writer, first thought to be Henrietta Gulliver's daughter, has been identified as Margaret Maclean, the Melbourne artist and entrepreneur. Maclean, now almost unknown, was a remarkable figure in Melbourne's arts community, occupying a singular niche as the only woman dealer of the period. Over several years, her letters to Rix Nicholas chronicled the fluctuations of her professional life, including her forced departure from the gallery she had established at 125 Collins Street in 1932 and her eventual relocation to a room in Kodak House, also in Collins Street. Here, according to a letter written in 1935, her establishment quickly became 'the talk of the town', with shows booked 'well ahead' and painting classes able to resume.

Maclean acted as Rix Nicholas' Melbourne agent throughout the 1930s. In 1934, she reported that she had booked the Athenaeum on her client's behalf for a solo exhibition in May 1936, the time lapse consistent with Gulliver's account of the popularity of this venue. Like Gulliver, Maclean included a

ABOVE LEFT
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Selection of works from
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earliest drawing when a child
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ABOVE RIGHT
Hilda Rix Nicholas (1884–1961)
A depiction of a Paris street,
from a scrapbook titled 'In the
Latin Quarter'
Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas
Manuscripts Collection
MS9817/18/2
Courtesy Bronwyn Wright /
Rix Wright Collection



man wrote not once but three times, enquiring as to her progress, encouraging her effort and ensuring she had the same information as the Melbourne-based competitors. Although Rix Nicholas' design was not selected, the courtesy of Hall's communication shows that not all of those in the male 'establishment' saw gender as a defining factor where artistic aptitude was concerned. Drafts of Rix Nicholas' own letters suggest that this was not always the case. In 1947, in an engagingly gleeful letter to an unidentified friend, she described her triumph over the directors of a widely respected commercial gallery whose condescending disparagement of her work had been retracted only

after she threatened to cancel a solo exhibition on their premises. Her account illuminates the plight of those women artists unable to muster a comparable show of strength.

Rix Nicholas was as exceptional a woman as she was an artist. The acclaim that greeted her European exhibitions almost certainly acquired some of its momentum from the colourful persona of this lady who, despite her sophistication, was known to have painted on canvases nailed to gum trees and had posed

wealth of minutiae from the Melbourne scene in her letters, ranging from Streeton's successes—'a wonderfully successful show, £3,000 sold'—to the widespread displeasure occasioned by the selection procedures of the Victorian Artists Society. Her professional services appear to have been extensive. She not only hung her clients' paintings in her gallery but also undertook all responsibility for their display in selected shows, and brought them to the attention of local and interstate collectors and administrators. In a letter written in early January 1934, she praised several of Rix Nicholas' pictures, saying that she 'will love to show them to Bernard' and believes that at least one will be sold as a result. This was no idle claim. Bernard Hall (or 'Barney', as Maclean also called him) was none other than the Director of the National Gallery of Victoria. Reference to the Felton Bequest letter books in Melbourne confirms that Hall successfully recommended the purchase of a Rix Nicholas painting offered by Maclean to the Gallery Trustees.

Hall also has a folder in the archive. In 1921, on his suggestion, the National Gallery Trustees decided to commission a mural to honour the soldiers of the First World War. A competition to select a design was announced and Rix Nicholas subsequently contacted Hall asking for further details. In the months that followed, this very busy



ABOVE
Unknown photographer
Mrs Rix Nicholas at Work
on her Picture, Looking for
Stragglers 1927
Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas
Manuscripts Collection
MS9817/10/8
Courtesy Bronwyn Wright /
Rix Wright Collection

RIGHT
Unknown photographer
Rix Nicholas with two lambs
Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas
Manuscripts Collection
MS9817/10/6
Courtesy Bronwyn Wright /
Rix Wright Collection

E.H. Fry.



for photographers with a lamb under each arm. Her passionate belief in her homeland, coupled with the sense of heritage evident in letters to Will Ashton, Director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, in which she discussed assembling her best works against the day of her death, led to the preservation of the material discussed above. Sometimes it is tempting, particularly in the face of a comprehensive and scholarly biography, to assume that the story has been told and the documents can be filed away. The Rix Nicholas

archive, which resonates with the rich interaction of many voices, most still waiting to be recognised, gives the lie to any such assumption.

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Drawing from 'Scrap Album'
(‘my very earliest drawing when
a child in Melbourne’)
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