

NQ 027.594405/2

# UPFRONT

Journal of the friends and supporters of the State Library of New South Wales



## THE WORK OF ART Australian Women Writers & Artists

*A new exhibition at the State Library of New South Wales  
and part of The National Women's Art Exhibition embracing  
140 institutions Australia wide in 1995*

June, July, August 1995

Vol 7 No 3 ISSN 1033-0224

# The art of history

BY MICHAEL MANGOLD

PART OF BEING powerless is to be ignored. The preservation and continued growth of an immense collection of women's writing and art by the State Library of New South Wales (covering almost 200 years of Australian history) make its public display, in the Library's *The Work of Art: Australian Women Writers & Artists* exhibition, extremely poignant.

In the context of *The National Women's Art Exhibition*, marking the twentieth anniversary of International Women's Day and embracing 140 institutions Australia wide, *The Work of Art* exhibition reveals the very substance of the history of women's art in this country.

Professor Joan Kerr is the initiator of *The National Women's Art Exhibition* and the editor of *Heritage: The National Women's Art Book* published in conjunction with it. In *Heritage* Kerr argues that the contribution of women's writing and art in Australia remains unrecognised in conventional art history.

"Every generation says 'Oh look, we've got some really good women [artists] now. At

last. Aren't they good, isn't that interesting, isn't it lovely, women are doing this?' No predecessors, no future. Therefore they are always in the present. And through that you get the argument that that is because their work doesn't last. Well it's because it's not collected and if it was collected, it's in the basement, not put in the history books."\*

However there is no question of confining history in the State Library. The commitment to the preservation and expansion of the Library's collections through acquisition by purchases and donations is matched by the energy and creativity with which the Library seeks to promote them and open them for research.

*The Work of Art* exhibition at the State Library is seen by its curator Rebecca Thomas as being very much in the tradition of the Library's ongoing exhibition program. "This particular exhibition follows in the tradition of *Faces of Australia: Image, Reality and the Portrait* (1992) and builds on earlier Library exhibitions such as *The Arts in Australia - Her Story* (1982) and *Women Artists in Australia* (1975)," Rebecca said.

"*The Work of Art* exhibition is drawn entirely from the State Library's collections and many of the works and artists represented also appear in *Heritage: The National Women's Art Book*. The Library's collection of watercolours, sketch-

books, photographs, oil paintings and engravings relating to women artists and writers is 'mind blowing'."

"The Library has been collecting this material often at a time when nobody else was collecting it because it was not deemed to be aesthetically pleasing or of any artistic value. Often women's sketchbooks and diaries were not even of a very high financial value. We have samples that have an association with someone's diaries or journals and not only do we have the original artworks but we have letters, magazine articles or newspaper accounts that put it in context. It's very rich!"

"So from this amazing amount of material that we have, the material we are using in the exhibition actually includes something more than the original artwork or written work. It is actually about them as an artist or a writer or about their lives or about the process of creating a work."

The stoicism of women artists and writers in many different social situations is revealed in the exhibition. The art and letters of the Scott sisters for example counterpoise life, art and history beautifully.

Helena Scott and her sister Harriet were responsible for virtually all of the scientific illustration for articles and books in Australia during the late 1860s and early 1870s. In a letter from 1862, included in *The Work of Art* Helena wrote to her friend Edward Ramsay; "You cannot think how thankful I am that my dear father allows me to place my name to the drawings. It makes me feel twice as much pleasure while painting them."

A passage by her sister Harriet written in 1865 is equally revealing; "I always have a great desire to distinguish myself in some way or another and if I were a man I might do it



Above: Untitled watercolour of butterflies and passionfruit flower c.1854 by Helena Scott.



Right: Drawings of Bird's Eggs c.1866 by sisters Helena and Harriet Scott.



Above: Nude study from Sketchbook c.1965 by Thea Proctor. In 1966 at the age of 86, Thea Proctor wrote "I am told that my latest portraits are my best. I am lucky, for I am not the sort of old woman who could just sit around and knit!"

Left: Nancy Kilgour's painting of her husband Jack Kilgour sketching a model c. 1940.

but as I am a woman I can't try, for I hold it wrong for women to seek after notoriety in any way because you see if they take care of homes etc and play and paint and all other feminine things they have quite enough to occupy themselves but if I were a man and had nothing to do in this line I might go writing books, or getting a name in some great professions or turn politicians or a hundred other things – clearly I ought to have been called Harry Scott instead of Hattie Scott".

Almost a century later Thea Proctor shared the same difficulties. Expressing her views on women artists she wrote in 1957; "A woman who has the care of a home and a family needs special courage and determina-

tion to practise an art which gives her self expression. An artist's work is often discouraging enough when one can give one's whole life to it".

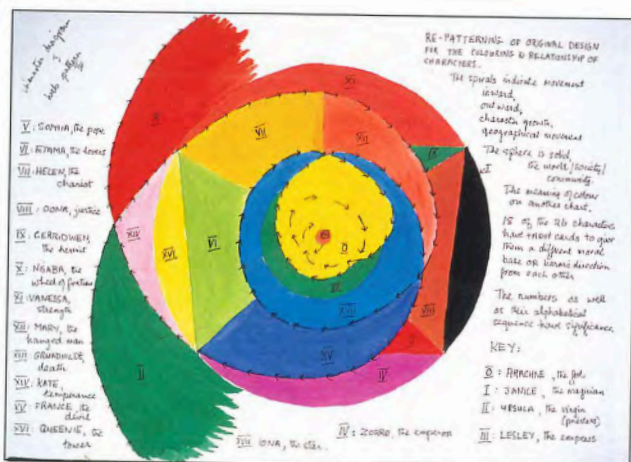
"Authors, journalists, designers, black and white artists, photographers, sculptors, teachers, portrait painters and children's book illustrators are profiled in the exhibition," Rebecca Thomas said. "The Work of Art conveys the lives and works of fifty women artists and writers in Australia."

"The balance between the number of historical and contemporary artists and writers featured in The Work of Art exhibition at the State Library is fairly even. A temporary exhibition space for contemporary artists is also an important component of the

exhibition. A mini film festival and a calendar of events through the Library Society are also planned."

The power of art in its broadest and possibly most socially valuable definition is evident in *The Work of Art*. As part of the massive intellectual and logistical effort orchestrated by Joan Kerr through *The National Women's Art* exhibition the State Library of New South Wales is once again revealing history, this time by opening its collections through *The Work of Art*.

\* Quotation by Professor Kerr from Anne Loxley's report *Girls night out*, Sydney Morning Herald, Saturday February 18, 1995.



Novelist Finola Moorhead used diagrams to plan the development of characters in *Remember the Tarantella*.

## The Work of Art: Australian Women Writers & Artists

Generously supported by the Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation and Perpetual Trustees

On Display in the Galleries from 14 August 1995 until 11 February 1996