

MARGARET OLLEY

My first encounter with great art was through reproductions displayed in the assembly hall at my school, Somerville House in Brisbane. Someone had given some Medici prints of great quality to the school. These were placed on an easel and during morning assembly my eyes were riveted to whichever print was on that easel. I was totally deaf to what was being said and completely lost in a Degas or a Gauguin. It was the beginning of the lifelong excitement of looking at works of art.

I have favourite paintings in galleries all around the world that give me great pleasure every time I visit them; sometimes I walk through rooms of paintings just to spend time with one particular work. Spending time alone with one painting is a great luxury. At other times the visual feast of a great retrospective such as the Vermeer exhibition in The Hague is too much to resist and, although the crowds can be an ordeal, the rewards are worth it.

Of course one's choice of paintings sometimes changes with time, but in all my painting life I have never tired of works by Cézanne, Bonnard, Derain, Degas, Vuillard, Matisse and the Fauves, or the still, spiritual quality of Morandi. For this exhibition I have tried to include as many works by these artists as were available within Australia.

Some of the Australian painters I have chosen, such as Emanuel Phillips Fox, Rupert Bunny, John Peter Russell, Charles Conder and Arthur Streeton, echo the qualities of the nineteenth century French painters whom I love.

Both the Rupert Bunny and the John Peter Russell were painted in the south of France where I spent a lot of time in the 1950s. The small John Russell has much in common with the Fauves who also painted there.

Arthur Streeton's *Morning sketch* reminds me of my days as an art student when I lived at McMahons Point and travelled by ferry each day to get to East Sydney Technical College. Always late, I would look out of the window and, as I saw the

ferry coming around the point, tear down countless flights of stairs, barely making it on board before the gangplank was pulled up.

It was in this period, at the end of World War II, that fellow student Anne Weinholt first introduced me to Sam Hughes who had previously run the Zwemmer Gallery in London. This gallery had been the first to exhibit Braque, Picasso and Matisse in England. Sam had an extraordinary knowledge of art and on his wall hung an Ivon Hitchens. It was this work, now hanging in the exhibition, which contributed to the ongoing excitement I have experienced through looking at paintings. I remember how visually fascinating I found that painting and how, ever since, it has encouraged me to seek out works of art which offer the same visual excitement.

A number of the works I have chosen are by artists I have known personally, or who, in some way, touched my life.

David Strachan was my friend from art school days and we often travelled and painted together. *The old wall Bricherasio* is, I think, one of his best works. David had been studying Jung therapy in Switzerland and then travelled to Northern Italy where he stayed with the Daneo family who owned this old silkworm factory and often had artists staying with them. David painted several versions of this building before moving on to stay with Paul Haefliger and Jean Bellette in Majorca.

I attended Jean Bellette's life classes when I was a student at East Sydney Technical College and she and her husband, the *Sydney Morning Herald* art critic Paul Haefliger, were sharing a house with David Strachan in Double Bay. I always admired Jean as a person, as a teacher, and as a painter whose work has not received the attention it deserves.

In the 1940s the Sydney art world was quite small and everyone knew each other. It was Russell Drysdale who opened my first exhibition at the old Macquarie Galleries in 1948 and it was at a party of Bonnie and Tas Drysdale's that I first met Bill Dobell. Going home on the tram that night Dobell asked me to sit for the portrait which later won the Archibald Prize. His nude, which I have included, was done in the 1930s and

is a work which is not often exhibited but, nevertheless, shows a strong command of the human form.

I knew both Justin O'Brien and Donald Friend from the 1940s when they lived in the 'artist's' boarding house *Merioola*. Justin had been a prisoner-of-war in Poland and the penetrating portrait I have chosen is one he did of a fellow prisoner in that camp.

Donald Friend's *The fortune teller* was painted in Brisbane after he and I had been on a painting trip to North Queensland. Donald was looking through *Life* magazine and saw some photographs of an Indian ceremony which included elephants decorated with elaborate designs. Donald was fascinated and later incorporated the patterns into this painting.

Lloyd Rees judged the first art prize I won. I consider him the grand old man of art. I was looking for one of his Tasmanian landscapes to include in the exhibition but in the end I decided on one of his exquisite etchings which he had given me.

I had seen Fairweather's paintings at the old Macquarie Galleries and at the Redfern Galleries, London, but it was not until the former Director of the Queensland Art Gallery, Laurie Thomas, introduced me to Fairweather that I really got to know the man. Fairweather was living on Bribie Island, just north of Brisbane, after years of living in China. I became a frequent visitor to his hut and he would often talk of his time in Peking and Shanghai. I have chosen a work from Peking, and in many ways it reminds me of Fauve painting. I remember him telling me how very much he loved the landscape around Shanghai, and in particular the area called Poet's Mountains, and he told me that the view from Bribie, looking back to the Glasshouse Mountains, reminded him of that fondly recalled landscape in China.

Lawrence Daws is another artist who lived on Bribie and now often incorporates the Glasshouse Mountains in his work. His *Night sea journey* is a haunting painting. He achieves work which is both lyrical and atmospheric, but at the same time foreboding. He is an artist who deserves much more attention.

Godfrey Miller was an artist I admired for his dedication and his spirituality. I remember once I was minding Jocelyn and Carl Plate's house at Woronora. Godfrey arrived late one evening and said he would sleep under the stars. He spent all the next day drawing two trees which particularly fascinated him. When I finally looked at the paper he had been working on all that time there were just a couple of lines as he sought their perfect placement.

Looking at paintings has been one of the great joys of my life. In recent years I have tried to give some of that excitement and stimulation to others by donating paintings to public collections through the Margaret Hannah Olley Art Trust. On my travels I had often noticed that great works of art had been given to galleries by private individuals, and I also had another mentor in Lucy Swanton, former director of the old Macquarie Galleries, who gave most generously. Lucy was a great friend of Grace Cossington Smith whose work I have included. Grace was a very private person and I never really got to know her, but I do admire her work, and also that of Margaret Preston.

Some artists I have included are from my own collection. Elwyn Lynn's and Kenneth Hood's works are both from the sixties. Kenneth Hood was a most outstanding painter, but after he became a curator at the National Gallery of Victoria he seemed to stop painting which was a great loss.

I have always liked this period of Elwyn Lynn's work and when I finally flew - midday, midwinter with perfect visibility - across Central Australia from Sydney to Derby and looked down on the great salt lakes I realised just how well Lynn could capture the essence of the Australian landscape.

Following Jeffrey Smart's excellent retrospective at the Art Gallery of New South Wales I chose his *St John in the wilderness* because it is such an unusual image and hasn't been seen in public before.

I am always on the lookout for young or up-and-coming artists and have included several in the exhibition. I particularly admire the work of Cressida Campbell and

also that of Robert Barnes. They both have a special way of interpreting the visual world and both work with the dedication I admire.

Naturally there were many works which I would have liked to include, but it was not practical to borrow great works such as the Bonnard nude at the National Gallery of Australia or Picasso's *La Belle Hollandaise*, which belongs to the Queensland Art Gallery. Many of the works I have chosen are not necessarily the best works by a particular artist, but they are, for one reason or another, favourites with me.

I get great pleasure from buying and giving paintings to galleries for people to enjoy and I wish this would become contagious, and that the government would offer more tax incentive, as they do in America, so that more people would be encouraged to give to public collections.

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