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Art and Politics: Mas Evatt and the Evatt Collection

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Catalogue essay: 'A fresh point of view': The life and work of Mary Alice Evatt

Mary Alice Evatt hung her large collection of paintings in every room of her Canberra house, including the kitchen. "And why not?" she said to a journalist in the 1960s, "It's the room in which a woman probably spends most of her time." It was in her daughter's kitchen in Leura, more than thirty years later, that I first admired a painting hanging on the wall above the workbench; it was Mary Alice's [Woman in red](#).

Mary Alice was born at Ottumwa, Iowa, USA in 1898 to Samuel and Alice Maud ('Nene') Sheffer. In the same year they moved to New Zealand because of her father's work. When Mary Alice was one year old the family moved to Melbourne, Australia where her brother Melbourne ('Mel') was born. Four years later they moved to Mosman, Sydney where they lived in 'Wapello', a grand house with views to the Heads.

Mary Alice enrolled to study architecture at Sydney University and, through family friends, she met final year Arts/Law student Herbert Vere Evatt, whom she called Bert and who Australians were later to know as 'Doc' Evatt - High Court judge; Attorney General and External Affairs Minister in the Curtin wartime government; deputy leader of the Chifley Labor government and President of the United Nations. Their romance blossomed and, as a Christmas gift in 1918, Mary Alice gave to Bert a handwritten and bound volume of her poetry entitled *Imaginings*. The final stanza of one of the poems written at 'Wapello', reveals her feelings for him:

I lie dreaming here of you
Awake, asleep 'tis all I do
To live to dream, to love, to live,
I all my dreams to you will give.

During their engagement Bert encouraged Mary Alice ('Mas' as her friends called her) to change from architecture to Arts (English and History) and then to Constitutional Law so that they could discuss cases together. In 1920 they married, against her father's wishes - Sam was an affluent, conservative American while Bert was a Labor Party supporter raised in the Bank Hotel in Maitland. Despite her father's opposition and their initial lack of money (they oiled the floorboards of their first house by hand), their marriage was enormously happy and successful, as their letters to each other across the decades show. In Lismore for a court case Bert writes:

Dearest Mas,

I'm leaving tomorrow ... for you and home and will be glad indeed to see you and love you again. It's only an absence like this which makes me miss you so acutely ... my beloved darling. I yearn for you want you and most adore you.

From your
Bert

Two years after their wedding Bert and Mary Alice adopted their first child Peter and, in 1932, their daughter Rosalind. In the mid 1920s Mary Alice designed and built a holiday house for her family on The Mall in Leura. A great admirer of William Morris since her school-days at Redlands, she named it 'Kelmscott' after his house in England.

In 1926, during a boat trip to England they met the journalist H. J. Cantwell and his wife Bill who became lifelong friends, sharing a love of art, theatre and political ideas (Bill refers to the Evatts at that time as "William Morris socialists"). While they were in London Bill recalls that the General Strike occurred:

All the buses, everything, was run by scab labour and Mary Alice was more principled than I was. She used to come out to our place at Hampstead Heath ... She wouldn't go on any transport at all, so we used to walk the 7 or 8 miles ... we'd attend meetings in Albert Hall, with all the miners, the place would be packed.¹

Not only passionate about the need for social change, the Evatts were also "fanatics about modern art".² Mary Alice studied and worked as an artist and played an active role as an advocate of contemporary art in Australia. It is hard now to imagine the effect of the new attitudes to making paintings in the 'modern manner', not only for audiences but for artists as well. The movement away from the 'Great Tradition' in European art (techniques of representational illusionism) in the work of artists in Australia during the 1920s reveals an almost tremulous embrace of methods of abstraction. Artists like Mary Alice were literally problem solving on the picture plane, just as her husband was initiating and negotiating change through his political life.

In 1930 Bert's appointment as Justice of the High Court of Australia meant that they lived between their Sydney home at Mosman and an apartment in 'Ardoch', Dandenong Road, Melbourne, which they furnished with Fred Ward designs. For Mary Alice the alternate locations enabled her to become an art student at both the Crowley Fizelle Art School at 215a George Street Sydney in Sydney and during 1936-7 at George Bell's Bourke Street School. Mary Alice's art work was initially and indeed primarily influenced by the teaching methods and theories presented by Grace Crowley and Rah Fizelle. In fact their influence never really left her work. Mary Alice writes that, through their school, Crowley and Fizelle:

influenced a whole generation of painters in Sydney with their aims of

balanced dynamic symmetry and harmonious arrangement of colour which held too a note of urgency and passion for beauty that must never make terms with custom or prejudice.³

What sets Mary Alice's work apart is a clear curiosity about all forms of contemporary art. Her inquisitiveness is seen in the combination of many of the prevailing attitudes to abstraction in her painting. Crowley and Fizelle had attended the André Lhote studio school in Paris during the 1920s. Lhote promoted a type of measured cubist-inspired abstraction combined with an appreciation for the effects of colour. The subject of the work - whether landscape, the human figure or still life - should remain recognisable. These qualities can be seen in Mary Alice's *Woman in red* and *Nude woman*.

At the George Bell School Mary Alice worked alongside artists such as David Strachan, Yvonne Atkinson and Russell Drysdale. It was there that she painted *Footballers*, a work which shows the influence of both Crowley's theories of rhythmic vitalism and Bell's interest in cubism at that time. Bell emphasized a more intuitive approach to subject matter and finish. In *Footballers* the heritage of the tasteful forms of cubist composition promoted by Crowley and Fizelle is evident but tempered by the choice of subject matter: a brief moment in an Australian Rules match. The painting shows influences from photography in its apparently random composition and from reproductions of European artworks then available to Australian audiences, in particular Robert Delaunay's footballer paintings.

Bert visited Bell's studio often and engaged in lengthy discussions with him about modern art. In 1939, Bert opened the controversial first exhibition of the Contemporary Art Society, of which Bell was the first president, at the National Gallery of Victoria.

Continuing to take the opportunities presented by her husband's work and research commitments meant that Mary Alice also studied internationally. In 1938, following in the footsteps of Crowley and Anne Dangar, she studied with Lhote in Paris at Montparnasse where, in her words, "I worked hard from nine till five every day and enjoyed it thoroughly".⁴ In New York she attended the studio school of Hans Hofmann, a leading exponent of Expressionism. In every spare moment during their travels Mary Alice went to contemporary art exhibitions, sending to Crowley and others catalogues and books about European artists including Georges Braque, Nanun Gabo and Llohte and American artists such as Sidney Janus and Stuart Davis which would otherwise have been difficult to obtain.

In 1946 and 1948, during Bert's presidency of the United Nations, the Evatts spent several months in Paris. It was there when they were "trying to work out how we would have peace and how peace should last" that they met Picasso who had been painting about the "feelings of peace and war".⁵ Mary Alice, asked

what she would most like to do in Paris, requested to see some of the recent works painted by Picasso. Soon after she was introduced to him. Picasso invited her to come again to his studio, where she spent an entire day while he encouraged her to open any drawer and look at any of his work. In an interview in 1973 Mary Alice recalls:

This was a wonderful experience, which influenced all my life ... I don't think the world will be the same without him because he didn't allow himself to be influenced by the thought of what things would bring in the way of money. And I feel that that's one of the most important things in life. Now my husband thought that, too.⁶

The Evatts invited him to come to one of the United Nations meetings; "he came and ... they rose in tribute to him".

While in Paris, Mary Alice and her friend from Melbourne, Moya Dyring who now lived in Paris, regularly went out together to paint *en plein air*.⁷ It was on one of these occasions that *Woman seated on grass* was painted. Mary Alice's love of contemporary work included literature and in Paris, and America, she bought and read the work of modernist writers such as Picasso's great friend, Gertrude Stein.

Mary Alice was the first woman to be appointed as a trustee of the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) and remained the only female member from 1943 until her retirement in 1970. Shortly after her appointment she voted to award the 1943 Archibald Prize to William Dobell for his portrait of Joshua Smith. The award was contested by a group of artists on the grounds that it was caricature rather than portraiture and the trustees and Dobell became the defendants in a case heard in the Supreme Court - Mary Alice was called to give evidence. On November 8th 1944 Justice Roper found in favour of the defendants.

The same year Mary Alice, with a committee of fellow trustees - Sydney Ure Smith, William Dobell, Charles Lloyd Jones and Professor E.G. Waterhouse - developed travelling art exhibitions in response to a 1940 report by the War Art Council and the Encouragement of Art Movement. In 1944-5 the first seven of these exhibitions, containing approximately 350 paintings, were sent by rail to forty regional towns. Works by contemporary Australian artists such as Roland Wakelin, Frank Hinder and Grace Cossington Smith were not only exhibited but offered for sale because "the organisers believed the sale of original works in country centres an important part of the scheme itself".⁸ The committee also purchased some of the paintings for the AGNSW, including Lloyd Rees' *Landscape at Orange*, Sidney Nolan's *Central Australia* and Margaret Preston's *Banksia*. During those years Mary Alice also travelled to America, representing the AGNSW in discussions about post-war exhibitions with the Carnegie Trust.

At every opportunity Mary Alice and Bert bought and gave works by contemporary Australian artists. Their many friends included artists and writers such as Dyring and her husband Sam Atyeo, Katharine Susannah Pritchard,

John and Sunday Reed, Eleanor and Eric Dark, Crowley and Strachan. The then Director of the AGNSW, Hal Missingham, emphasises the Evatt's advocacy of contemporary art, adding that:

they were very knowledgeable, especially Mary Alice ... if you said to Mary Alice, have you seen any work by Paul Tchelitchew lately she'd know what you were talking about, but if you mentioned it to any of the other Trustees they wouldn't know what the hell you were at at all.⁹

As well as their support for Australian artists they collected the work of European modernist painters and in 1939 purchased a Modigliani portrait of Morgan Russell for £1,000 and a work by Vlaminck for £95 from the Melbourne *Herald* Exhibition of *French and British Contemporary Art*.

Both Mary Alice's status as the sole female trustee of the AGNSW and her commitment to contemporary art are highlighted in an incident recounted by Missingham. The trustees were considering whether or not to purchase any of the pictures from the 1953 exhibition, called *French Painting Today*. Missingham's suggestion that he favoured André Marchand's painting *Spring*, a vibrantly coloured painting of a goddess with two nude black handmaidens, was rejected by the president, with the comment - "surely, we shouldn't think of acquiring such a lewd and indecent work, gentlemen".¹⁰ Not a gentleman, but nevertheless a trustee, Mary Alice voted for the purchase of *Spring* saying: "I can't see anything indecent about it, I think it is magnificent. Perhaps, Mr President, you would point out just *where* its indecency lies?"

Throughout her time as a trustee Mary Alice donated a number of artworks to the AGNSW. These included several drawings by Horace Brodzky; a lithograph, *Don't meddle with the press!!* by Honoré Daumier; another, *Torso of a woman*, by Henri Matisse; an oil, *The Bicycle*, by Fernand Léger and a marble sculpture, *Head of a Woman*, by Ossip Zadkine.

In the late 1950s and early 60s Mary Alice continued her studies, becoming a student of Desiderius Orban at his studio in Sydney. It was here that she painted in pastels producing works such as *Tulips in a white vase* and *Vase of flowers*. During these years she continued to judge a number of art exhibitions including the Mosman Art Prize, the Henry Lawson Festival at Grenfell, NSW, and various shows in Canberra.

In 1963, with Bert's health failing, the Evatts left their home in Mosman to be near their daughter and son-in-law, Peter Carrodus, in Canberra. The cost of day and night home nursing care created the need to sell both the Modigliani and the Vlaminck, two of their most valuable artworks. Shortly after her husband's death in 1965 Mary Alice flew to England to see Dyring who was dying from cancer. At this time Mary Alice's brother, Mel, also died. On her return to Australia Mary Alice lived with Peter and Rosalind in a studio apartment they had built for her at their Canberra home.

In 1966 she became Convenor of Arts and Letters for the National Council of Women. Two of the Council's special projects were children's art competitions and Book Week. She also worked to develop strategies for parents to encourage children to read "books worth reading", based on the principle she learnt when a student: "as my old teacher George Bell used to say, 'never look at a bad picture - it's catching'".¹¹

In that year she became a student once more, at the Canberra Art School, concentrating mainly on sculpture. It was in this final stage of her career, up until her sudden death in 1973, that she created works in *ciment fondu* such as *Contemplation*, *'Lady Elsie'*, *Mother and Child* and *Man seated*.

In 1979 the Evatt foundation was established as a memorial to her husband. Amongst its charter is the development of young artists in Australia. To that end, in 1989, the Foundation established the annual Mary Alice Evatt Art Prize at the University of Western Sydney for the best art work by a final year student.

Mary Alice and her husband spent their life together "always trying to get people to take a fresh point of view".¹² The experiments of contemporary art in many ways exemplified their philosophy of the need for lifelong learning - by "disinterring ideas" from history one can bring "into the light a great many beautiful, fascinating and fruitful ideas".¹³ In an interview shortly before her death Mary Alice reveals once more her embrace of art:

I find that a great many people who are very wise and very hard-working and a great success in whatever line they're pursuing, don't seem to have enough extra thoughts and enough extra time to be interested in art, and I do think that art helps to clarify one's thinking, one's way of life and to make it fundamentally sounder.¹⁴

1. Peter Fry, *'The Doc' H.V. Evatt*, Australia: ABC Radio Tapes, 1988, part one.
2. *ibid.*
3. Mary Alice Evatt, "The Crowley Fizelle Art School", *Art Gallery of New South Wales Quarterly*, vol. 8, no.1, October, 1966, pp. 314-316.
- 4 "Colorful Glimpses of Life Among Art Students", *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 28 January 1939, pp. 24-32.
5. Mel Pratt Collection, "Mary Alice Evatt interviews" 26 April-1 June, 1973, 2:2/23. Oral History Section, National Library of Canberra.
6. *ibid.*, 2:2/25.
7. Dyring bequeathed what is now known as the 'Moya Dyring Memorial Studio' at the Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris, for the benefit of Australian artists.

8. *Art Gallery of New South Wales Quarterly*, vol.12, no.2, January, 1971, p. 583.
9. Geoffrey Dutton, *The Innovators: the Sydney alternatives in the rise of modern art, literature and ideas*, Sydney: Macmillan Company of Australia Pty Ltd., 1986, p. 69.
10. Hal Missingham, *They Kill You in the End*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson Pty Ltd., 1973, pp. 65-66.
11. "Mrs Evatt on Art", 18th May, 1966, Art Gallery of New South Wales archive.
12. Fry, *op. cit.*, part one.
13. Pratt. *op. cit*, 2:2/28.
14. *Ibid.*, 3:1/5.