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MAKING IT ACCESSIBLE: MARY ALICE EVATT AND AUSTRALIAN MODERNIST ART

Melissa Boyde

In his autobiography art historian Bernard Smith recounts how, as a young art teacher posted to a school at Murraguldrrie in country New South Wales (NSW) in the mid 1930s, he tried unsuccessfully to borrow books on modern art from the country lending service of the State Public Library. On a visit to Sydney he made an appointment to see the NSW Chief Librarian W. H. Ifould, “a man of considerable power and influence in New South Wales” who was also a trustee of the National Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW).¹ Smith took to the meeting the small catalogue listing the art books in the country section and “asked, as discreetly as he could manage, why it offered no books on modern art.” Ifould was very clear: “There are no books on modern art in the Country Reference Section...because to the best of my knowledge no one in the country is interested in modern art.”²

This chapter explores the history of taking modern art to country towns in NSW, particularly the contribution of one woman, Mary Alice Evatt. Mary Alice was involved in the modernist art movement both locally and overseas. Through her international connections she was well-informed on the ‘Art for the People’ movement: in America the Federal Art Project, established under Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal in 1932, emphasised the central role of the arts in a democracy and in Britain the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts was established in 1939 on principles of opportunity and participation for all citizens. In Australia, Mary Alice promoted similar ideals focusing on arts access, education and participation as part of the modern state. These views, combined with her advocacy of principles of social equity, led to her becoming a key broker in the delivery of one of the main ‘Art for the People’ initiatives in Australia, the AGNSW’s Country Art Exhibition Scheme. It was through this scheme that modern art found its way not

only into library catalogues but into the heartland of NSW country towns.

In 1943 Mary Alice Evatt was appointed a trustee of the AGNSW. *The Bulletin* reported on the morning tea put on by the President and trustees of the gallery to welcome her:

Through the board room of the National Gallery last Saturday morning ran a thrill of anticipation. For the first time in its history a women trustee was to enter its portals.

Women's groups and women artists wrote to the gallery applauding Mary Alice's appointment but she remained the only woman throughout her twenty-seven years in the role. Not only was she the lone female voice at board meetings (the standard address by the president to the trustees began "Gentlemen – and Mrs Evatt –") but she was one of the few champions of modern art.³ In his autobiography the director of the gallery from late 1945, Hal Missingham, recalls that the "early trustees were inordinately partisan about what they considered to be true art as opposed to all the horrible modern rubbish infiltrating the pure art of Australia."⁴ He credits Mary Alice as being the only trustee with a thorough knowledge of modern art and with consistently arguing for the purchase of modern works in the face of the entrenched conservatism of trustees such as Sir Lionel Lindsay, Sir Marcus Clarke, Sydney Long, J. W. Maund and Ifould.

Background

Mary Alice Sheffer (1898–1973) met Herbert Vere (Bert) Evatt in 1918 at the University of Sydney – she was studying architecture and he was an outstanding law student and University medallist. They married the following year despite some misgivings by her father, a wealthy American industrialist who had moved the family to Australia when Mary Alice was a baby. Samuel Sheffer's concern was that Bert was a socialist, but for Mary Alice that was part of the attraction – she had developed strong views about social justice during the 1917 tram strike in Sydney when allegations of victimisation of the workers circulated. Her future husband had expressed his analysis and support of the workers' case in published articles and he worked on the subsequent inquiry into the strike. Bert went on to become a Justice of the High Court of Australia, Minister for External Affairs in the Curtin wartime

government, leader of the Labor Party and President of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly. Throughout their marriage Mary Alice extended the role of supportive wife and mother expected at that time and actively worked as an advocate for cultural development, educational reform and social justice. Described by a friend as a “William Morris socialist” – Mary Alice named the holiday house she designed for her family in the Blue Mountains ‘Kelmescott’ after Morris’ house in England – she shared his belief that art, education and freedom should be for all, not a few. Her work in these areas spans six decades – from the Depression when she organised a women’s co-operative to provide clothing material and sewing machines at Balmain Town Hall for use by women in need, to appointments she took on after her husband’s death in 1965, including convenor of arts and letters for the National Council of Women, in which role she became a leading voice for children’s literacy, and vice-president of the UN Association in Canberra. Mary Alice accompanied Bert on the majority of his official overseas trips, gave public talks and radio interviews and acted as a cultural broker for Australian art and artists. She was not only an advocate for art and education but also took the opportunities presented by official travel to study with major modernist artists, including André Lhote in Paris and Hans Hofmann in New York and to meet with prominent artists such as Picasso.

In the 1930s, while Bert worked on the High Court, the Evatts lived between Sydney and Melbourne and forged connections in the avant-garde art milieu of both cities. In Melbourne, their friends included John and Sunday Reed, Cynthia Reed, Sam Atyeo, Moya Dyring and other members of the Heide circle and Bert opened the controversial first exhibition of the Contemporary Art Society in 1939. Mary Alice took painting classes in both cities – at the Grace Crowley and Rah Fizelle studio in Sydney and in Melbourne at the George Bell School alongside artists such as Russell Drysdale, Albert Tucker and David Strachan. In 1935 one of her paintings, an oil entitled “Intermediate French”, was featured in an *Australian Women’s Weekly* article on modern art.⁵ The Evatts were a bridge between art circles in the two cities – John Reed suggested to them that a Sydney branch of the Contemporary Art Society be formed and the first meeting was held in the lounge room of their Mosman house.⁶

Together the Evatts were “the first couple to buy any really modern paintings in Australia.”⁷ They purchased several works from the 1939 *Herald* “Exhibition of French and British Contemporary Art” (before any of the state galleries made an acquisition) including Amedeo Modigliani’s “Portrait of Morgan Russell” (1918) and Fernand Léger’s “La Bicyclette” (1930). The failure of state galleries to purchase significant numbers of works from the *Herald* exhibition is now regarded as “the greatest of Australia’s missed opportunities to purchase fine examples of modern European art for reasonable prices.”⁸ These kinds of resistances and failures to incorporate the modern by national institutions were precisely what Mary Alice worked to overcome. In public forums she put forward the argument that public galleries need:

not only to show a collection of exhibited masters of art, but also to make available provocative contemporary works created by artists of all other nations so that an interchange of ideas can keep the imaginations and powers of one’s own people active and creative.⁹

The Evatts actively supported emerging Australian artists and regularly bought works from them, often as gifts for friends, relatives and overseas contacts. In a letter dated 1958 Queen Elizabeth II writes to thank them for a painting they presented to her: “I am thrilled with the Drysdale and look forward to hanging it in my room...the painting is so luminous and the colour so lovely, and it is so full of tenderness as well.”¹⁰

In America during World War Two while Bert “put Australia’s problems before the people of America”¹¹ Mary Alice gave radio interviews emphasising the contribution women could make in rebuilding and striving for peace and gave lectures at galleries on Australian art. Bert met Franklin D. Roosevelt at Harvard University in 1938 and the two men became friends. Similarly when Mary Alice met Eleanor Roosevelt they found they shared much common ground. One of Eleanor’s greatest achievements was in her role as chairperson on the UN Commission of Human Rights which drafted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, accepted by the UN General Assembly in 1948 under Bert Evatt’s presidency. Article 27.1 asserts the right of everyone to participate freely in cultural life and to enjoy the arts. The arts were also central to Mary Alice’s vision for the future and she fully endorsed Eleanor’s statement that “the development of art, science and literature

for the benefit of our country as a whole is a concern of the whole country, not of a privileged few.”¹² Speaking in New York in 1948 Mary Alice emphasised the importance of government recognition that:

art is able to crystallize emotions, intellectual trends, moments in the past, moments in the future, for its people, thus clarifying their views on life, and in making critical or appreciative art viewers also people capable of a larger and more complete life as citizens of a modern state.¹³

The same year in Paris she spent time with Picasso at his studio looking at his wartime paintings and hearing about the details of his involvement in the Resistance. As a result, she and Bert invited him to attend the UN General Assembly, where he received a standing ovation (*see* Figure 9.1).

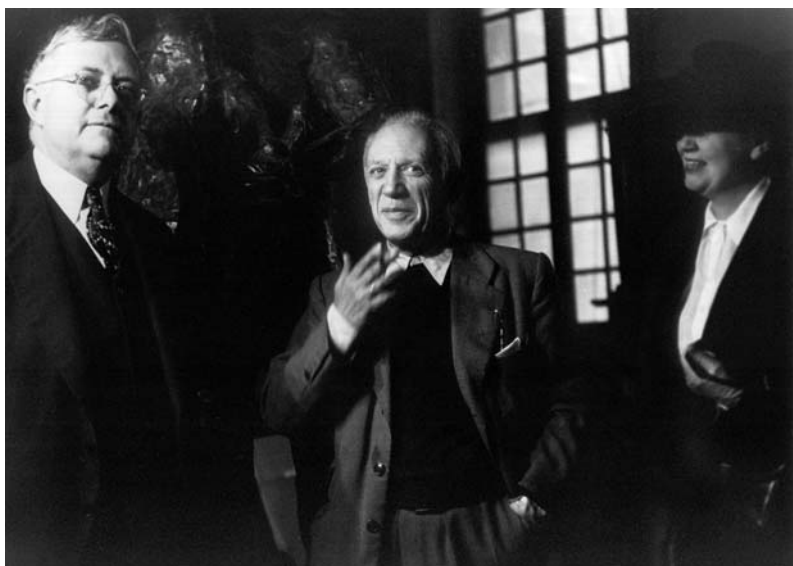


FIGURE 9.1. Dr Herbert Vere Evatt and Mary Alice Evatt with Picasso, Paris (c.1948). Photograph courtesy of Rosalind Carrodus.

Art in the country

Although Mary Alice mixed with world leaders and international stars of modernist art, her story is not one of elitism. Back in Australia she

argued vigorously for wide access to the arts as a fundamental part of the social structure. In 1941, as part of his successful election platform, the leader of the NSW Labor Party, W. J. McKell, promoted the idea of taking exhibitions of original works of art to regional centres. Mary Alice's brother-in-law Clive Evatt became Minister for Education and in that role appointed Mary Alice as a trustee of the AGNSW. To head off speculation about possible nepotism, Premier McKell issued a press release detailing the protocol for trustee appointments and outlining her suitability for the position. From the start of her role as a trustee Mary Alice expressed her views on art for the people – at the reception to welcome her she told the press that among her aims were art education and public art projects.¹⁴ Her presence on the board provided strong support for initiatives based on these ideals. She was asked to attend meetings of the War Art Council and the Encouragement of Art Movement (EAM) in 1944, which were developing strategies to take art to the people. As a wartime initiative the War Art Council's committee brought representatives from all the major art societies – traditionalists to modernists – into one room: Bernard Smith, Sydney Ure Smith from the Society of Artists and Hayward Veal from the Royal Art Society. Similarly EAM, established in January that year, had a broad membership including Smith and Veal, Howard Ashton, president of the Royal Society, and Corporal Leo McKern (later to become famous for his television role as Rumpole of the Bailey) who represented the Army.

In May 1944 the report "Plan for the Organisation of Travelling Art Exhibitions in NSW" was released and its recommendations discussed by the AGNSW trustees. In response the progressive trustees formed a sub-committee, comprising Mary Alice, Sydney Ure Smith, Charles Lloyd Jones and Professor E. G. Waterhouse, to develop the Country Art Exhibition Scheme. Clive Evatt endorsed their request to have Bernard Smith seconded from his position teaching art at Enmore Activity School to administer the scheme. A central aim of the exhibitions outlined in the report was educational but as Smith found "an education programme for the gallery and the support of contemporary art were issues closely linked."¹⁵ Tensions surfaced among the trustees as a result of the convergence of education and contemporary art in the country tours. Smith developed a strategy of sidestepping some of the opposition: "I never argued with any of them on aesthetic grounds but simply in liberal terms: country people had a

right to see contemporary art, just as city people had, and to then make up their own minds.”¹⁶ Mary Alice’s authority and ideas were indispensable to him. He describes her as “a very effective, outspoken and shrewd member of the ‘Trust’ whose support he sorely missed whenever she was absent from meetings because of wartime commitments overseas.”¹⁷

The McKell Labor government’s initial funding was for seven exhibitions to be assembled and shown in forty country towns during the period 1944–5. The sub-committee decided they would consist of original paintings and some reproductions. Since the only gallery outside Sydney at that time was at Broken Hill, the exhibitions were to be shown in a centrally located hall or room in each town with the support of groups of “responsible citizens.”¹⁸ One hundred of the works were from the gallery’s permanent collection and the remainder, approximately two hundred and fifty works, were lent for seven months by the National Library in Canberra, the NSW State Library, private collectors and by the artists themselves. The logistics of how the tours would operate were developed by Smith and the sub-committee: wooden crates were specially made at the gallery to pack the works so they could be transported by rail to country centres; responsibility for the safety of the works when they arrived was delegated to local district school inspectors, and a roster of exhibition attendants was allocated to groups such as the Country Women’s Association. A brief explanatory catalogue was to be published and sold at each exhibition and, as the minutes note, any money “over and above catalogue costs might go toward some charitable purpose nominated by the District concerned. Such a feature might help toward stimulating an interest in the exhibition. Any feature that helps to stimulate an interest in the exhibition deserves consideration.”¹⁹

Mary Alice proposed that a series of lectures should also accompany the exhibitions. She gained the support of Premier McKell and the Labor Party and funds were provided. The lecturers would usually visit the country centre for three days, supervise the hang (carried out by local volunteers or council workers) and then give talks after the opening, on the following evening and at morning sessions arranged for groups of school students. Over the next ten years lecturers included modernist artists such as Tony Tuckson, Sali Herman, Jeffrey Smart and Jean Bellette.

The first exhibition, “One Hundred and Fifty Years of Painting in Australia”, was a broad survey of Australian art from the colonial period to the present and included work by Conrad Martens, James Gleeson and Bellette. The first town to show the exhibition was to be Wollongong but at the last minute, after problems with negotiations, it opened instead at the School of Arts at Wagga Wagga on 9 October, 1944. From there it toured on throughout the state.

The second exhibition, “Some Recent Australian Painting”, was organised by Mary Alice and commenced in Canberra in late 1944. Mary Alice borrowed approximately fifty works from contemporary artists including Grace Cossington Smith, Roland Wakelin, Missingham, Crowley, Frank Hinder, Bellette, Ralph Balson, Drysdale, Thea Proctor, Fizelle and Margaret Preston. It was the first major exhibition of contemporary art shown in Canberra. There was no public art gallery so the exhibition was held in the Masonic Hall. In the absence of a local council or art society to supervise the exhibition Mary Alice and Bernard Smith did it all. On several evenings the exhibition room doubled as a venue for local functions so Mary Alice went there early every morning to sweep out the hall and ensure everything was in order before the doors were opened to the public.²⁰ The exhibition opening by Senator Collings, Minister for the Interior (assisted by Bert Evatt) was attended by members of Parliament and diplomats. Local media coverage included a detailed discussion about the modern art on display and the minutes note that “many citizens commented that the exhibition emphasised the need for improved art facilities in Canberra.”²¹

In line with the principles of the ‘Art for the People’ movements in America and Britain, Mary Alice and her colleagues had as a primary aim of the AGNSW scheme “the development of a wider patronage” both for the economic benefit of artists and to increase public “knowledge and appreciation.”²² To help achieve this aim they arranged that some of the works would be available for sale. The opportunity to purchase modern art was taken up by country audiences and at the Canberra exhibition, for example, there were a number of purchases including paintings by Hinder and Wakelin.

Mary Alice and her colleagues on the sub-committee wanted the modern works not only to go to private collectors but also into the public collection of the AGNSW. Acquisition of new works for the permanent collection was entirely at the Trustees’ discretion and as Bernard Smith

notes “the old guard of the trust was absolutely convinced that contemporary art was degenerate.”²³ This attitude amongst the conservatives continued after the war so at a trustee meeting when they were outnumbered the sub-committee seized the moment and voted to allow the acquisition of modern paintings for the tours. However, this strategy was short-lived. When Mary Alice travelled with her husband to the 1946 UN conference in San Francisco the conservative trustees, who had realised that the modern works they detested were entering the permanent collection in this way, voted in her absence to abolish the practice.

Were country people as disinterested in modern art as Ifould had told the young Smith that they were? The statistics, documented carefully by staff and committee, indicate otherwise. In the first year a total attendance of 57,144 people was recorded.²⁴ At Wagga Wagga the exhibition received good coverage in the local press, including publication in full of an essay on ‘Abstraction in Art’ by Eric Wilson, one of the exhibiting artists. There was an audience of over 2,000 and 444 catalogues were sold. The minutes also note that:

sixty people attended a lecture on “The Development of Australian Art” held on Wed. evening 11th October. A feature of the exhibition was the widespread interest of members of the services. The Wagga Wagga Council exhibited its plans for a local art gallery with the exhibition.²⁵

Temora, at that time a town of 4,000 people, recorded audience attendance of 3,500. The report from Tamworth said the exhibition was “an outstanding success” with 4,733 attending. Isabel McKenzie, the lecturer at Tenterfield, reported that “great interest was taken in the exhibition” with more than five hundred children seeing it and around fifty adults attending each of the three evening lectures.²⁶ Similarly enthusiastic comments emerged from other country centres.

But even with such success, many of the trustees remained opposed to modern art and in 1947 Sydney Ure Smith resigned “as a protest against what he considered the total refusal by the trustees to accept any form of contemporary art for inclusion in the Gallery collections.”²⁷ In the following years Mary Alice persisted with the idea of acquiring contemporary works for the country exhibitions successfully arguing that the model had been established by the Victoria and Albert Museum.

She was granted several allocations of funds including £500 to acquire prints and reproductions which she selected from an art dealer when in New York and another £500 to purchase contemporary Australian painting. However, in 1954 the country exhibitions were discontinued, ostensibly due to lack of funds. Mary Alice consistently lobbied for their re-establishment and before her retirement in 1970 this came to fruition. A new truck was purchased in 1967 which contained seventeen large aluminium wall-panels which could be clipped together to form a temporary art gallery. The first exhibition that year was seen by 100,000 visitors in 52 country towns and 1,100 lectures were given.²⁸ The travelling exhibitions continued until 1987.

From the beginning the sub-committee of the Country Art Exhibitions had “a hidden agenda.”²⁹ Mary Alice and her colleagues’ vision was that the travelling exhibitions would stimulate the establishment of regional galleries in NSW. The success of the scheme elicited lasting support for the visual arts in country towns and established a blueprint for art gallery adult and school education programs that has continued for sixty years. Contacts made during the early tours led to the ongoing involvement of modernist artists in local art prizes and art teaching in regional centres. During the 1950s and 60s public galleries started to open in larger towns as a result of successful lobbying of councils led by the local art groups which had thrived during and after the tours. By 2005 there were 1.23 million visitors to thirty-four public galleries in regional and suburban NSW employing over 110 full-time professional staff with total expenditure of \$14.75 million, largely met by local government.³⁰ Several of the galleries have significant modernist art collections – another important legacy of Mary Alice’s passion for making modern art accessible for all citizens, not just a select few.

¹ Bernard Smith, *The Boy Adeodatus: The Portrait of a Lucky Young Bastard* (Ringwood, Vic: Penguin, 1985), p. 235.

² Ibid.

³ Hal Missingham, *They Kill You in the End* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1973), p. 33.

⁴ Ibid, p. 27.

⁵ *Australian Women’s Weekly*, 7 December 1935.

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- ⁶ Bernard Smith, *A Pavane for Another Time* (South Yarra, Vic: Macmillan Art Publishing, 2002), p. 44.
- ⁷ Eileen Chanin and Steve Miller, *Degenerates and Perverts: The 1939 Herald Exhibition of French and British Contemporary Art* (Carlton, Vic: Miegunyah Press, 2005), p. 222.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ Mary Alice Evatt, Mary Alice Evatt papers, Evatt Collection, Flinders University.
- ¹⁰ Rosalind Carrodus papers. Blackheath, NSW.
- ¹¹ John Curtin, Letter, 28 June 1942, Evatt Collection, Flinders University.
- ¹² Allida M. Black, ed., *Courage in a Dangerous World: The Political Writings of Eleanor Roosevelt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 52.
- ¹³ Mary Alice Evatt, Mary Alice Evatt papers, Evatt Collection, Flinders University.
- ¹⁴ *Bulletin*, 24 March 1943.
- ¹⁵ Bernard Smith, "Taking Art to the Country: How It Began" in Peter Timms and Robyn Christie, eds., *Cultivating the Country: Living with the Arts in Regional Australia* (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 40, 33–46.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- ¹⁷ Bernard Smith, Letter, 10 February 1993, Barbara Dale papers, Evatt Collection, Flinders University.
- ¹⁸ Mary Alice Evatt, Mary Alice Evatt papers, Evatt Collection, Flinders University.
- ¹⁹ AGNSW Minute Books, Country Art Exhibitions, AGNSW Archives, Sydney.
- ²⁰ Bernard Smith, Interview with Melissa Boyde, Melbourne, September 2006.
- ²¹ AGNSW Minute Books, Country Art Exhibitions, AGNSW Archives, Sydney.
- ²² War Art Council and the Encouragement of Art Movement, "Plan for the Organization of Travelling Art Exhibitions in New South Wales," 1944, Mary Alice Evatt papers, Evatt Collection, Flinders University.
- ²³ Smith, "Taking Art to the Country", p. 40.
- ²⁴ AGNSW, "Art in the Country," 1946, AGNSW Archives, Sydney.
- ²⁵ AGNSW Minute Books, Country Art Exhibitions. AGNSW Archives, Sydney.
- ²⁶ AGNSW, "Art in the Country," 1946, AGNSW Archives, Sydney.
- ²⁷ Missingham, *They Kill You in the End*, p. 32.
- ²⁸ AGNSW, News Release, 1967, AGNSW Archives, Sydney.
- ²⁹ Bernard Smith, *A Pavane for Another Time*, p. 116.
- ³⁰ Museums and Galleries NSW, Regional Galleries Scoping Study Final Report, 2005.