

2004

Art and advocacy: Mary Alice Evatt in the 1930s and '40s

Melissa Boyde

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Boyde, Melissa, Art and advocacy: Mary Alice Evatt in the 1930s and '40s, *Kunapipi*, 26(2), 2004.
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol26/iss2/11>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

Art and advocacy: Mary Alice Evatt in the 1930s and '40s

Abstract

On her return to Australia from Europe in 1939, Mary Alice Evatt remarked in an interview for the Australian Women's Weekly that paintings devoted to gum trees, sheep, koalas and misty seascapes were the only Australian works selected to hang in World Fair Art Exhibitions. In addition she derided the decision makers who overlooked Australia's modernist, experimental artists, many of whom were women: 'if only those in authority were to select the paintings of Australian artists who prefer creation to photography, and were less overawed by official selection bodies, Australia might find a worthy place on the art map of the world' (Evatt 1939 32).

MELISSA BOYDE

Art and Advocacy: Mary Alice Evatt in the 1930s and '40s

On her return to Australia from Europe in 1939, Mary Alice Evatt remarked in an interview for the *Australian Women's Weekly* that paintings devoted to gum trees, sheep, koalas and misty seascapes were the only Australian works selected to hang in World Fair Art Exhibitions. In addition she derided the decision makers who overlooked Australia's modernist, experimental artists, many of whom were women: 'if only those in authority were to select the paintings of Australian artists who prefer creation to photography, and were less overawed by official selection bodies, Australia might find a worthy place on the art map of the world' (Evatt 1939 32).

Although born in America, Mary Alice lived all her life in Australia. In 1920 she married Herbert Vere Evatt (Bert) whom she met in two years earlier while they were both students at the University of Sydney.¹ The Evatts were passionate about the need for social change, Mary Alice being described as 'a William Morris socialist' (Cantwell qtd in Fry). They were also 'fanatics about modern art' (Fry), both welcoming contemporary art's movement away from techniques of representational illusionism to abstractionism. Mary Alice played an active role as an advocate of contemporary art in Australia during a period in which the dominant climate was conservative. Censorship meant that thousands of books were banned² and in the art world there was division between supporters of traditional and contemporary art. The most famous instance was the controversy that surrounded the awarding of the 1943 Art Gallery of New South Wales' Archibald Prize for a non-traditional portrait. The tensions implicit in this controversy between conservatism and modernity were exemplified in the opposed views of Bert and the conservative Prime Minister Robert Menzies: Menzies felt that modern art was 'ill-drawn' and 'unintelligible to the unilluminated mind', finding 'nothing but absurdity in much so-called "modern art"' (Martin 195), while Evatt, on the other hand, was recognised as a connoisseur of modern art, opening the controversial first exhibition of the Contemporary Art Society at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1939.

From 1930 Mary Alice divided her time between Sydney and Melbourne as a result of Bert's appointment as Justice of the High Court of Australia. The alternate locations enabled her to become an art student at both the Crowley Fizzelle Art school in George Street, Sydney and at George Bell's school in Bourke Street, Melbourne during 1936–37. Her artwork was initially, and indeed primarily,

influenced by the teaching methods and theories of design, pure colour and significant line presented by the modernist painters Grace Crowley and Rah Fizelle. In fact, their influence never really left her work; looking back on that period 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.

(Evatt 1966 314–16)

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 both attended the André Lhote studio school in Paris during the 1920s. Lhote promoted a measured, cubist-inspired abstraction combined with an appreciation for the effects of colour. According to Lhote, 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 painting, *Woman in Red* (1930s) [fig 1] which shows effective use of strong contrasting colour and an abstract approach to portraiture.

The George Bell School, which opened in 1932, was in its heyday when Mary Alice studied there. Bell focused on the importance of both the imagination and technical ability, and his teaching was directed at encouraging artists to find their own ways to express their ideas concretely. Consequently, his approach meant that 'depending on the temper of the times it led as readily to surrealism and expressionism as to abstraction' (Eagle and Minchin 9). It was here that Mary Alice painted *Footballers* (1936) [fig 2], a work which shows the influence of both Crowley's theories of rhythmic vitalism and Bell's interest in cubism at that time. Bell emphasised a more intuitive approach to subject matter and finish. In *Footballers*, the heritage of the ordered 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 also shows influences from avant-garde photography in its apparently random composition and from reproductions of European artworks then available to Australian audiences, in particular Robert Delaunay's footballer paintings.

Although her painting from this period shows considerable talent and application Mary Alice never exhibited during her life, always describing herself as a student. Undoubtedly, the public roles she took on and her involvement in her husband's work and international travel impacted on the time she could devote to her own artistic practice. The first public exhibition of her work, thirty years after her death, was in 2002 at Bathurst Regional Art Gallery.³

As well as the classes she attended in Australia, Mary Alice also studied internationally. In 1938, following in the footsteps of other Australian artists, she spent two months in the Lhote studio in Paris where she 'worked hard from nine till five every day and enjoyed it thoroughly' (Evatt 1939 32). Despite the

threat of war that pervaded outside, she recounts how inside the studio an atmosphere of camaraderie and happiness prevailed amongst the thirty students who came from almost every European nation. Later that year Mary Alice took classes with Hans Hofmann, a leading exponent of Expressionism, at his studio school in New York. In every spare moment during their travels she went to contemporary art exhibitions, and sent publications difficult to obtain in Australia 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.

In 1943 Mary Alice was appointed a trustee of the National Art Gallery of New South Wales (now the Art Gallery of New South Wales — AGNSW). She was the first woman to hold this position and remained the only female trustee 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 decision was controversial and the award was legally contested by a group of artists on the grounds that it was caricature rather than portraiture. The media coverage generated public interest and huge crowds flocked to the exhibition to see the painting. The trustees and Dobell became the defendants in a case heard in the Supreme Court. On November 8th 1944 Justice Roper found in favour of the defendants.

In the same year Mary Alice, with a committee of fellow trustees — Sydney Ure Smith, William Dobell, Charles Lloyd Jones and Professor E.G. Waterhouse — started to develop travelling art exhibitions in response to a 1940 report by the War Art Council and the Encouragement of Art Movement. Bernard Smith, who was later to become a leading art historian and commentator on modernism, was seconded from the Department of Education to implement the initiative. In 1944–45 the first seven of these exhibitions, containing approximately 350 paintings, were sent by rail to forty regional towns throughout New South Wales. Works by contemporary Australian artists such as Roland Wakelin, Frank Hinder and Grace Cossington Smith were not only exhibited but also offered for sale because Mary Alice and several of the other organisers ‘believed the sale of original works in country centres an important part of the scheme itself’ (‘In New South Wales’ 583). The committee also purchased some of the paintings from the Travelling Art Exhibition scheme for the AGNSW, including Lloyd Rees’ *Landscape at Orange*, Margaret Preston’s *Banksia* and Sidney Nolan’s *Central Australia*. Nolan’s landscape, utterly devoid of koalas, gum trees or humans, is evidence that a shift in perspective had taken place in representations of Australia. Only recently has the AGNSW purchased the larger and more significant Nolan work of the same name painted two years earlier, in 1950 (Sykes 29). During these years Mary Alice also travelled to America, and while there she represented the AGNSW in discussions about post-war exhibitions with the Carnegie Trust.



Fig 1. Mary Alice Evatt, *Woman in Red*, from the collection of Rosalind Carrodus
(Photo: Graham Lupp)



Fig 2. Mary Alice Evatt, *Footballers*, from the collection of Rosalind Carrodus
(Photo: Graham Lupp)

At every opportunity Mary Alice and Bert bought and gave works by contemporary Australian artists. The then Director of the AGNSW, Hal Missingham, emphasises the Evatts' 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 Tchelitchev 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. (qtd in Dutton 69)

As well as their support for Australian artists they collected the work of European modernist painters and in 1939 purchased an Amedeo Modigliani painting, *Portrait of Morgan Russell* for £1,000 and a work by Maurice de Vlaminck for £95 from the Herald Exhibition of French and British Contemporary Art touring show. The National Gallery of Victoria short-listed nine works for purchase from this exhibition but the conservative director of the gallery, James S. MacDonald, referred to them as 'exceedingly wretched paintings ... the product of degenerates and perverts' (Eagle and Minchin 15). Thus the opportunity to buy works by Pablo Picasso, Maurice Utrillo, Braque and others was missed. Mary Alice, for her part, donated to the AGNSW a number of the significant modernist artworks she had collected from this period. These included a lithograph by Henri Matisse, *Torso of a Woman* (1913), an oil, *The Bicycle* (1930), by Fernand Léger and a marble sculpture, *Head of a Woman* (1923–24), by Ossip Zadkine.

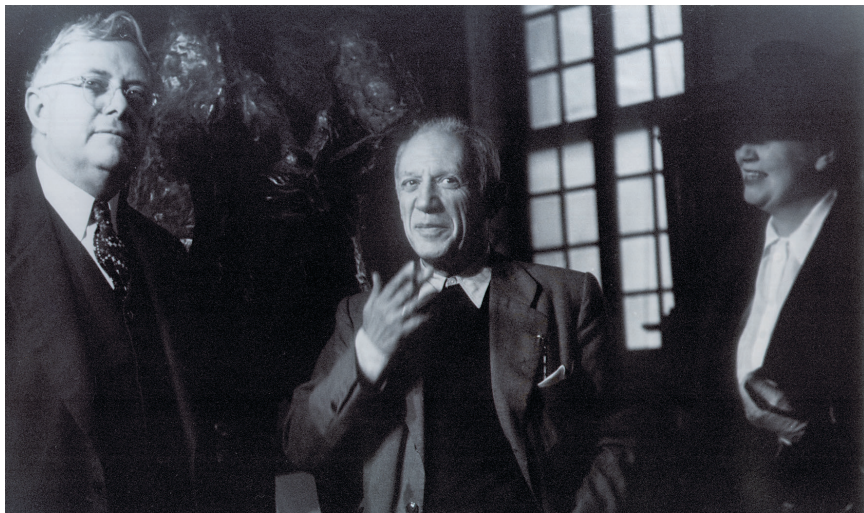
Mary Alice's status as the sole female trustee of the AGNSW, her commitment to contemporary art and the division between traditionalists and modernists are highlighted in an incident recounted by Missingham. The trustees were considering whether or not to purchase any of the works from the 1953 exhibition *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 of the trustees, with the comment, 'surely, we shouldn't think of acquiring such a lewd and indecent work, gentlemen' (Missingham 65–66). 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?' (66).

In 1948, Bert's presidency of the United Nations General Assembly took the Evatts to Paris where they rented an apartment near the Parc Monceau. Paris, one of the major centres of Modernism, was a city they both loved and Mary Alice was struck by the marks the war had left there. She and Bert often walked through the park where they would watch the children playing, the Punch and Judy shows, and the youth there who were growing up in the post-war environment. Mary Alice recounts how 'you'd see the shadows behind them of bitterness and sadness and desolation. You can't fight a war like that and think that it doesn't leave behind it these bitter shadows, it does do so' (Pratt).

During this time Mary Alice acted as an ambassador for Australian art, developing associations with key art world figures and organisations. France's



Mary Alice Evatt, from the Evatt family archive



Doc Evatt, Pablo Picasso, Mary Alice Evatt, from the Evatt family archive

art treasures, stored during the war for safekeeping, were gradually brought out and Mary Alice was invited to help assemble them in the Grand Palais and Petit Palais. She was also asked to assist in the hanging of pictures from the Musée d'Art Moderne in the Palais Chaillot — the venue for the 1948 session of the United Nations (Evatt 1971). It was also while in Paris when they were 'trying to work out how we would have peace and how peace should last' that she met Picasso, who had been painting about 'the feelings of peace and war' (Pratt). Mary Alice was a great admirer of Picasso's abstract painting — his influence can be seen in *Woman in Red* which has stylistic and compositional similarities to Picasso's portrait *Gertrude Stein* (1906). When asked by UN officials what she would most like to do in Paris, Mary Alice requested to see some of the works painted by Picasso during the war and soon after she was introduced to him at his studio in the Grande Rue de St. Augustine (Pratt). Picasso invited her back to his studio, where she spent a day while he encouraged her to open any drawer and look at any of his work. In an interview 1973, shortly before her death, she 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. (Pratt)

For Mary Alice art was not set apart from social and political contexts. Recognising Picasso's work during the war, both as an artist and supporter of the French Resistance, she and Bert invited him to attend the United Nations General Assembly where the entire Assembly 'rose in tribute to him' (Pratt).

Mary Alice's passionate commitment to modern art went hand in hand with her commitment to the cause of social justice advocated by her husband throughout his life. She believed that the wives of political leaders 'should always speak out if they had something to say' (Wilson 13) and during and after the war she took an active role helping to deepen alliances and form friendships with leading political figures. The Evatts and Roosevelts became good friends: she describes Franklin as 'a gay, vital man' and Eleanor as 'one of the best raconteurs I've ever known'; she also had discussions with Winston Churchill who 'loved to argue the point [and] liked you to disagree with him' and spent evenings in Paris with the de Gaulles where the discussion, always in French, was on international law (Curnow 29).

Mary Alice and her husband were international in outlook at a time when Australia tended towards parochialism. They spent their life together 'always trying to get people to take a fresh point of view' (Fry). Through her public roles Mary Alice made important connections internationally and at home played an influential role in the art world. In an interview shortly before her death she reveals the tremendous importance she placed upon 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. (Pratt)

NOTES

- ¹ Dr Evatt later became a High Court Judge, Attorney General, Minister for External Affairs in the Curtin wartime government, leader of the Opposition and President of the General Assembly of the United Nations.
- ² From 1929 over 5,000 books were banned by the Commonwealth Customs Department, starting with James Joyce's *Ulysses* and followed by works including Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* and Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (Coleman 13).
- ³ *Mary Alice Evatt 'Mas'* curated by Melissa Boyde.

WORKS CITED

- 'In New South Wales...' 1971, *Art Gallery of New South Wales Quarterly*, 12.2, p. 583.
- Coleman, Peter 1974, *Obscenity, Blasphemy, Sedition: 100 Years of Censorship in Australia*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney.
- Curnow, Hugh 1968, 'Indomitable Women: Mrs. Mary Alice Evatt', *Daily Telegraph*, 19th March, p. 29.
- Dutton, Geoffrey 1986, *The Innovators: The Sydney Alternatives in the Rise of Modern Art, Literature and Ideas*, Macmillan Company of Australia, Sydney.
- Eagle, Mary and Jan Minchin 1981, *The George Bell School: Students, Friends, Influences*, Deutscher Art Publications, Melbourne.