



"TRIPTYCH OF THE PASSION"
by JOHN COBURN
WINNING ENTRY, 1960

BLAKE PRIZE 1961

'Triptych of the Passion'
by John Coburn
Winning Entry, 1960
Reproduced from the
cover of *Blake Prize*
(Sydney: Blake Prize,
1961)
Courtesy of the
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THE BLAKE PRIZE

passion as well as art

Judy Cannon describes the history and evolution of the Blake Prize

A group of people with the desire to bring church and artist closer together in the modern world met in Sydney in 1949 and agreed to found the Blake Prize for Religious Art. The name 'Blake' was chosen because William Blake, whom the group regarded as a genius of no particular school, had successfully integrated art and religious content into his work.

The founding committee included Richard Morley, the Rev. Michael Scott SJ, Rector of Newman College, Melbourne, and Mrs M. Tenison. Prize money was subsequently raised by more than 300 Friends of the Blake Prize.

The committee envisaged that artists would create work on religious themes 'for churches, institutions and homes, and equally for the church to become a patron of the highest quality'. The Blake Prize continues to be awarded annually and a collection of background papers and some

reproductions of winning works are lodged with the National Library.

The first exhibition opened in 1951 at Mark Foy's Gallery, Sydney, and later toured to Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth, Ballarat, Hobart, Brisbane, Newcastle and Canberra. Justin O'Brien won the inaugural prize for a set of Stations of the Cross. The committee, whose appointed judges usually included clergy as well as artists, initially welcomed contemporary interpretation, but made it clear that works should 'attempt to penetrate the profundity of theological thought, and also have



MEDITATING ON GOOD FRIDAY BY STANISLAUS RAPOTEC, WINNING ENTRY, 1961

BLAKE PRIZE 1962

'Meditating on Good Friday'

by Stanislaus Rapotec

Winning Entry, 1961

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the ability to convey inspiration in a manner ultimately communicable to the perceptive seeker as well as the artist'.

Expectations were confounded when, during the 1950s, more and more exhibits were contemporary, or abstract, in expression. 'BTD', in the *Catholic Weekly* of March 1958, wrote of the exhibits that 'inspiration was relatively rare and genuine religious feeling was not apparent' and queried whether the judges preferred the abstract.

BTD's view may have reflected the opinions of those who readily understood traditional expressions of religious art and were shaken by contemporary artists' new and experimental work. It was an understandable dilemma, since religious attitudes and artistic thinking do not necessarily tread the same path at the same time.

There soon emerged another award, the 50-guinea Darcy Morris Memorial Prize, which specifically called for a non-abstract religious painting, its guidelines explaining that the term 'non-abstract' was to mean that a painting should include 'a recognisable

human figure' to illustrate a scriptural subject.

When the 1959 Darcy Morris Prize was awarded to Matilda Lister, for *Christ Preaching from the Sea of Galilee*, a metropolitan newspaper art critic opined that 'artists and teachers have cause for some self-critical analysis when an elderly, untutored "spare-time" beginner can win a national art competition'. Whether Matilda Lister welcomed such definition of herself and her talents is another matter.

The editor in the magazine section of the *Catholic Weekly* in 1960 pulled no punches either. He wrote that, because there had been no tradition of religious art in Australia, and because practitioners needed time to appreciate the purpose of religious art, 'we were prepared to exercise tolerance—and indeed, charity; to recognise and praise good intentions in the hope fulfillment would come in due time.'

But after ten years he had seen no improvement and admonished, 'They have gone their own wild and wilful ways.' He was not to know Australia was on the brink of the challenging 1960s.

Blake Society chairman Alan Dougan, then principal of Sydney University's St Andrew's College, said the winning work by John Coburn, *Triptych of the Passion* (1960), would fit into modern churches, pointing out, 'A Gothic would be totally unsuitable in the churches we are

seeing going up now.' He thought it inevitable that modern artists would go beyond outward forms in religious art (*The Sun*, 22 January 1960).

Talking in an ABC Radio broadcast in February 1961, founder member Fr Michael Scott, previously mentioned, praised the fact that the prize had attracted altogether about 3000 works from 'just about every worthwhile painter in the country'. However, he regretted that not all the aims of the committee had been achieved. 'The preoccupation of so many of our artists over the past two or three years with pure abstraction and abstract expressionism has come very close to defeating the purpose for which the Blake Prize was founded,' he said. The express purpose of religious art was to communicate religious experience and he believed non-figurative painters had failed.

Even so, that year's prize was awarded unanimously to Stanislaus Rapotec for his abstract expressionist painting, *Meditating on Good Friday*. Stanislaus Rapotec had studied art at Zagreb University and painting in Vienna and arrived in Australia in 1949. After winning the Blake Prize in 1961, he became prominent as the leader of the Sydney abstract-expressionist school.

As Melbourne curator and art historian Rosemary Crumlin records, the committee resigned over the 1961 decision, followed by heated



ST. JOHN AND SCENES FROM THE APOCALYPSE—REV. 22-8.
УСЛУЖИТЕЛИ ГИТРОУ '61

BLAKE PRIZE 1956

'St. John and Scenes from the Apocalypse' by Donald Friend
 Winning Entry, 1955
 Reproduced from the cover of *Blake Prize*
 (Sydney: Blake Prize, 1956)
 Courtesy of the Blake Society Ltd

public and media debate. Courageously, the first Blake Prize chairman, Dr Felix Arnott, then Warden of St Paul's College, University of Sydney, made it clear that he did not feel religious art should conform to certain conventional patterns. 'Indeed, I have often defended abstract art as a means of expressing spiritual truth,' he said. The controversy ebbed and, in 1964 when Mike Kitching won the prize for *Last Supper—Premonition*, an assemblage entry, there was little criticism.

ABC programs in 1968 fired up new public interest in the Blake Prize and sculptures were introduced alongside paintings. To quote Rosemary Crumlin further, 'Gradually the boundaries of the prize shifted away from being exclusively Christian or sacred. Artists' inspiration became more likely to be "spiritual" in its broadest sense.'

In 1959 the Blake Prize was worth £250; by 1970 it had risen to \$1000, with the Darcy Morris Prize at \$400.

In 2002 the Blake Prize was worth \$10 000; entries can be submitted in a variety of media, including film, video and sound, as well as outdoor sculpture. The prize has attracted a number of well-known artists, including John Coburn (1960, 1977), Leonard French (1963, 1980), Donald Friend (1955), George Gittoes (1992, 1995), John Gould (1985), Roger Kemp (1968, 1970), Keith Looby (1973), Alan Oldfield (1987, 1991), Desiderius Orban (1967, 1971), Frances Belle Parker (2000), Stanislaus Rapotec (1961) and Eric Smith (1956, 1958, 1959, 1962, 1969).

The National Library has had a close association with a number of competing artists. Sculptor Tom Bass created the bronze which features on the Library's front portico and Leonard French's stained-glass windows punctuate the high walls of the foyer. French won the Blake Prize in 1963 with *Ancient Fragments*, an enamel on hessian-covered hardboard, and won



"ANCIENT FRAGMENTS"
 by LEONARD FRENCH
 WINNING ENTRY, 1963

BLAKE PRIZE 1964

'Ancient Fragments' by Leonard French
 Winning Entry, 1963
 Reproduced from the cover of *Blake Prize*
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again in 1980 with *Instruments for a Drama Meditation*.

Once a farmhand and signwriter, French is also known for the huge stained-glass ceiling at the National Gallery of Victoria (1963) and a number of large, mural-scale artworks in Melbourne using stained glass, tapestry and mosaics as well as paint. He created glass murals for Monash and Latrobe universities and 47 windows for Haileybury College, Keysborough, Victoria.

The National Library also holds 44 volumes of Donald Friend's illustrated diary, an edited version of which is currently being published by the Library in four volumes. Donald Friend won the Blake Prize in 1955 with *St. John and Scenes from the Apocalypse*. Born in Sydney in 1915, he was both painter and writer and a leading artist of the 1938–50 Sydney group. He studied at Sydney's Royal Art School, the Datillo-Rubbo School and Westminster School, London, and his early paintings became known for their wit and versatility. Impressed



"The Cross" by Roger Kemp (Vic.)—Winning Entry, 1968

BLAKE PRIZE 1969

'The Cross' by Roger Kemp (Vic.)
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"CHRIST IS RISEN"
 by ERIC SMITH
 WINNING ENTRY, 1959

BLAKE PRIZE 1960

'Christ Is Risen' by Eric Smith
 Winning Entry, 1959
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by primitive art, he spent a great deal of his life living in Melanesia, Africa and Asia.

The National Library also holds Blake artist Judy Cassab's portraits of Donald Friend, author Morris West, businessman and entrepreneur G.H. Taubman, artist Ray Crooke and a self-portrait. In addition, it has Blake winners Keith Looby's portrait of Rupert Lockwood and Eric Smith's portrait of author Richard Hall (see cover).

The 50th Blake Prize, awarded to Lachlan Warner in 2001, was a mixed-media work of Buddhas in various traditional postures. At the same time, Thomas Spence was highly commended for a portrayal of spiritual presence in suburbia. The two works, presenting artistic and cultural expression of both the East and West, made it difficult for the judges to choose one above the other.

The 2002 exhibition, sponsored by the Australian Catholic University, opened in December and during 2003 is touring Tamworth,



"HOSANNA" by DESIDERIUS ORBAN — WINNING ENTRY, 1967

BLAKE PRIZE 1968

Strathfield, Melbourne, Coffs Harbour and Devonport, Tasmania. Hilton McCormick won this latest Blake Prize for his multi-media work, *The Harvest*. Judges found that, despite the work's 'seemingly iconoclastic, vaudevillian qualities', it reaffirmed a Blakean idiom. Have we come full circle? Blake challenged the belief that one could be cast into eternal damnation, preferring the idea that all should be forgiven.

'Hosanna' by Desiderius Orban
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A glimpse at Blake Prize history suggests this is most apt.

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