

## Nora Heysen 1911–2003

Australia lost a significant artist, and the National Library a treasured friend, with the death of Nora Heysen in December

Nora's career began with early recognition. By the age of 20 she was represented in three state galleries. She was the first woman to win the Archibald Prize, in 1938, with a portrait of Madame Elink Schuurmann. Five years later she was appointed an official war artist. Her career then moved into a period of what she described as 'comfortable obscurity'. This was broken by a series of exhibitions in the 1980s, including a retrospective exhibition at the S.H. Ervin Gallery in 1989. An Australian Artists Creative Fellowship followed in 1993, and an Order of Australia (AM) in 1998. Her exhibition at the National Library from October 2000 to January 2001 was a huge success, attracting an average of nearly 400 people a day.

Daughter of Sir Hans Heysen, Nora inherited both his drafting talent and his reticence. She admired her father greatly, though sometimes remarked, with her wry sense of humour, about the frequency with which journalists referred to her as 'the talented daughter of the famous artist'. Throughout her life she followed her own artistic vision with quiet determination. She chose to absorb the structure, light and shade of Renaissance artists such as Piero della Francesca, and changed her palette after encountering the works of Pissaro, but she did not follow the paths of many of her fellow twentieth-century artists towards Abstractionism or Expressionism.

Nora Heysen maintained a lifelong fascination with the representation of flowers. On one occasion, during her time as a war artist in New Guinea, this brought her into conflict with her superior officers. She was ordered to move to the relative safety of Lae, but

when a jeep arrived to take her to the airport she told the driver to 'Go away! I'm in the middle of painting flowers'. Though threatened with court martial, she completed the painting.

The National Library holds a number of Nora's works, including a luminous portrait of Adrian Feint, and her ink illustrations for *Woggheeguy, Australian Aboriginal Legends* collected by K. Langloh Parker. Her voice is preserved in the Oral History Collection, in a series of interviews made in 1965, 1971 and 1994. The Library is in the process of acquiring a number of photographs by Sydney photographer Barbara Konkolowicz of the Pens and Pencils Group, in which Nora was an active member up to her death. The

photographs capture her continuing joy, despite her failing eyesight, in the act of drawing. In her interview in 1994, she speculated that she would draw till the end: 'One memory of childhood is always wanting to draw or paint. This is my earliest memory and will be my last, I think'. It is fitting that she was able to fulfil her wish, and enjoy the delight that art gave her, for her full 92 years.

Linda Groom  
Pictures Librarian

Unknown photographer  
[Nora Heysen Seated at  
Desk, Studio in Hahndorf]  
In 'Collection of Portraits of  
Nora Heysen' album  
Pictures Collection, nla.pic-an21762020-6

