



Ursula Hoff
(1909–2005)

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Dr Hoff was a legendary figure in the Australian and international art world; her death, on 10 January, represents the end of an era. Her life spanned nearly a century. For those whom she taught at the University of Melbourne, she was one of those fascinating German Jewish intellectuals, a product of the Diaspora, who taught Early European art history with a real knowledge of her subject. We were enthralled by her elegant manners, her distinguished and severe beauty, and her lectures, which were an initiation into iconography. Her legacies to the discipline of art history and to Australian museums are diverse and important. She will be remembered principally for the crucial role that she played in the creation of the collection of prints and drawings at the National Gallery of Victoria, where she was employed from 1942 until 1975. She made the Print Room in that gallery one of the finest in the world and nurtured many great curators in the process, including James Mollison and Irene Zdanowicz. Her numerous acquisitions were all of quality, and included important works by Rembrandt, Rubens, Dürer and Sassetta. She also purchased non-European art and works by Australian artists.

Ursula Hoff was born on Boxing Day, 1909, the daughter of a pharmaceuticals representative. Her formation as a scholar was principally at the University of Hamburg, during that legendary period when Aby Warburg created his institute there, and where the young Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl taught. The Hamburg School of Art History is celebrated for the theoretical interpretations of subject matter known as iconography. Ursula's real field of expertise was in the Dutch seventeenth century. Her thesis was on Rembrandt.

When Hitler came to power in 1933, Ursula's parents took their only child to live in Hampstead, England. She applied for a tutorship at the Courtauld Institute of Art, which had been founded the previous year. The acting director, W P Gibson, told her that their posts were reserved for English students only. She was similarly unable to obtain a position in a museum, because by law only persons who were 'two generations British born' were permitted to enter the British Civil Service. Instead, Ursula became a temporary research assistant to some of the best-known scholars in sixteenth-century Italian prints and drawings at the British Museums, Karl Parker and A E Popham.

Just before the war was declared, the head of the Women's College in the University of Melbourne wrote to Girton College in Cambridge, offering to 'help out someone needy' or, more explicitly, to give a home to a Jewish refugee to Australia. Ursula was invited and she arrived in Australia on the SS *Orcades*. Her first position in Australia was secretary to the Women's College from 1939 to 1942. The Director of the National Gallery of Victoria was then J S McDonald, who made it clear to Ursula that there would be no chance of employment for a German Jewish refugee during his directorship. All this changed when Sir Keith Murdoch became chairman of the Trustees and with his appointment of Daryl Lindsay as Director. From 1942, Ursula entered the critical limelight with her appointment as Assistant Keeper of Prints and Drawings at the Gallery and with a series of public lectures on European art history. The collection at that stage consisted of a few boxes of prints and drawings. Lindsay decided to create the first purpose-built print room in Australia, modelled on that in the British Museum. Because of war-time restrictions, Ursula was not made a public servant until 1948. In 1949, she became Keeper of Prints and Drawings at the NGV, and Assistant Director in 1968. After her so-called retirement, she became London Advisor to the Felton Bequest, from 1975 to 1984.

In 1946, again with an enlightened act of sponsorship from Sir Keith Murdoch, a chair of art history was founded at the University of Melbourne, known as the Herald Chair of Fine Arts. The first professor was Joseph Burke, an Irishman, whose field of expertise was English eighteenth-century art. Burke created an excellent department, with a significant group of scholars including Bernard Smith, the first Australian art historian, and Franz Philipp, a German Jewish refugee from Vienna. Ursula had a part-time position as a visiting lecturer in this new department. She proved to be a good colleague, and enjoyed a mutually sustaining relationship with Burke and his group. She taught usually at an advanced honours level, both in the University and at the Gallery. Her lectures were formal and at times a little dry, but in the Print Room, up close and personal with works of art, she became a different person. It was as though works of art provoked a kind of vitality and enthusiasm from her. In 1949, Burke remarked in a letter to the Vice-Chancellor of the University that 'she is the most valuable helper I have had'.

Her principal book was a catalogue of the European Old Masters at the National Gallery of Victoria. When it first appeared in 1961, it was reviewed by Michael Levey, Director of the National Gallery of London, as 'an admirable piece of scholarly work'. It has been revised and reissued many times, and remains the fundamental work of scholarship for the national collection.

Ursula Hoff was one of the earliest women scholars to pursue a rewarding intellectual career in art history. Irrespective of gender, her life was an extraordinary one.

Jaynie Anderson