

MARGARET HANNAH OLLEY

1923-2011



Photo: Courtesy Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane ©Hugh Stewart

WHEN Margaret Olley died in 2011 at the age of eighty-eight, not only the art community, but the whole nation was grieved by the loss of this national treasure.

She was a painter of happiness, with colourful canvases frequently featuring still-life compositions and she was especially remembered for her lush and sensuous flower pieces. She showed little interest in grand figure compositions, but championed a form of intimacy, admiring particularly the great French colourists, including Matisse, Fantin-Latour, Bonnard, Vuillard and

Gauguin. She rose to prominence in 1947 when she was awarded the Mosman Art Prize with a depiction of the Wallamumbi hills. The following year, in 1948, she held her first solo exhibition when she was twenty-five, more than ninety other solo exhibitions followed. She was exceptionally prolific and energetic and late in life she developed an enthusiastic and faithful following resulting in sell-out exhibitions. Her art is represented in virtually all the public art galleries of Australia. In 1997 a major retrospective of her work was organised by the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

Margaret Olley belonged to a family of pioneers from the Lismore district, NSW, who moved to Tully in north Queensland and at the age of five she became a boarder at St Anne's school in Townsville. As the family moved around Queensland, she commenced her art education at the Somerville School in Brisbane, between 1937 and 1940, and subsequently at the Brisbane Technical College. By the mid-1940s she was in Sydney studying at the East Sydney Tech and became involved in theatre, where she worked with Sidney Nolan on a production of Jean Cocteau's *Orphée*. She subsequently lived and studied in London and Paris, returning to Australia in 1953, where she divided her time between Sydney, Newcastle and Brisbane. She struggled with alcoholism and depression throughout the 1950s before completely abandoning drink and embracing art. She proudly maintained her addiction to nicotine and was frequently seen standing outside an art gallery having a puff.

Margaret Olley was a great philanthropist, who initially accumulated considerable wealth as a property developer in Newcastle and Sydney and gave most of it away to art galleries to buy art. Subsequently, through the successful sale of her own work, she supported younger artists, especially through the Margaret Hannah Olley Foundation, and she would constantly gift her own art as well as that of other artists to art collections throughout the country. It is estimated that to the Art Gallery of New South Wales alone she gave works to the value of \$7 million as well as a \$1 million donation to assist the gallery to purchase Paul Cézanne's landscape *Bords de la Marne*.

She had a great thirst for art and travelled the globe to see the major exhibitions. However, even when in advanced age and severely limited in movement, she would insist on travelling in economy class arguing ‘why waste money if it can be used to buy great works of art’.

Margaret Olley was twice the subject of a winning portrait at the Archibald Exhibition, the first in 1948 painted by William Dobell, the second more than sixty years later, in 2011, painted by Ben Quilty. Although not a conventional beauty, she had strikingly beautiful dark-blue eyes and was painted by many artists including Russell Drysdale, Donald Friend, Jeffrey Smart and Judy Cassab. Although she never married, she lived in the thick of the Sydney art community and was close friends with many prominent artists, writers, critics and theatre personalities. Barry Humphries described her as one of Sydney’s ‘most coveted hostesses’. She had a number of long-term relationships, but felt that she was not the marrying kind and described herself as ‘a one-woman band, too independent to be subservient to anyone’. Amongst her close friends were Sidney Nolan, William Dobell, Russell Drysdale, Lloyd Rees, Donald Friend, Margaret Preston and Ian Fairweather, all of whom she outlived. Her house in Paddington was a converted hat factory and was filled to the brim with various art objects which she had collected from all parts of the world, including New Guinea, Asia, Russia, Europe and Australia. It was a cross between a living museum and a welcoming drop-in centre and served as a magnet for the art community.

Later in life she became one of the most public figures in the Australian art scene, a spokesperson for the art community and one who frequently voiced strong opinions and was involved in controversy. For example, in 2006, when there was a threat that the National Art School in Sydney was to be merged with the College of Fine Arts at

the University of New South Wales, at the age of eighty-three she successfully campaigned against this. She boldly announced to a newspaper: ‘It cannot be linked with the university, it would change the whole learning process. To be a sculptor or a painter you do not need a university degree. You don’t need a degree to be a plumber and you don’t need a degree to be a practical artist.’ On 10 June 1991, in the Queen’s Birthday Honours list, Olley was made a Member of the Order of Australia ‘for service as an artist and to the promotion of art’. In 1997 she was named an Australian National Treasure. On 12 June 2006, while defending the National Art School in Sydney, she was awarded Australia’s highest civilian honour, the Companion of the Order, ‘for service as one of Australia’s most distinguished artists, for support and philanthropy to the visual and performing arts, and for encouragement of young and emerging artists’. In 2006, Olley was awarded the degree Doctor of Fine Arts *honoris causa* by the University of Newcastle and in the same year she was elected an Honorary Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities.

In 2005 I was invited to open an exhibition by the veteran Australian artist Margaret Cilento, who had slipped off the radar with the public art galleries. Margaret Olley turned up and promptly bought the key, and most expensive painting at the exhibition which she immediately donated to the Art Gallery of New South Wales, telling me with a twinkle in her eye ‘they’ll never buy it themselves and they wouldn’t dare to turn down a gift from me’. Cilento had been Olley’s friend for half a century and she always remained fiercely loyal to her friends.

What people love may not have been so much the art of Margaret Olley, but the idea of Margaret Olley as the independent, outspoken freedom-loving artist who exhibited an extraordinary generosity of spirit.

- SASHA GRISHIN