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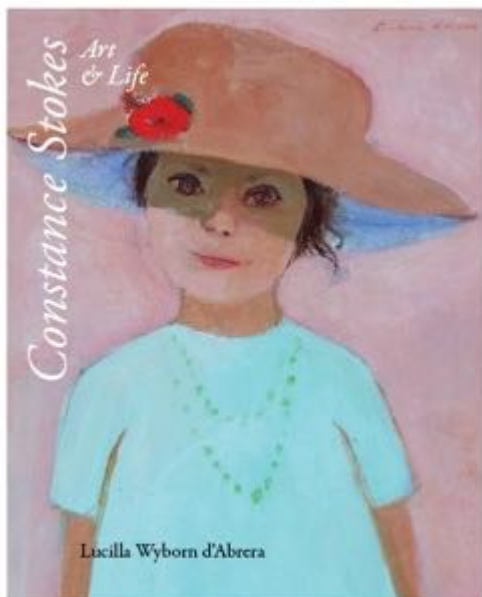
LAURINE · DIGGINS · FINE · ART

The Outsiders Sky News with Ross Cameron and Rowan Dean and Bella d’Abrera
Monday 25th June 2018 (edited transcript)

We’ve been talking about Western civilisation and we’ve often talked about art and the role of art in Western civilisation. Today we’re going to show you an artist, an Australian artist who bears a very literal connection to Western civilisation. The name Constance Stokes may not ring a bell to you or it may to some of you. Constance Stokes was once mentioned in the same breath as Sidney Nolan, Russell Drysdale, Arthur Boyd, as a great Australian artist. She exhibited during the 30s, 40s, 50s and then again after the war in the 60s and 70s. A terrific artist but we’re absolutely privileged, we’re going to be talking about Constance, but her granddaughter, who also features in some of her paintings, is the great Bella d’Abrera the head of the foundation program for Western civilisation at the Institute of Public Affairs and regular on Sky and more specifically Outsiders – welcome Bella.

Thank you for having me back.

Now you are the granddaughter of Constance Stokes, Ross hold up the book [*Art & Life: Constance Stokes* by Lucilla Wyborn d’Abrera, Hill House, 2015]



Now on the first page, there you go... a nice image, beautiful, people can make up their own minds...

I think she has captured something about those luminous almond eyes and a certain introspection and intelligence revealed...

Talk us through... How old were you.. Do you remember sitting for it?

I remember dressing up, it was a dress up box that she had in the house, which I absolutely adored...

So take us back through the story of Constance Stokes – described as a brilliant draughtsman, draughtswoman – tell us her story and then we'll get to your broader thoughts about western civilisation and what art can teach us.

She was born in 1906 in the Wimmera in the middle of nowhere on a wheat farm, her father owned 10,000 acres.

Where is Wimmera?

It's Victoria – North East.. She grew up in a traditional Irish Catholic family, Irish-English Catholic family and ended up moving to Melbourne but she was born with this absolutely prodigious talent that didn't really have any sort of explanation – her parents didn't paint - but she ended up going to the National Gallery School and doing absolutely brilliantly and winning the scholarship.

She had a scholarship which took her around the world.

It took her to London during the Depression actually and she was lucky because she had money to survive.

Who would have funded such a scholarship at that time?

It would have been the Gallery School and she got to London and for the first time in her life she saw the paintings that she'd seen very bad black and white prints of and she suddenly realised what her inheritance was, what her European, her Western civilisation inheritance was and it was at the National Gallery School that she learnt to draw and she directly inherited that idea from the Renaissance of anatomy and looking at the figure and she did six months of anatomy classes.

And so back in the Renaissance you had painters like Michelangelo, da Vinci they would all actually go and get dead bodies and study them and cut them up and look them to work out- before you could even draw a human, you had to understand how every bone and muscle worked.

Yes, and this was directly passed onto her in London in the 1930s, she directly inherited that Renaissance idea of looking at the form.

What was it like for her in the 1930 – was that the flapper period?

She loved it, so it was before she got married, she had to go with a chaperone, but in those days obviously she had a British passport ... so it was like going home. She absolutely loved it, she actually found the Royal Academy a little too stifling so she went to Paris and she studied under a very famous cubist called Andre Lhote, who was quite eccentric – you know, he used to wear a hairnet and his wife had a monkey on her shoulder but she just loved Paris at the time and she said she there were Picassos on the wall she could have bought for 7 guineas when she was in Paris.

Your grandmother was paid a very high compliment, who was it she described her as Australia's greatest draughtsman?

So Sir Kenneth Clark, who came to Australia in the 1940s and he met all the artists and he saw her work and he said “Constance Stokes is one of the world’s greatest draughtsman”, living draughtsman at the time.

So talk us through some of her paintings, those particularly noteworthy and what she was attempting to do ...

I tried to put them in chronological order so this first one *The Seated Man*... so at the National Gallery School in Victoria they actually paid and found homeless people and poor people on the street and they paid them a few guineas to come and sit in the studio, so this is a work she did before she even got to London. This is before she even had her anatomy classes, I mean she could paint that well, so this is one of the earliest paintings... and then she went to London and she went round Europe ... *The Village* which is a very important one. So this you can see the background, you can see how much the ideal of the Renaissance background has influenced her painting; the hands of that woman in particular are very amazingly well executed. It’s totally influenced by the Renaissance paintings that she saw.

Then she came back to Australia and she painted this painting called *Madame Mortill*. She became the most sought after portraitist in Victoria at the time, so she had people queuing to get their portraits done by her. Madame Mortill was very mysterious Russian character who came to Melbourne

So she was a society woman and then around the same time she painted the portrait of Margaret and I think Margaret was a cousin or a relative of hers but again she was just so well known for her portraits...

So what happened to her career? She exhibited throughout Australia and then what happened?

She did. She got married to my grandfather and because she was wasn’t a Bohemian and she was always conservative and she was brought up a Catholic and did the right thing. for the time.

So she gave up her career?

No, she kept painting but she had to juggle a family. She was traditional, she got married in the 30s and it was what you did but she kept painting. My grandfather was very supportive and she always had a studio and she kept painting and painting. He unfortunately passed away when he was only 55 and she was suddenly left having to support the family so she took up painting again and came into her own again but she was never a Bohemian, she was never trying to rebel, she was always very conservative.

There’s a great deal to be said for celebrating the beauty of what is, I mean I would say a part of western tradition is observational, it is using one’s five senses and that art can be a celebration of the beauty of what is. ... If we say what is the most beautiful object on earth ... the female of the human species it is, in our view, the apex of beauty and why should art not celebrate that apex.

She never left the idea of form, so in contrast with her contemporaries like Sidney Nolan and Perceval who were untrained really, they were untutored expressionists and she had the weight of this training behind her and she never lost that.

Well this is what I want to get to because this is the point of the Renaissance artist and the point of Classic artists, was the training, the training, the training, that went into it and we see this idea repeatedly and this whole idea was thrown out with post-modernism... Art was all about the training and the skills that went into it ... Would you agree with that?

Yes, and we do have a drawing here... she was able to use one line to capture the solidity and weight of the figure and this was entirely based on her training, really rigorous training as a younger artist and that western tradition.



Constance Stokes 1906 – 1991 (*Female Nude*) 1964 ink on paper 24 x 33.5 cm

LAURINE DIGGINS FINE ART
has a selection of artworks by **CONSTANCE STOKES**
available to view at the **Gallery**.
Please see our website or contact us for further details.

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Gallery Hours: Tues – Fri 10am – 6pm or by appointment