



NORA HEYSEN AM & CONSTANCE STOKES

Drawings from the Estates

21 May – 18 June 2016

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Drawing was a constant for two very different artists: Nora Heysen (1911-2003) and Constance Stokes (1906-1991). Both had career-defining periods in London in the 1930s, both studied art in the great museums of Europe then and in later years, and for each drawing was integral to their practice.

Nora Heysen commenced her formal training as an artist at Adelaide's establishment North Adelaide School of Fine Arts. Then self-funded by sales from an exhibition, she headed for London in 1934 where she stayed until 1937. Drawing proved to be the medium that challenged all she had learned prior to enrolling at London's Central School of Art where her teacher, modernist Bernard Meninsky criticised her work, and reportedly said her 'drawing was lifeless, dull, formless and superficial and the technique was like sandpaper'. She was completely crushed and wrote home to her father and first teacher, 'it appears that he does not see my point of view at all and looks at the figure in a totally different way. He draws with a heavy line and square modelling, handling the pencil like a pen, whereas I draw with a single line and just use the shading to emphasise certain forms. It is very difficult to know how far to trust one's own judgement and how much to follow the masters'.¹ However, she did take on board Meninsky's criticism and even his style, albeit briefly, and went on to produce one of her most adventurous Self-Portraits ever in 1934, showing herself as alone, facing an unknown future.² When she felt it time to move on from the Central School, she hired models in her studio at Dukes Lane, and as she wrote home in August 1935, 'I had my flaxen haired model all day. I made a study for the back view ... I have begun to realise that to paint a good nude is a very difficult thing'.³ She then later enrolled in the Byam Shore School in London specifically to improve her drawing.

Constance Stokes, who initially trained at the National Gallery School in Melbourne, was awarded their prestigious Travelling Scholarship which took her to London from 1930-1933.⁴ She studied at the Royal Academy School under William Mornington whom she acknowledged for 'furthering my understanding of drawing', and for showing her how line can express form.⁵ Then in the summer of 1931, she took herself to Paris to study with Andre Lhôte who had a profound influence on her. As she recalled, 'the Lhôte School was a revelation to me and, as I did not have much French, and Lhôte had no English, I had to do the best I could by watching him work with his brush - drawing all the colour together, and for the first time I became aware of colour used as tone, and not used as local colour'.⁶



NORA HEYSEN 1911 – 2003
Standing Female 1935
 pencil on paper
 38 x 28 cm



COVER
NORA HEYSEN 1911 – 2003
Seated Female Nude c.1928
 pencil on paper
 46 x 29 cm

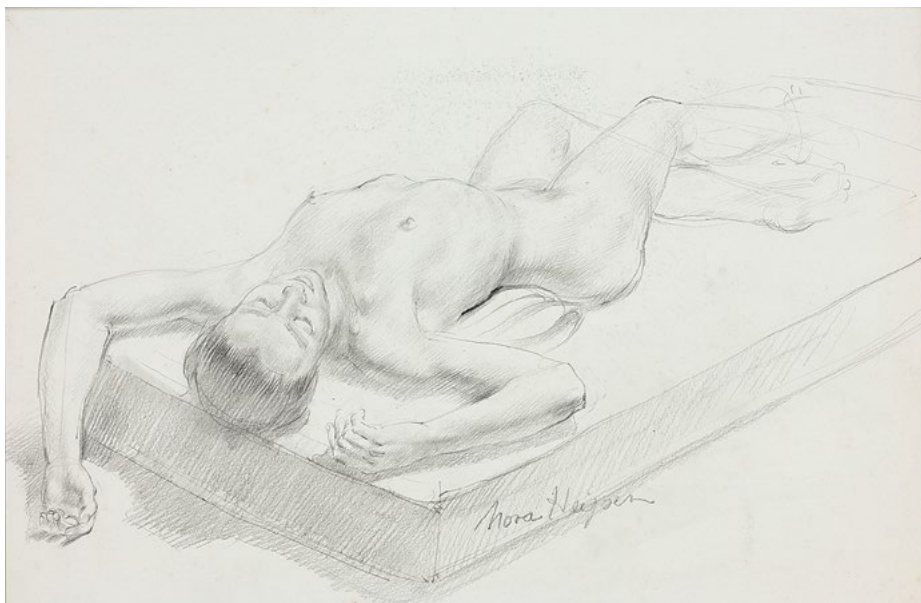
Back in Melbourne, from c.1940-1966 she attended George Bell's Thursday evening life drawing sessions, although she was never a student of his. He refused to teach her saying she did not need it, but he was happy to give her criticism, and to pass on knowledge of glazing methods⁷ Drawing was in Stokes's blood, she even described it as 'my great love', and in 1965 when Hazel de Berg interviewed her she said, 'I can't help wanting to use it even now ... it's so strongly in me that I don't think I'll ever disregard it'.⁸

There are interesting parallels and divergences in the careers of these two artists. Heysen never identified with the contemporary arena, showing instead in Sydney with the Society of Artists. Stokes on the other hand did, exhibiting with the New Melbourne Art Club in 1935, the Contemporary Art Society in 1939 and 1940, and then with George Bell's Melbourne Contemporary Artists Group. Both had high points in their careers: Heysen was the first woman to win the Archibald Prize in 1939 and the first woman to take up the post of official war artist in 1943; Stokes was included in the prestigious exhibition *Art of Australia 1788-1941* which was shown at the Carnegie Institute in 1941 and then toured the US; and she was in the Australian Government's sponsored exhibition *Twelve Australian Artists* at London's Burlington Galleries in 1953, Jean Bellette being the only other woman included. Stokes's work was also shown in the Venice Biennale that same year. Both Heysen and Stokes had work acquired by major state galleries throughout their careers. Heysen as early as 1932 by the Art Gallery of New South Wales and numerous other collections, Stokes from 1945 and acquired mostly by the National Gallery of Victoria.

Each balanced their professional lives with domestic responsibilities. Heysen never had children of her own, although her husband Dr Robert Black's children would come to stay in the school holidays. In the 1950s and 1960s she felt the responsibilities of being a wife to a successful tropical diseases doctor, and having to be the hostess when she would rather have been free to be an artist, writing home to her parents Hans and Sallie Heysen, 'We entertained a beautiful Indian woman doctor the other night. I'd rather had been painting her in her glorious rose silk sari than preparing a meal for her'.⁹ Stokes, meanwhile with three young children, had to find time for her art, commenting 'I kept painting hail, rain or shine, and sometimes it was raining. I managed to exhibit perhaps one or two, perhaps three paintings a year, and that's really how I made my reputation... you're half mother and half painter and it's a very difficult situation'.¹⁰

Drawing was an end in itself for both Heysen and Stokes. Heysen's mid-career work includes her sensuous conté drawings of Melanesian and Polynesian peoples completed on her Pacific sojourns in the 1950s and the 1960s, while Stokes's 'drawings' with colour take drawing to an altogether different level. For each artist, drawing was a refined and much practised artform.

Catherine Speck



NORA HEYSEN 1911 – 2003

Reclining Nude c.1956

pencil on paper

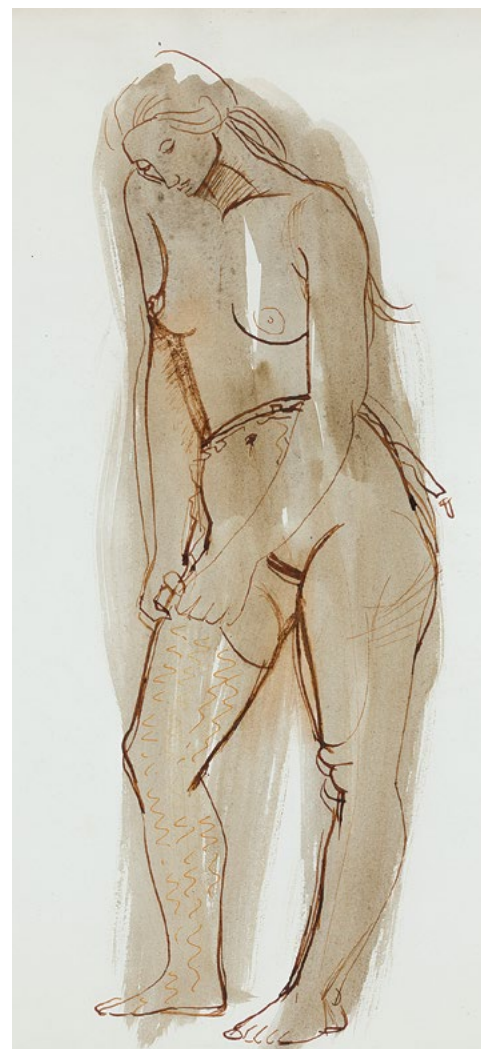
28.5 x 39.5 cm

NOTES ON THE AUTHOR:

Catherine Speck is Professor of Art History, University Adelaide. Her publications include *Selected Letters of Hans Heysen and Nora Heysen*, National Library of Australia, 2011.

ENDNOTES:

- 1 Nora Heysen to her parents, 12 November 1934, in Catherine Speck (ed) *Selected Letters of Hans Heysen and Nora Heysen*, National Library of Australia, 2011, p. 27.
- 2 Nora Heysen's *Self-Portrait*, 1934, oil on canvas, is held by the National Portrait Gallery, Canberra.
- 3 Nora Heysen to her parents, August 1935 in Catherine Speck (ed) *Selected Letters of Hans Heysen and Nora Heysen*.
- 4 On the artist see Lucilla Wyborn d'Abreera, *Constance Stokes: Art and Life*, Hill House Publishers, 2015; Anne Summers, *The Lost Mother: A Story of Love and Art*, Melbourne University Press, 2009.
- 5 *Constance Stokes Retrospective Exhibition*, Swan Hill Regional Gallery, 1985, np; Barbara Blackman interview cited in Felicity St John Moore, *Classical Modernism: The George Bell Circle*, National Gallery of Victoria, 1992, p. 126.
- 6 *Constance Stokes Retrospective Exhibition*, Swan Hill Regional Gallery, 1985, np.
- 7 Felicity St John Moore, *Classical Modernism: The George Bell Circle*, p. 125
- 8 Hazel de Berg interview, 2 December 1965, National Library of Australia.
- 9 Nora Heysen to her parents, 3 September 1962, in Catherine Speck (ed) *Selected Letters of Hans Heysen and Nora Heysen*, p. 292.
- 10 *Constance Stokes Retrospective Exhibition*, Swan Hill Regional Gallery, 1985, np.

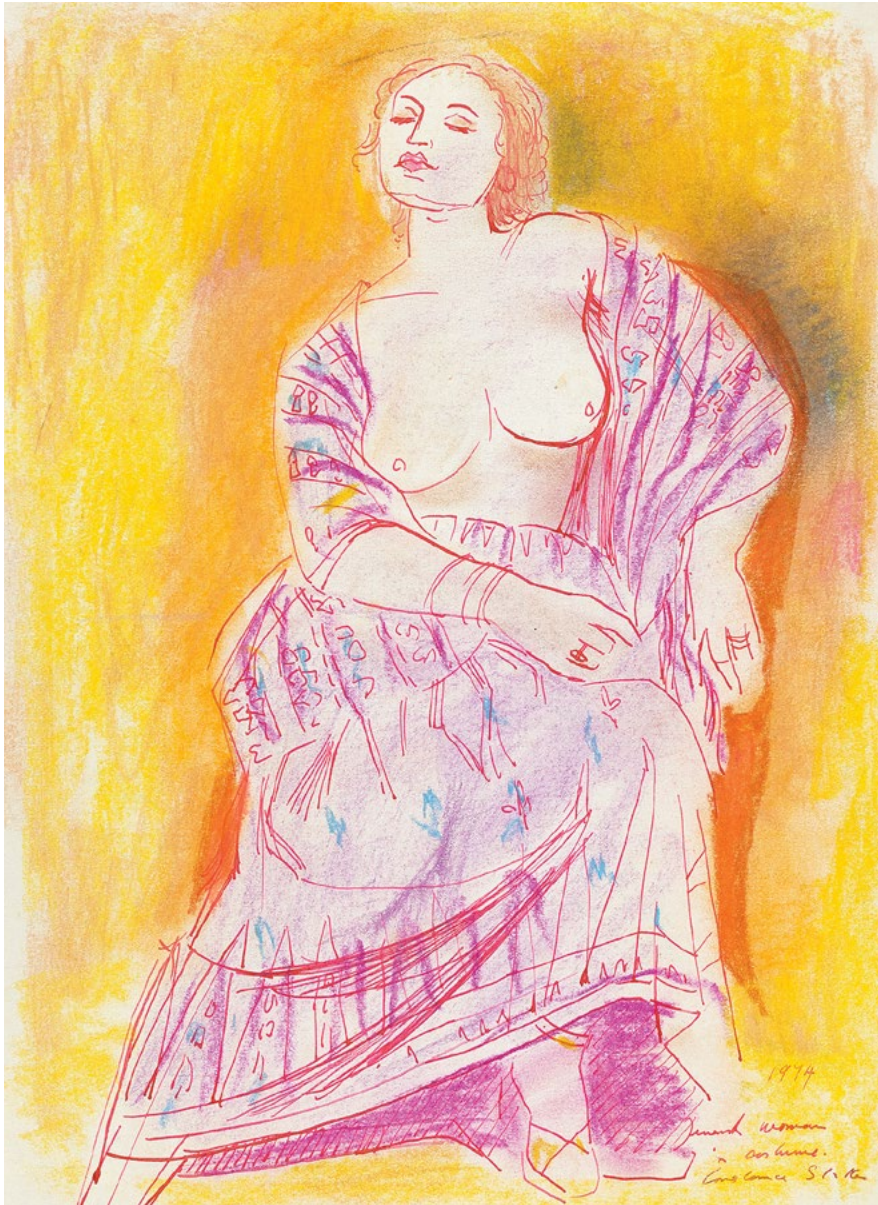


CONSTANCE STOKES 1906 – 1991

(Nude with Garter)

sepia ink and wash on paper

38 x 28 cm



CONSTANCE STOKES 1906 - 1991

Jewish Woman in Costume 1974
red ink and pastel on paper
37 x 27 cm



NORA HEYSEN 1911 - 2003

Sleeping Native Child, New Guinea c.1954-55
conte on paper
25.1 x 41 cm



NORA HEYSEN 1911 - 2003

Leaning Male c.1956
pencil on paper
50 x 37 cm



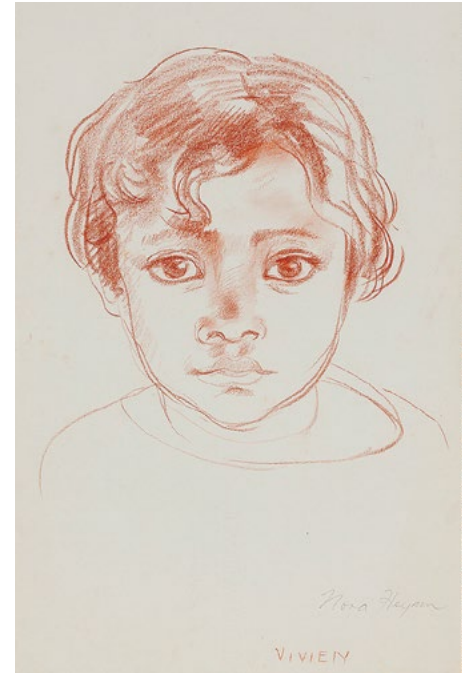
CONSTANCE STOKES 1906 - 1991

Au Courant 1980
black ink and pastel on paper
36.5 x 26.5 cm



CONSTANCE STOKES 1906 - 1991

George Bell 1962
black ink and wash on paper
38 x 28 cm



NORA HEYSEN 1911 - 2003

Young Native Girl c.1954-55
conte on paper
41 x 25.1 cm

"Both had career-defining periods in London in the 1930s, both studied art in the great museums of Europe then and in later years, and for each drawing was integral to their practice."



NORA HEYSEN 1911 - 2003

Seated Male c.1956
conte on paper
50 x 37 cm



NORA HEYSEN 1911 – 2003

Native Woman Trobriand Islands, New Guinea c.1955
 conte with charcoal highlights on paper
 37.6 x 27.4 cm



NORA HEYSEN 1911 – 2003

Female Back Study c.2002
 sepia pen on paper
 38.5 x 28.3 cm



CONSTANCE STOKES 1906 - 1991

(Seated Figure with Dressing Gown) 1963
 black ink, pastel and wash on paper
 37 x 27 cm



CONSTANCE STOKES 1906 - 1991

Charles Bush 1968
 black ink on paper
 38 x 28 cm



NORA HEYSEN

1911 – 2003

Female Nude – Back Study c.1956

conte on paper

47.5 x 31.5 cm



CONSTANCE STOKES 1906 - 1991

(Female Figure Study)

sepia ink, pastel and wash on paper

38 x 28 cm



CONSTANCE STOKES 1906 - 1991

(Blue Nude)

purple ink, watercolour and wash on paper

38 x 28 cm



CONSTANCE STOKES 1906 - 1991

(Dancer) 1959

black ink, watercolour and wash on paper

26.8 x 21.5 cm



CONSTANCE STOKES 1906 - 1991

Black Stockings 1968

blue ink, watercolour and wash on paper
38.1 x 28 cm

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Gallery Exhibition Hours:
Tues - Fri 10am – 6pm, Sat 1pm – 5pm