

5 Malakoff Street, North Caulfield, Vic, 3161
Telephone: (61 3) 9509 9855 Facsimile: (61 3) 9509 4549
Email: ausart@diggins.com.au Website: www.diggins.com.au
ABN.19006 457 101

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CONSTANCE STOKES 1906 - 1991

In a Churchyard 1933

oil on canvas

61 x 61 cm

signed lower right: Constance Parkin 1933

Provenance:

the artist

by descent

Literature:

Wyborn d'Abbrera., Lucilla, *Constance Stokes: Art & Life*, Hill House Publishers, Melbourne, 2015, p. 58, illus.

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The portrait of Eric Stokes was first shown in a solo exhibition at Decoration Gallery, Melbourne 1933, and listed in the catalogue at 30 guineas. The painting was described by Lionel Lindsay, then *Herald* art critic as 'a fine piece of modeling, with the russet and green-grey colour scheme suggesting melancholy in the brooding face of the man'.

In 1929 Constance Parkin won the NGV travelling scholarship, enabling her to spend two years studying at the Royal Academy in London and the Andre Lhote School in Paris. Immediately upon her return to Melbourne in 1933, she set about preparing for her first solo exhibition. Parkin was also to marry Eric Stokes later that same year. For that exhibition she painted a portrait of Eric which she entitled *In a Churchyard*. She was inspired to produce a work which would reflect the influence of the Italian renaissance painters she had been so memorably and delightfully confronted with on her recent stay in Europe.

The background Italianate church with its Pencil Pines, headstones and winding path clearly show the influence of her time in Europe and of the Renaissance painters she had so admired. However the sharp contrast of the figure of the 'brooding' man leaning pensively on a wooden fence, pipe in hand, speaks of profound personal conflict for the young artist. She was, after all, about to launch her professional career as an artist, but was expected by her family also to marry Eric Stokes, the man who had already waited faithfully, twelve years for her hand. Perhaps the theme of the background church also carried with it intimations of the forthcoming matrimony.

Eric Wyborn Stokes for his part, was the scion of the notable Melbourne family firm of metalware engineers, Stokes & Sons, first established by Thomas Stokes in Collins Street, in 1865. The young Eric Stokes had been educated at Trinity Grammar in Melbourne, but unfortunately had his schooling tragically interrupted by the premature death of his father, forcing him to enter the firm at a very young age, there to complete his apprenticeship, and eventually becoming a Director of Stokes himself, until his own premature death at the age of 58.

The marriage between Eric and Connie was not without its problems. He knew nothing of her world, nor she of his. After somewhat rocky beginnings and the births of three children, Eric became her greatest champion while Connie in turn learned to support him through his crippling migraines and the stresses and strains of his profession. Throughout these difficult years, she continued to draw and paint, firmly establishing herself as one of the foremost Australian artists of her time.

It must be noted however, that *In a Churchyard* was painted while Connie was not yet married to her ever faithful Eric, at the same time during which she had painted a portrait of her mother, titled *The Village*, now in the National Gallery of Victoria. The significance of the two works in apposition is the reality of the deep personal conflict she was enduring at the time, between declining Eric's proposal of marriage and acceding to her mother's deep wish for her to marry him. In this particular situation, the strong image of the pensively prospective groom waiting at the church gate has considerable charm, wit and irony.

Lucilla Wyborn d'Abrera, 2016