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A CLOSER LOOK AT ... HILDA RIX NICHOLAS 1884 – 1961

Our exhibition of artworks by Hilda Rix Nicholas encompasses her long and successful career showing a range of paintings and works on paper – from academic drawings; to portraits and landscapes; to depictions of her home and studio interior and works inspired by her travels; from fantasy scenes to images of her beloved son...



Presenting such a diverse selection allows us to take *A Closer Look At...* the artist herself as we gain an understanding of all the different circumstances of her life influencing her choice of subject matter.

The opportunity of working closely with the artist's Estate has also allowed a more detailed examination, as the artworks can be given further context through photographs and costumes included in the exhibition.



The Pied Piper c.1911 oil on canvas 113.3 x 160.3 cm

Costume was certainly a significant focus of her oeuvre, which we can see from early paintings like *The Pied Piper* c.1911. The painting was probably inspired by an entertainment for the British Sailors' Institute at Boulogne-sur-mer in 1912-13. The model was a sailor persuaded by the artist to pose in medieval costume, likely made by Hilda herself. Her correspondence recalls, "When we at last arrived and he shed the chrysalis of sailor oh! how inspiring he looked on the edge of the hill with the wind blowing out the long folds of his red and yellow cloak!" The appeal of fables is later reflected in the nursery rhyme watercolours of 1936. First inspired by a series of dolls created for her son, Hilda Rix Nicholas held an exhibition of nursery themed dolls and watercolours in Collins Street, with the invitation issued from the king and queen of fairyland, Oberon and Titania and members of the Russian Ballet in attendance.



Mary, Mary Quite Contrary

watercolour, pencil, ink, gouache on paper, approx. size 55 x 35 cm each



Jack and Jill



Little Miss Muffet all c.1936

Further exploration of costume is found in her works of Morocco and Etaples and Brittany where she is so clearly drawn to the intricacies, colours and silhouettes of garments new to her eyes.



Breton Marketplace c.1926 coloured pastel on paper 37 x 56 cm



Estanco Marrooui c.1914
coloured pastel on paper, 38 x 28.5 cm



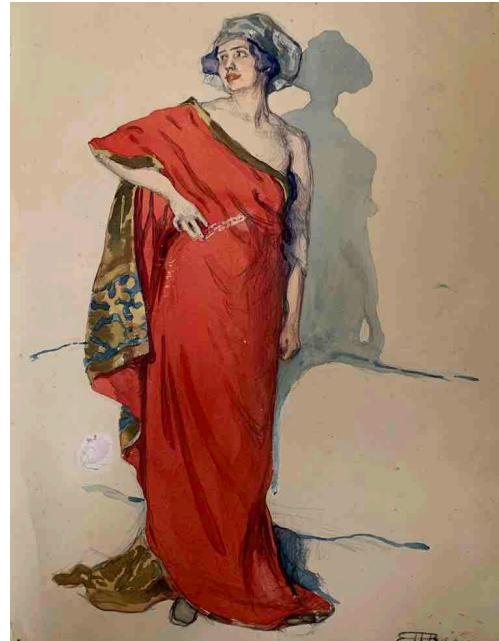
In Festive Attire, Brittany c.1926
coloured pastel on paper, 30.5 x 22.8 cm

Hilda was fortunate to have her elder sister Elsie as a willing model and agreeable to pose in numerous costumes, some homemade. *Elsie in the Garden* c.1913 shows her in a richly patterned red dress with medieval flair and we are delighted to include alongside the painting a contemporary photograph of Elsie wearing the dress, as well as a photograph of Hilda wearing the dress much later with her son Rix for a costume party. Even more delightful the dress itself was in a box in the studio and is now shown alongside the painting, which may have once belonged to the Worth family of the House of Worth fashion house in Paris.

Elsie is also the subject of a painting by Hilda wearing a beautifully ornate chinese robe. Here, a study shows *Elsie wearing the Chinese Hat*, again, alongside the object itself and a photograph of Hilda wearing the outfit at a later date. The finished painting is a highlight of the collection of the Art Gallery of Western Australia.



Elsie in the Chinese Hat c.1913
oil on canvas, 60.5 x 51 cm



Elsie in Red Costume
pencil, watercolour, gouache on paper, 39.8x 23.8 cm



Images of Elsie by Hilda Rix Nicholas at LDFA exhibition 2023

Hilda's son Rix later proved an enduring subject and her devotion to him is clear in her images. He did not escape his mother's fondness for dressing up (his christening celebration saw his parents as the King and Queen of Hearts and little Rix dressed as the 'tart') and he appears in various guises throughout her work – including here dressed in a Souwester and in uniforms. The people in her life in the Monaro region provided inspiring sitters – squatters, land owners, farmers, refugees (the Dutch couple in this exhibition), friends and the various nannies for her son. Her husband's cousin, Paddy Walcott was the subject of her painting *Looking for Stragglers* and she has beautifully captured his alert and intense gaze in the sketches.



Rix in Souwester c.1935
coloured pastel on paper, 30.5 x 22.8 cm



Paddy Walcott Portrait Study 1927
pastel on paper, 30.5 x 28 cm



Portrait of Dutch Refugee Man late 1940s
oil on canvas 61 x 50.5 cm



Portrait of a Dutch Refugee Woman late 1940s
oil on canvas 61 x 50 cm

One of the nannies was the niece of Hilda's good friend Dorothy Richmond and Hilda painted June Ashley-Wilson in her wedding dress, with correspondence to her friend Dodo giving an insight into this work:

“This afternoon was our third sitting on portrait of June – I know you'd love the beginning. It will be unusual - & classic & lovely in colour – She is standing near the Belgian cabinet & lovely golden light from side window and cool light from big window – delicate and lovely on her fair hair & skin – her frock is medieval in character & ivory embossed satin (doesn't show embossing) orange blossom around her golden head – She is to be holding a sheaf of golden lilies - on arm – lovely simple pale colours ivory and soft grey green of tapestry (from Square Hall) and only 'live' colour coral lips – Dignified - & not a bit “pretty pretty” ...”



The Bride (June Ashley-Wilson) c.1938 oil on canvas 98 x 94 cm

The wedding did not last and perhaps the lilies, traditionally linked to death, were a foreboding shadow. The painting remained with the artist and was included by invitation at the second annual exhibition of the XV Group of Independent Artists in Sydney 1939: “Will Ashton came over to me and he said he liked the Bride – “Yes very much – a very personal rendering” – yes he liked it – Howard Ashton liked it, a little worried as to whether the background didn't assert itself – might have liked it calmer (But I don't find this so.) Yes he liked the sheen of the satin & loved the painting of the flesh – he said “so many people paint flesh as if it was leather”. When Mrs Ashton saw it the next day I asked her if she liked the tapestry & she said – “Yes – oh is it tapestry? oh Howard does not know that – I'm sure he does not know that!!” I said “What did he think it was” – and she said “He thinks it's a suggestion of a landscape”. I said “Oh no – I felt it especially suitable for the little lady – her medieval frock, the romantic feeling – the tapestry is medieval – its old castle, little wooded hills – birds, etc – So on, I described my meaning – But Dodo it was very much enjoyed and truly loved – and caused a real flutter – And you need not worry re background – it takes not one whit from the figure – of course being unusual ... There is grace & repose & some beauty I hope – in both line and colour.”

Looking at contemporary writings, photographs and the costumes themselves gives an added insight into the artwork of Hilda Rix Nicholas, an artist whose experiences in her life are so clearly seen in her work – her studies of art students in the Latin Quarter, Paris; figures on the streets of Morocco; her skilled drawings of striking outfits in France; soldiers in uniform; rural landscapes of Australia; her use of family, friends and the people in her immediate surrounds as her models; and her ongoing love of costumes.



**The exhibition is showing at Lauraine Diggins Fine Art until 15 December 2023.
Please contact the Gallery for pricelist.**

To preview the exhibition please visit our website www.diggins.com.au

where you can download the [illustrated catalogue](#) and read the full essay entries by curator, historian, writer and speaker [Dr Sarah Engledow](#) and conservator, [Catherine Nunn](#)

and watch the video of the opening speech by [Dr Gerard Vaughan](#)

For further reading:

Dr Sarah Engledow, *Pleasures from the Studio Hilda Rix Nicholas Paris to Monaro*,
National Portrait Gallery, 2013

John Pigot, *Hilda Rix Nicholas: Her Life and Art*,
Melbourne University Publishing, 2000

Richard Travers, *Hilda : The Life of Hilda Rix Nicholas*,
Thames and Hudson, 2021

Hilda Rix Nicholas is represented in the National Gallery of Australia; the National Gallery of Victoria; the Art Gallery of New South Wales; the Art Gallery of South Australia; the Art Gallery of Western Australia; Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art; as well as numerous regional collections

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Gallery Hours: Tues – Fri 10am – 6pm