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## LAURINE · DIGGINS · FINE · ART

### From the fabled studio

Hilda Rix Nicholas at Lauraine Diggins 2023

A great deal has been written about the artist Hilda Rix Nicholas. Authors of books, essays, academic theses and exhibition catalogues have divided up her interesting life and vivid, distinctive works by medium and geography, focusing on her sketchbooks, for example, or on her times in Paris, Tangier, Mosman and the Monaro Plains.

Hilda's paintings and drawings are represented in national, state and regional galleries across Australia, as well as fine private collections. This exhibition comprises a selection by the artist's granddaughter, Bronwyn Wright, of the relatively few paintings and drawings remaining in her grandmother's remarkable studio. Completed in 1930 to the artist's own detailed design, the studio has rarely been entered by anyone outside Hilda's immediate family in the years since her death in 1961.

Hilda Rix, who was born in Ballarat, Victoria in 1884 and died in Delegate, New South Wales in 1961, spent three years at the National Gallery School, Melbourne before leaving Australia with her sister Elsie and mother Elizabeth in early 1907. Hungry for more art training, she took classes at the New Art School in London and the Académie Delécluse and the Grande Chaumière in Paris. Before the First World War Hilda and Elsie made several visits to Tangier, Morocco, where they fell in love with the crafts, garments, camels and effects of light and shadow on white buildings. A superb draftsman, Hilda made many striking paintings and drawings there, evoking the fine-boned faces and hands of people she encountered, the tiny buttons and embroidery on their vests, the lightness of their cotton robes and trousers, the shapes of their leather bags and shoes.

The women spent the summers of 1910, 1911, 1912 and 1914 amongst the throng of mostly expatriate artists around Étapes, painting and partying, partaking in charades, dress-ups, tableaux, concerts, recitations and picnics. The painting *Elsie in the garden, Étapes*, expresses the keenness Hilda gained there for mediaeval aesthetics and sumptuous fabrics. She retained this taste for decades; she appears to be wearing Elsie's red dress and a similar headpiece in a photograph taken 30 years later, at the other end of the world. Somehow, too, she there obtained the 'Chinese robe' that features in a magnificent painting in the collection of the Art Gallery of Western Australia, in a beguiling self-portrait in the collection of the National Portrait Gallery and in various drawings and paintings of family and friends. She kept the robe and its accessories all her life.

As well as being a keen collector of 'costumes', Hilda Rix Nicholas was very skilled at making them. She almost certainly made at least some of the garments visible in the large canvas depicting the Pied Piper of Hamelin, which may have been painted in

association with an entertainment at the British Sailors' Institute, Boulogne-sur-mer, staged in 1912-1913. The model was a sailor, persuaded by Hilda and her sister Elsie to pose in strange garb on an open hillside. A male artist friend helped him don the mediaeval gear before replacing his own, and they set off, the double-dressed seaman carrying the canvas and easel. '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 artist wrote.

Hilda's fun-filled life abroad took a radical turn during the First World War. The women left France for England, but there, Elsie and Elizabeth died of fever. In 1916 joy flared anew when Hilda met and married Major George Matson Nicholas, but he was killed at Flers within weeks. In spite of her terrible losses, she remained in London, and by the autumn of 1917 had recovered sufficiently to draw up beguiling Australian-themed costumes representing Australian flora and produce or a matinée fundraiser for the Anzac Club and Buffet at the Victoria Palace Theatre. Doubtless she had a hand in stitching them, too; the outfits, , were worn by young women with names like Ethel, Olive and Vera in the Pageant of the Southern Cross, at which Ada Crossley sang 'Yellow Wattle (Dedicated to the Australian Soldier)'.

In 1918, Hilda returned to Australia, bringing various rolled canvases; portraits of soldiers both raffish and tragic; drawings of Bretons in clogs and Arabs in djellabas; and trunks of fabrics, bags, shoes and furnishings. For some years she lived and painted gaily in the Sydney sunshine, frolicking on the beach and again delighting in fancy-dress hijinks. She returned to Paris in 1924-1926, painting *Les fleurs dédaignées* (now a highlight of the collection of the National Gallery of Australia). In 1927, proud owner of a new Morris Cowley, she took a long, adventurous Australian motoring holiday with her friend Dorothy 'Dodo' Richmond, during which she was able to paint her view of *Brisbane from One Tree Hill*.

Hilda remarried in 1928, and soon moved with her husband, Edgar Wright, to his sheep grazing property, Knockalong, near Delegate in southern New South Wales. In no time she was organising entertainments such as a mediaeval jousting tournament at the Delegate show, and a Moroccan evening at the Delegate School of Arts in which Edgar Wright played an Arab stallholder and his cousin, Paddy Walcott from Burnima, Bombala, a 'beauteous Arab'. (Paddy had been Hilda's model for the heroically Australian painting *Looking for Stragglers* in 1927.) Mostly, however, she spent the year of 1929 designing and overseeing the construction of a magnificent studio alongside the Knockalong house. The studio had enormous windows, a huge European-style fireplace and an attic store atop a stage, and was linked to the house by a pretty flower garden. It was a prodigious, perfect 'room of her own'.

In the year of the studio's completion, 1930, Hilda turned 46 and gave birth at home to her only child: a son, Rix Wright. He was christened in the studio on a table draped with grey and rose French brocade, and his birth was celebrated with a costume party for which Edgar and Hilda dressed as the King and Queen of Hearts. Henceforth, Rix was Hilda's perpetual subject; she drew and painted him from infancy to strong manhood, in and out of costume, with and without his toys, nannies and horses. So much did Hilda enjoy making toys for Rix that as he outgrew his taste for such things, she made a series of dolls of nursery-rhyme characters for the enjoyment of the public. They were exhibited alongside similarly-themed watercolour illustrations in a show opened by the glamorous Russian ballerina, Tamara Tchinarova, in the new Kodak House at 252 Collins Street, Melbourne just before Christmas 1936.

Over years in her historical-French style studio Hilda painted amongst Savonarola-style chairs, snake-charmer-style baskets, a spinning wheel, clogs, shawls and scarves, Italian ceramics, and drawings and paintings she had made many years before. Elements and objects of the studio she established at Knockalong in 1929 appear in paintings of her earlier workspaces, including one by her friend Harry van der Weyden of her studio in Étaples, which he sent to her in 1916; one of her studio in Mosman in 1921; and one of her studio in Paris in 1925. Works she painted within the Knockalong studio drew freely from a mixed bag of historical and contemporary elements, memories and direct observations.

*The Spanish shawl*, now in the collection of Newcastle Regional Gallery, was assumed for many years to have been painted in Spain when Hilda travelled through the country before the First World War. However, it was painted in the studio in 1936, and depicts one of her country neighbours, named Valmai Searle. Hilda draped her in a shawl and mantilla from her attic trunk, and she posed holding a Moroccan oud in a so-called 'antique Spanish chair' the artist had purchased from Myer. In the leadup to her wedding, local lass June Potts -- niece of Hilda's friend Dodo -- posed with a superbly enigmatic expression in her own modern satin gown against a tapestry (whether genuinely old, or a twentieth-century reproduction) of Italianate or Flemish design that Hilda had used as the backdrop for *Les fleurs dédaignées* in Paris in 1926 and brought back to Australia later the same year.

*Portrait of a Dutch Refugee*, in which the subject stands before the distinctive door Hilda designed for her studio, may well be thought to belong to the artist's body of fanciful-realist works; but it doesn't. It really *does* depict a contemporary Dutch person, many of whom came to Australia after 1945 and some of whom moved to the Monaro to work on the Snowy Mountains Hydroelectric Scheme, bringing what portable possessions they could.

After a holiday in Switzerland in 1950, during which she painted the Eiger, Hilda returned to Knockalong and painted very little. Her work was done; in the twenty years before, she had painted definitive pictures of the wide country that had become her destiny. *Rix catching the horse* was one of the last of the big paintings to exude the artist's confidence in her own ability and taste, the handsome vigour of her family and peers, and the unassailable position of people of their kind in the period when Australia 'rode on the sheep's back'. That golden age has seldom been evoked more compellingly than in the arresting art Hilda Rix Nicholas produced at Knockalong, far from the exhilarating destinations she depicted so seductively in her twenties and early thirties.

Dr Sarah Engledow, 12 September 2023

Dr Sarah Engledow is a writer and speaker on Australian painting, history and biography. She was the designated historian and a curator at the National Portrait Gallery from 1999 to 2019. During that period she wrote copiously on Australian art, history and figures represented in Australian portraits. Major exhibitions she curated include *So Fine: Contemporary women artists make Australian history* (2018); *The Popular Pet Show* (2016); *Arcadia: Sound of the Sea* (2014); *Paris to Monaro: Pleasures from the studio of Hilda Rix Nicholas* (2013); *Idle Hours* (2009); *Open Air: Portraits in the landscape* (2008) (with Andrew Sayers and Wally Caruana); and *The World of Thea Proctor* (2005) (with Andrew Sayers). She has spoken in a great variety of situations about portraits and their historical contexts. Sarah received the University Medal in English from ANU in 1995 and received her doctorate - for a contextual introduction to the novels of Scottish author James Kelman - from ANU in 2003. She is currently Senior Research Curator at Museum of Brisbane.