



# HILDA RIX NICHOLAS

28 October – 25 November 2023

LAURINE · DIGGINS · FINE · ART



**HARRY VAN DER WEYDEN 1868 - 1952**

***Hilda's Studio, Étapes 1916***

oil on canvas  
64.5 x 80 cm

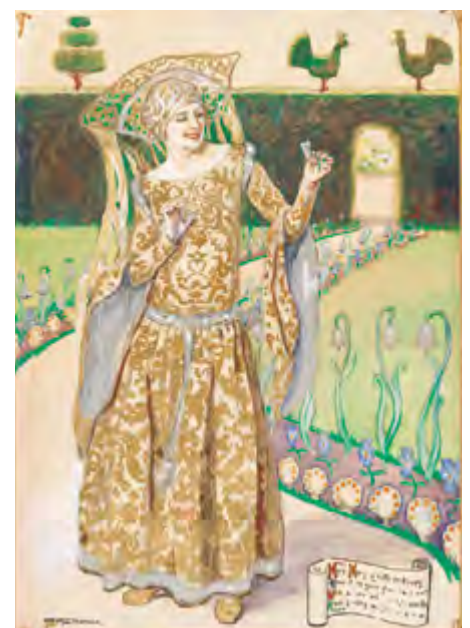
## FROM THE FABLED STUDIO

**H**ilda 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. *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. The model was a sailor, persuaded by Hilda and her sister Elsie to pose in strange garb on an open hillside.

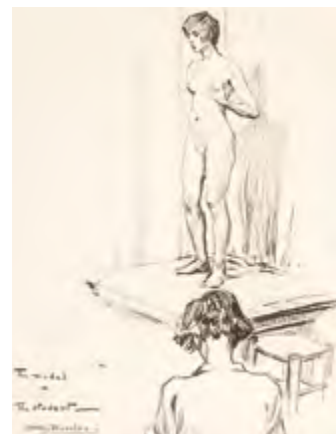


***Mary Mary Quite Contrary 1936***

pencil, ink, watercolour, gouache on paper  
54 x 36 cm



**The Eiger 1950**  
oil on canvas  
51 x 61 cm



**The Model and The Student c.1926**  
pencil on paper  
30 x 22.5 cm



**The Blue Blouse, Brittany**  
coloured pastel on paper  
30.5 x 22.8 cm



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



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



**Gums on the Hillside, Knockalong**  
oil on canvas  
78.5 x 98.3 cm



**The Pied Piper c.1911**

oil on canvas  
113.3 x 160.3 cm

'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 for a matinée fundraiser for the Anzac Club and Buffet at the Victoria Palace Theatre. Doubtless she had a hand in stitching them too.

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 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 dedaignées* (now a highlight of the collection of the National Gallery of Australia). In 1927, proud owner of a new Morris Cowley, she took a



**The Bride (June Ashley-Wilson) c.1938**

oil on canvas  
98 x 94 cm



**(Knockalong Studio and Garden) c.1940**  
oil on canvas on board  
40 x 32 cm



**Portrait Study, Paddy Walcott 1927**  
pastel on paper  
56 x 38 cm



**Sublime Point, Blue Mountains**  
oil on canvas  
31 x 40 cm



**Brisbane from One Tree Hill c.1927**  
oil on canvasboard  
40.3 x 30.7 cm

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'.



**Young Arab Girl 1914**  
coloured pastel on paper  
56 x 38 cm



**(Green Hands, Morocco) c.1912-14**  
coloured pastel on paper  
37 x 27.2 cm

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. 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 illustrating nursery rhymes for Rix that she decided to exhibit a series of nursery rhyme watercolours and handmade dolls in 1936.

Over the 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 Étapes, 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. These are liable to puzzle viewers unfamiliar with the context.

One of Hilda's most delightfully, grandly strange paintings is *The Bride (June Ashley-Wilson)* in which several strands of the artist's own story entwine in a portrait of another woman. In the leadup to her wedding, probably in 1938, 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

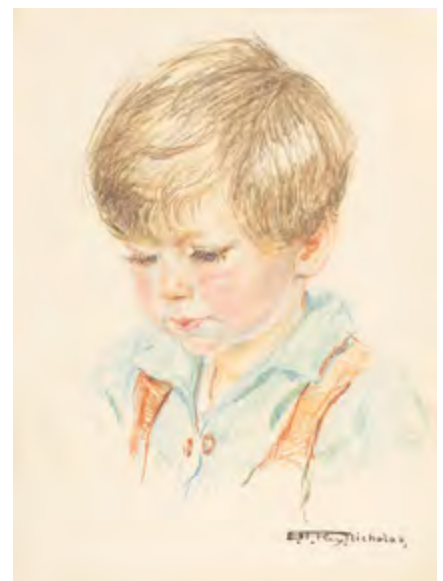


**Jack and Jill c.1936**  
pencil, ink, watercolour, gouache on paper  
51 x 35 cm

to belong to the artist's body of work in mixed fanciful and realist vein; 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. *Afternoon Light*, *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



**Rix 1932**  
coloured pastel on paper  
30.5 x 22.8 cm



**(Landscape with Aloe)**  
oil on canvas on cardboard  
27.5 x 34 cm



**Breton Marketplace c.1925**  
coloured pastel and conte on paper  
37 x 56 cm

## HILDA RIX NICHOLAS' PAINTING METHODS AND MATERIALS IN MOROCCO

While resident in France from 1907 to 1914, the Australian artist Hilda Rix Nicholas travelled twice to Tangiers, in Morocco, staying in the *Hôtel Villa de France*. On her first trip in 1912 she was accompanied by American artist Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859-1937) and spent two months painting. She returned to Tangiers for three months in 1914, accompanied by her sister Elsie (1877-1914). On arrival in Morocco in 1912, Hilda wrote about her first impressions of Tangiers that made her feel as if she were in 'an extraordinarily beautiful dream'.<sup>i</sup> She worked in the *soko* (the outdoor marketplace) every day, painting directly in front of her subjects on small pieces of canvas cut from a large roll of fabric. Before applying paint, she pinned the canvas pieces at each corner to a drawing board. Evidence of this method can still be seen on the paintings, where white 'halos' of unpainted tack-marks are found in the corners, as seen in 'The Souk of Morocco' and the other small oils from Tangiers.<sup>ii</sup>

Rix Nicholas painted rapidly, applying thick, confident strokes of bright colour, sometimes with just a single mark to capture the head of a figure in the crowd or a flag flapping in the wind. This thick paint would take time to dry, and consequently when the artist carried the paintings back to her hotel from the *soko*, some areas of the still wet paint became compressed, as seen in the surface of the central white flag and other areas of 'The Souk of Morocco'. Art historian John Pigot observed that Rix Nicholas' drawings made in the marketplace were 'more carefully rendered



*Compressed white paint in the white flag*

and completed in several sittings, with finishing touches added later in her hotel room'.<sup>iii</sup> In contrast, Rix Nicholas has made no attempt to cover the pin-holes and white 'halos', nor correct the compressed paint in her small oils. Choosing to retain these marks of process suggests the artist aimed to depict her experience of the *soko* as faithfully as possible in her small oil paintings. These physical qualities embody the artist's experience of painting in Morocco as she captured 'an extraordinarily beautiful dream', an experience still visible in the paintings now here in Australia over a century after their creation.

- Catherine Nunn

### FOOTNOTES:

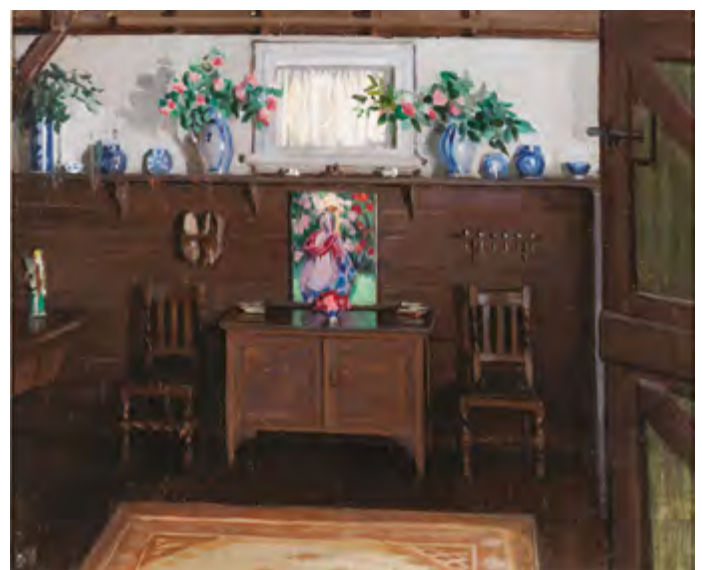
- i Letter to two friends from Hilda Rix, 5 February 1912 'To Angels' from Hotel Villa de France, Tangier, Morocco, cited in *Capturing the Orient Hilda Rix Nicholas & Ethel Carrick in the East*, Waverly City Gallery Touring Exhibition, 1993-4, p. 14.
- ii Shown on our site: [www.diggins.com.au](http://www.diggins.com.au)
- iii Pigot, John 'Les Femmes Orientalistes: Hilda Rix Nicholas and Ethel Carrick in the East' pp. 155-168, in *Strange Women: Essays in Art and Gender*, Hoorn, Jeanette (ed.), Melbourne University Press, 1994, p. 162.



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



**Beach c.1920**  
pencil and coloured pastel  
on paper  
55.5 x 36 cm



**In My Studio c.1920**  
oil on canvas  
51 x 61 cm



**Afternoon Light, Rix Catching the Horse 1948**  
oil on canvas  
114.5 x 114.5 cm



**COVER (detail)**  
**(Élsie in the Garden, Étapes) c.1913**  
oil on canvas  
98 x 79 cm

Catalogue design: Anton Banulski  
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and supplied.

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