



Mandala of the Eucharist



The Mob (right)  
The Black Madonna and child (bottom right)

# AN ARTIST'S LIFE

Two reviews of the life of a devoted Anglican

## Michael Whiting The grandeur of creation

*Barbara Robertson: An Australian Artist's Life*  
by Lorraine McLoughlin

Recently, on 10 May, at the South Australian Writers' Centre, a book on the life and art of local Anglican and noted artist, Barbara Robertson, was launched by Dr Lynn Arnold, CE of Anglicare. The book, written by Lorraine McLoughlin, is a publication of 100 pages, contains colour reproductions of 60 paintings with 30 quality photographs, and includes a DVD in which Barbara is interviewed and a catalogue of her works appears.

Barbara was born in 1921 and initially trained with Ivor Hele in Adelaide, and then with William Dargie in Melbourne. Acclaim came in the 1940s and 1950s when she exhibited with

the Adelaide Group. Twice her works were hung in the Archibald and the Sulman prizes at the Art Gallery of NSW and also in the Melrose and Blake competitions.

Her religious paintings are confident and strong statements and five of her Mandala series have been bought by Anglicare to hang in chapels of aged care facilities, and quite a number of works were purchased by Christ Church Anglican parish at Yankalilla, following a successful exhibition for that church's sesquicentenary in 2007.

*Mandala of the Eucharist* (top left) is one of the works purchased by Anglicare. Barbara herself writes: 'the aim of the mandala is to express an idea of the grandeur of God's creation, either as an expression of an ordered past or to give expression

to the feelings and aspirations of the present and future.' (p.74) Featured in this mandala are the symbols of the Holy Trinity, the four evangelists, wheat and grapes, and crosses with stigmata.

*The Black Madonna and Child*, and the *The Mob*, (right, and top right) are part of the Yankalilla parish's collection.

The former clearly illustrates a social realist theme common throughout Barbara's work; the background of the painting (Grote Street in the city) was first used in a 1950's work by Barbara. Of *The mob*, Barbara, when referring to the masks worn by the onlookers, said, 'their individuality is masked and humanity debased'.

Lorraine McLoughlin's book is a sensitive and thoughtful portrayal of a significant South Australian



artist. It is superbly illustrated and the text does justification not only to the diverse and challenging oeuvre of the artist, but is a sympathetic portrayal of a

devoted and talented Anglican. Lorraine is to be congratulated. For information about the book, and how to purchase a copy, visit [www.robertsonbiography.com](http://www.robertsonbiography.com)

## Lynn Arnold A revealer of what Adelaide refused to see

Lorraine McLoughlin's book on Barbara Robertson is an important contribution to the literature on South Australian art bringing into the limelight a fine artist whose name should long ago have been entered on the public honour roll of great South Australian painters.

There is a sad irony that, in 1949, when Barbara Robertson started her exhibiting career she did so just after the golden age of the better known 'Adelaide Angries' whom the late Max Harris described as artists who 'were a threat to accepted thought, accepted thought about identity', yet more than any of them she painted a reality that a comfortable prosperous post-war com-

munity refused to see - the poor and the dispossessed, black and white.

Her painting '*Grote Street Backyard*', for example, powerfully makes a point of marginalization and dispossession hidden by the comfortable facades of Adelaide.

It was also in the 1950s that Barbara Robertson saw what so few others saw - indigenous Australians - living, not as sociological curiosities but as a dignified yet hurting people relegated to the edge of urban society.

When she painted the first of these works, we were as a nation still a decade and a half away from the 1968 Referendum when it was thought all would be made good.

That which we collectively had not seen in our midst, Barbara saw and recorded through her moving paintings of a people not only forgotten but betrayed.

Her painting, '*Madonna and Child*', with indigenous Australians as mother and child, unreasonably seems counter-intuitive theologically.

Unreasonably because surely that painting takes us closer to the real essence of the biblical Mary and baby Jesus in terms of social mores of the prevailing culture than many of the more sanitized representations that we are used to.

In later years, Barbara's work seemed to indicate that she had embarked on a personal pilgrim-

age of reconciliation based on the biblical dictum 'blessed are the poor' giving enriched meaning to religious themes of agape, shalom and grace.

This pilgrimage, by the time Barbara Robertson retired from painting, reached its apogee in the symmetry of her painted mandalas.

In these wonderful works, some of which are in Anglicare chapels, the harmonious interplay of worldly elements seeking the divine exudes a profound peace moving on from the poignancy of earlier works.

Lorraine McLoughlin has, in this self-published work, provided a fine telling of Barbara's artistic journey, embellished with

the effect upon her work of encounters with various artistic influences through her early years; and also relates the significant events of her personal life, giving us the privilege of feeling we now know Barbara Robertson, painter and pilgrim.

The book is beautifully produced with good reproductions of art works that have been aptly selected to support the text. An accompanying DVD contains a wealth of additional material including interviews with Barbara Robertson.

Through this work, Lorraine McLoughlin has made a significant contribution to ensure that a fine Australian artist is not forgotten.