

ELAINE HAXTON – a colourful artist and life

Review by Winnie Pelz AM

Elaine Haxton is an artist whose name and work would not be familiar to many Australians.

In 1986 she was awarded a Queen's Birthday Honours Australia Medal for her services to art and in particular her achievements in printmaking. When she died in 1999, she was eulogised by the respected gallery director Kym Bonython AC as a generous and effervescent spirit with a huge personality, who had been an artist of quality, extraordinary range and innovation.

Then she was forgotten.

South Australian biographer, Lorraine Penny McLoughlin, based on the comprehensive and impeccable documentation compiled by Haxton's family, has written a fine book about the extraordinary life and the fascinating work of this quite exceptional artist.

Art was Haxton's life: simultaneously absorbing and creating a level of energy, output and commitment that is astonishing. The prolific volume of work and breadth of her skills and creative exploration is almost overwhelming, even though this book documents only a fraction of the life's work.

She deserves to be recognised and remembered, and the book deserves to be read. It is an elegant and lavishly illustrated volume with a most beguiling photograph of Elaine Haxton on the front cover.

There is no doubt, reading this extraordinary story, that Haxton's appearance and personality were significant assets, contributing to her ability to build a network of friends and professional contacts who opened doors and leveraged opportunities to travel and exhibit her work. As McLoughlin states, her looks, her friendliness and vitality kept her in the social pages for many years, and reading Haxton's own accounts of her travels suggest that her journey of self-discovery was about fun, colour, celebration and useful contacts, but this would be to under-estimate her ability, her dogged determination, commitment to her independence and a formidable work ethic.

Having made a decision in childhood that she wanted to be an artist, she left school at 14 and began to plan her independent creative pathway. As a teenager at East Sydney Tech (now the National Art School) she initially worked as an assistant in the sculpture studio, doing hard and dirty physical work. When she realised that commercial art paid better rates and was less physically demanding, she found employment as a fashion artist at David Jones. These decisions to 'pay her own way' and work at whatever opportunities presented that enabled her to continue her own studies and practise, became consistent elements in her life.

Haxton's artistic life continued to be characterised by a juggle of activities that would generate income and a pursuit of work that would gain the respect of her peers and the art world. Working hard just to make a living led her to seize chances where she could in the not always compatible worlds of commercial and 'fine' arts.

McLoughlin describes the tensions with skill and diplomacy and gives insights into the attitudes towards the 'Sydney Charm School' artists and the Melburnians who considered themselves as more serious artists portraying deeper and more worthy social issues.

The critics were not always as diplomatic. 'Triteness and superficiality' were a running theme in the critiques of Haxton's work at the time. Praise was frequently faint and qualified and some comments were particularly stinging, such as the following of an exhibition at Macquarie Galleries in the 1940s.

"...the onlookers' search for meaning or idea will prove entirely without avail... It is probably useless to point out their superficiality, for this effect is, on the whole, clearly intended."

A less robust and less confident personality would have wilted under such criticism, but Elaine Haxton was not deterred and continued to pursue her love of strong colour, design and decorative qualities. Her independence was as strong in her work as in her lifestyle.

Years later, in the 1980s, when her work had been described as '*an exercise in fashion... gay but temporary*', Haxton's response was gracious: "*I had the right to paint what I liked; the critics had the right to say what they liked. I didn't expect much from anybody so I didn't suffer much from being vulnerable*". Her strength of character and purpose was extraordinary.

The narrative of the book makes fascinating reading, painting a wonderful picture of the time and prevailing attitudes during periods of immense social and cultural changes in Australia. Haxton travelled extensively and maintained a disciplined practise of keeping sketchbooks to record her travels, frequently into exotic places. Mexico, Italy, Greece, France, Indonesia, China and Japan were sources of great adventure and inspiration and the sketches from these travels reflect an immediacy and freshness which is not always apparent in the paintings. Some of the lesser examples need not have been included.

The extent of Haxton's technical mastery forms part of the narrative, describing the exceptional contribution she made to set and costume design for a period of nearly twenty years, from the early 1940s to the 1960s. Her designs were commissioned by the Elizabethan Theatre, the Borovansky Ballet and the Australian Ballet and the Australian National Gallery now holds an archive of hundreds of her set and costume designs, testimony to the skill and innovation she brought to this area.

The book also covers her mural art, one of which won the Sulman Prize in 1943 and others made a huge impact during the 1950s. One mural at St Catherine's School in Sydney has been placed on the National Trust register.

The book is structured to reflect the main areas of influence and activity throughout Haxton's prolific life. One chapter is devoted to Printmaking, an obsession in the 1960s. Printmaking provided a new direction for her, gave her an opportunity to study and work in Japan, and provided a level of international recognition that surpassed any recognition she had gained for her painting. Two etchings: *Great Palm Parrot* and *Up and Away*, both printed in 1982 and both reproduced in the book, would have to be among her finest and strongest works. Her Australia Medal was awarded for her significant contribution to printmaking.

Interwoven through the narrative is the personal story of an irrepressible soul, a woman of extraordinary independence and courage who made her life one of total immersion and dedication to her art, but who, through a joy in colourful activity and a love for people, provided much joy and rich experiences for others.

Towards the later years, the critics mellowed in their appraisals and Lou Klepac, Sasha Grishin and Daniel Thomas, highly respected for their influential roles in the world of fine art, wrote positively of Haxton's work, recognising that she was a free spirit who had made a huge contribution, spanning an immense spectrum of creative activity.

The narrative and writing persuaded me to rethink my own views. The direction in her work became clearer as I gained a level of understanding of what made her tick and what excited her. I found myself admiring the extraordinary determination and the amazing work ethic/output. Any aesthetic considerations aside, the woman was a powerhouse and I found myself re-examining the whole issue of what it means to be an artist. And how do you determine who is a 'serious' artist, in a world where fashion now dictates whether you are 'hot'? Or not.

Elaine Haxton was not 'of her time'... and yet she was an amazing trailblazer and made the absolute MOST of 'her time', seizing every opportunity that came her way... and making opportunities when they didn't exist.

Her life and how she lived it was her art. That sense of total immersion and being driven by some internal power that propels you to a destiny that is almost beyond your control.

McLoughlin's writing and ability to bring the personality of Haxton to life is one of the strongest elements that makes this book worthy of adding to the emerging history of women artists in Australia. It's an engrossing story.