



Elaine Haxton: A colourful artist and life by Lorraine Penny McLoughlin

Review by Lynn Lancaster, Sydney Arts Guide: 11 March 2021

Where did she get the energy from?

Art was her life. This is a large, beautifully, lavishly illustrated coffee table book about the fascinating life of Elaine Haxton, excellently researched.

This publication is divided into ten chapters with a forward by Adam Wynn. While yes there is a table of contents at the front and an extensive bibliography, this is one of those excellent but annoying books that doesn't have an index.

Copies of newspaper clippings and brief information about various people or events are included in highlight boxes on the page. We learn that Haxton travelled wildly, which expanded and developed her oeuvre. She worked in various media and often juggled different projects all at once. How did she do it? She was a favourite of the press and had a great reputation in the art world.

We learn that Haxton was a smoker and a cat person. Her networking was legendary.

Haxton was an artist almost from birth. She left school as soon as she possibly could and studied at what was then called East Sydney Technical College (now the National Art School) under sculptor Rayner Hoff. She became an apprentice to Hoff, helping him with his sculptures for the War Memorial in Hyde Park. She then changed to part time studies with Fred Leist and working as a fashion artist at David Jones. After three years Haxton went freelance and began to develop a reputation in the art world.

At age twenty-three Haxton moved to London for the first time, doing night classes at the Grosvenor School of Modern Art while working for advertising company J Walter Thompson Company. Haxton partied and experienced the London social scene as well as attending various galleries and painting and sketching on weekends.

In 1934 she was included in the 'Six Colonial Artists' exhibition and also produced mural paintings. During this time she also went on a walking tour of Germany but was seemingly unaware of the political rumbles at the time. In 1936 she was in London for the abdication crisis, and the coronation of George VI in 1937. In 1937 Haxton returned to Australia via New York and Mexico.

McLaughlin then examines the rest of Haxton's life, her extraordinary travels and adventures and how she often juggled various projects and different media all at once. Haxton was in Australia for the years of the Second World War and kept up her UK and USA contacts as well as her commercial art work.

She became great friends with the Drysdales, Donald Friend and others. Haxton was featured on the front cover of the Australian National Journal in 1941. Dobell painted her portrait in 1941 and won the Sulman prize in 1943.

Haxton worked on both murals and easel paintings which not many artists can do. As well, her work was featured in a book by Ure Smith and some of her paintings were in an exhibition that toured America. Elaine's work as a war artist included painting a mural for a British air craft carrier and right at the end of the war stage managing a dance group travelling New Guinea as well as designing for the New Theatre in Sydney's production of Moliere's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*.

Once things settled after the War, Haxton moved to New York, and did assorted freelance jobs (eg for Vogue) while doing night classes and studying at the New School of Theatre Design while keeping up her Australian connections winning the prestigious Ballarat Art Gallery Crough Prize in 1947.

Various reasons forced Haxton to move to London where she first meets her husband Brigadier Richard Cunningham-Foot, known as 'Dickie'. She moved back to Australia in 1948 and was extremely busy... working on the 125th Anniversary celebrations for Antony Horden's (a huge success) plus an exhibition at Macquarie Galleries, (one of her paintings inspiring Margaret Barr) designing a set of playing cards and murals and...

In 1949 'Dickie' and Haxton toured France before returning to Sydney. They married in 1954, Haxton exhibiting in Brisbane and Adelaide. She also has her portrait painted by Judy Cassab and enters both the Archibald and Blake prizes various years. 1956 saw Haxton involved in a very special high-profile trip to China (Australia's first for a cultural delegation) while juggling murals and other exhibitions etc simultaneously (including a fridge one!)

Chapter Six is a fascinating look at the massive amount of theatre design work Haxton produced in the 1950s and 60s – ballet opera and musicals for instance and there is a detailed chronological list of the various productions.

In the 1960s Haxton and Cunningham Foot toured what is now Sri Lanka and Iran, Colombo, Turkey, Greece, Madrid, Paris and visited London with a visit to America and Japan on the way home. When back Haxton designed textiles, produced works for John Kaldor and also studied printmaking as well as continuing her painting and participating in several more exhibitions. In 1969 she studied in Paris then Japan to learn more about woodblock printing .

Cunningham-Foot sadly collapsed with a heart attack and passed away.

The 1970s saw printmaking in various forms become a passion for Haxton, leading to some exciting book illustrations, changing style and form for each book. She visited Indonesia and Tahiti and has some major exhibitions. There is a two-page chronological list included of the books Haxton was involved in. In 1982 there was a major touring retrospective exhibition starting in Tasmania 1985 saw Haxton's last significant show, this time in Canberra. In 1986 Haxton was awarded the Australia Medal. Sadly, her health declined and she developed Alzheimer's, passing in July 1999.