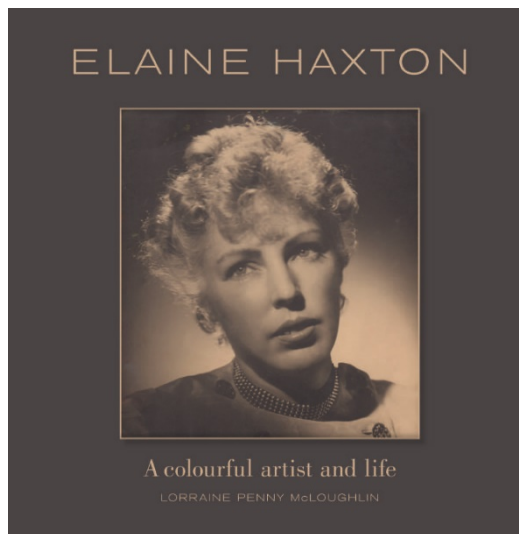


The work of Sydney artist Elaine Haxton, who died in 1999, is worth celebrating *The Canberra Times* July 3, 2021, Sasha Grishin



Elaine Haxton: A colourful artist and life, by Lorraine Penny McLoughlin. Wakefield Press, \$79.95.

A major, comprehensive publication on the work of the Sydney-based artist Elaine Haxton (1909-1999) has been long overdue and this beautifully produced and profusely illustrated monograph by Lorraine Penny McLoughlin has been worth the wait.

Although born in Melbourne, the Haxton family moved to Sydney when the future artist was a year old and the rest of her life was to be associated with the harbour city, except for her extensive periods of travel abroad. Elaine's father, David Haxton, could be described as a failed artist, one who had to abandon his professional interest in art for a day job to support his wife and three children.

Elaine may not have been born with a silver spoon in her mouth, but she was born into a family where art as a serious career choice was encouraged. At the start of 1924 she entered the East Sydney Tech and her future career as an artist was sealed. Rayner Hoff and Fred Leist were her teachers and, to support herself, she worked in commercial art at the David Jones department store.

Although Haxton moved in high society and was glamorous, gregarious and popular with the social pages of the media, she never became a social butterfly and throughout her life remained seriously committed to her art. She had a reputation for spending long hours in the studio, but also for partying hard and for being addicted to travel.

In 1933 she sailed to London where she worked in commercial art during the day and studied in the evenings at the Grosvenor School of Modern Art. It is interesting that here she studied under the conservative Iain McNab, rather than the more dynamic modernist Claude Fight, who had such an impact on a number of Australian modernist printmakers including Dorrit Black, Eveline Syme and Ethel Spowers. In London, she formed a friendship with John Passmore and other expats and returned to Sydney in 1939 via New York and Mexico.

The war saw Haxton "stranded" in Sydney in what she initially intended as a brief stay to catch up with her family, but this period also saw her building up a close friendship with Russell Drysdale and his family, and William Dobell. In the 1930s and 1940s Haxton was prolific, but in her paintings she produced work of an uneven quality and the serious art critics sounded a note of caution. Paul Haefliger essentially found her work as charming, decorative and superficial; for Clive Turnbull there were too many concessions to commercial art; while the scholarly Dr Gertrude Langer found her essentially "a decorative painter".

At the conclusion of the war, Haxton travelled to New York and subsequently back to England and the continent. In Britain she met a charming military man turned businessman, Richard (Dickie) Foot, who was her senior by 17 years and who would become her husband.

They married in October 1954 and made their base in Sydney and formed a popular art hub at Clareville Beach along the Pittwater foreshore. Her husband died suddenly from a heart attack in 1969.

Haxton was prolific, driven, at times brilliant and on other occasions fairly mundane. Having seen quite a bit of her art and examining the high quality reproductions in this book, it is difficult to grasp a singular style or a dominant artistic language. When she worked with theatre, her decorative gift gave life and exuberance to her costume designs and stage set designs and McLoughlin provides an invaluable summary of her involvement with theatre design.

She was also a dedicated book illustrator and received appropriate acclaim for her monumental murals.

Possibly Haxton's greatest achievement came as a printmaker, an art form that she turned to when she was in her mid-50s. In 1965, she commenced printmaking at the Willoughby Arts Centre in Sydney and in 1969 spent three months studying at the famous Atelier 17 in Paris, then travelled on to Japan where she studied with Tomikichiro Tokuriki, a very traditional woodblock artist of the Sosaka Hanga and Shin Hanga movements. Having absorbed this huge repertoire of skills, she did not follow in a single direction but made quite memorable exquisite prints with intaglio prints possibly her finest achievement.



Haxton was a great storyteller and her trip to Mexico in 1939 or her visit to China in 1956, as part of a cultural delegation, were to feed her tales for years to come. She sought to enchant, charm and entertain her viewers with gorgeous, decorative and well-crafted art objects. When she died in July 1999 afflicted by Alzheimer's, "decorative" - at least in some quarters - was seen as a dirty word and the antithesis to serious art.

Now that the concept has been rehabilitated and the term "charm school" is no longer seen as derogatory, we can start to enjoy the multifaceted talents of the remarkable Elaine Haxton.

Elaine Haxton, Up and Away - Australian Sulphur Cockatoos (detail), 1978

RECOMMENDED