

The Age January 23, 2010

One Australian woman painter strode into the masculine territory of the Australian bush, writes Andrew Stephens.

HILDA Rix Nicholas slept on her husband's greatcoat for years after he was killed.

She, a young Australian woman travelling abroad, had known him for a month before the wedding. Less than six weeks later, at Flers, he was dead. That was in 1916, a few months after her mother's death in England. And about a year before that, at the start of the war, her beloved sister Elsie was taken from her by typhoid, incubated during the Channel crossing from France.

It had been such a good idea to travel to Europe in 1907 for a long stint, to get an art education for Hilda in Paris.

When she returned to Australia in 1918, you'd have thought she'd be broken beyond repair after all that grief and war, but Rix Nicholas got on with her life - amazingly so - building an international career as an artist, remarrying, and having a son at the age of 46.

Hilda Rix Nicholas isn't a well-known name, even in art circles, not in the league of Roberts, Streeton, Bunny, Preston, Proctor or McCubbin (her teacher at the National Gallery of Victoria school). Yet she was a successful artist in her day: the first Australian woman - and the second Australian artist, after Rupert Bunny - to secure a solo exhibition in Paris. It was such a hit, the Musee de Luxembourg bought two of the paintings. Perfectly, one was titled *In Australia*, and bought on Australia Day, 1925.

Forty years after Rix Nicholas' death in 1961, one critic was saddened that this painter was now just "a footnote, an afterthought" in standard histories of Australian art. And her biographer, John Pigot, who reclaimed her work from relative obscurity, wrote that at the end of her life she had found herself "aesthetically marginalised, and relegated to the edge of the Australian art world".

While her interesting European paintings have been known about for years, her Australian landscape work is now being reappraised in an exhibition of about 50 works at the Bendigo Art Gallery. The life of Rix Nicholas, too, is explored.

Here she is in a photograph from the 1930s, a formidable person in jodhpurs, jacket and a rather mannish hat. Legs astride, a brush in one hand, the other jabbing forcefully at the canvas set on an easel out in the countryside, she is almost a parody of the legendary white Australian male artist, intrepidly capturing the spirit of the bush in oils.



Women, she had found, weren't meant to do that, not in the Australia of that era. They weren't meant to be heroic, or self-promoting, or confident in their abilities, or prone to sending photos of themselves to newspapers. Nor were they meant to move, at the height of their hard-won careers, far away from the Sydney-Melbourne arts hubs, or to have a custom-built Morris bullnose ute into whose modified trunks they could chuck their canvas, easel and paint box. Or to give birth for the first time at the age of 46. Women were meant to paint docile, pretty interiors and domestic scenes, not get about on the land in trousers and be upset that the great nationalist bush myth centred on men.

So, no surprise that one snarky critic of the day wrote that the "pseudo-masculinity of Mrs Nicholas' work", with its "sensation of boldness and vigour of attack" yielded, on closer examination, a "paucity of really fundamental quality", with the colours of the Australian landscape "generally unconvincing".

Kirsty Grant, Australian art curator at the National Gallery of Victoria, says the neglect of Rix Nicholas after her success in the 1920s was partly because she was a woman. "But also, for the time that she was painting, she was out of step with the prevailing fashion. She wasn't really a modernist - you compare her to the Margaret Prestons or the Thea Proctors of that period [1920s-40s] and they were, it probably seemed at the time, doing much more interesting, more challenging work." Grant is pleased the show will bring this painter to a new audience, and is curious to see how well the landscape paintings hold up. She says there is a nice continuity from the European pictures, in which Rix Nicholas painted many women, to the Australian subjects - and a good inversion by painting women in pastoral scenes "which is so much the domain of the male painter and men in the landscape".

Rix Nicholas certainly had a firm project in mind back then. A few years before the photo in jodphurs was taken, she had written in a letter that she wanted to "paint things typical of my country, the splendid types in their proper setting of struggling with the elements of this, my dear land"; it was something she could do with a "deep holy love". She was, she wrote - possibly with some irony - "the man for the job".

Being a curator, Tracy Cooper-Lavery was naturally aware of Hilda Rix Nicholas. She had seen the impressionist and "orientalist" paintings from Rix Nicholas' first 11-year trip (1907-18) to Europe, made with her ill-fated mother and sister. But when Cooper-Lavery did some more thorough sleuthing a few years ago, she was drawn more and more deeply into the incredibly well-documented life of this woman - the tragedy of her early life, her success in the 1920s, and her great, grand romance with the Australian bush and landscape ever afterwards.

"I got completely consumed with her story, once I started looking at the archives," says Cooper-Lavery, senior curator at Bendigo Art Gallery. "She was such an amazing letter keeper: she kept everything. It's so rare to get that from an artist."

She says Rix Nicholas' Australian works were often overlooked by public collections - except for the NGV, which bought *Canberra from Red Hill* in 1928. Now, it is difficult for them to be publicly acquired because they are tightly held in private collections.

To research Rix Nicholas, Cooper-Lavery travelled to a remote town named Delegate, on the border of Victoria and NSW. There, she looked through "boxes and boxes" of photos and saw the purpose-built studio where Rix Nicholas spent the rest of her life after a second, successful trip to Europe in the 1920s. And at the National Library, she ploughed through more of "the Hilda archive" - many, many letters that the family had kept for years until biographer Pigot started researching his PhD and book on the artist in the late 1990s.

In that, *Hilda Rix Nicholas: Her Life and Art* (1999), Pigot writes that Rix Nicholas was unwilling to play by the interwar rules, which required female artists to paint domestic life. Though some of the period's most adventurous artists were women (Thea Proctor, Margaret Preston or Grace Cossington Smith), their work did not take on the Australian landscape as a main theme.

Rix Nicholas did, even though it meant being seen as out of step with the rise of modernism. She painted the bush with a fervour and frequently inhabited it with women doing what we still, perhaps, assume to be men's work on the land. And they were wearing men's duds.

"Every white man was supposed to be able to own a part of Australia, but the same thing was not necessarily true of every woman," writes Pigot; the ennobled bushman, and thus the bush, was equated with masculinity, independence and action. "These ideas were inscribed into the bush mythology at the time that it was becoming part of the national story. The bush ... defined Australianness as well as masculinity."

Take a look at some of the paintings in the new Rix Nicholas show at Bendigo and the challenge is clear: the artist's dear friend Dorothy Richmond on horseback in the bush wearing a bloke's clobber; another cowgirl rounding up the sheep under what many would describe as a thick-trunked Heysen-esque (but never a Rix Nicholas-ish) tree; or another female musterer, with dog, horse and sheep.

No vases of flowers, tablecloths or pastel colours for this painter - though she had done beautiful post-impressionist work.

Rix Nicholas, writes Pigot, passionately believed in the ideals bound up with the bush - honesty, sanity, morality - and saw women as active participants in rural life.

After marrying Edgar Wright and moving to Delegate - their property was called Knockalong - she immersed herself in painting such scenes. The price, though, mainly because of her isolation from the arts hubs of Melbourne and Sydney, was the sacrifice of the career she had so single-mindedly established.

Indeed, after returning from the second tour of Europe in 1926 she had been "greeted almost in paparazzi style" as journalists vied for an interview, says Cooper-Lavery. As she produced her paintings of the landscape and Australian "types" during the next couple of years, what she called a "vile" review appeared in the influential art design magazine *Home* describing her work as "lacking in serious intention".

"I think she was an incredibly strong woman, particularly when you think about what happened to her in her early life," says Cooper-Lavery. "She could have just flaked - it would have been seen as quite natural for her not to recover from that tragedy. She obviously decided that she wanted to start again - the fact that she went on as she did. She was obviously a very strong woman but someone who had a lot of moral values and complete and absolute love for her country and for the young men and women that went overseas to fight in the war. She also had that very domestic side, her absolute devotion to her husband and son and her life on the property.

"The fact that she was able to create these wonderful paintings among it all and portray women as equal partners in working the landscape was quite unique."

That, no doubt, is because the woman herself was somewhat unusual and spirited. This comes through clearly from her granddaughter, Bronwyn Wright, who lives at Knockalong. We speak on the phone, but she manages to give an atmospheric tour of her grandmother's studio, describing things as she walks through it.

Built in a French style, the studio has a large wall of windows on the south side - perfect, soft light for a painter - and the timber for it came up the hill on a bullock dray, says Wright. The family try to keep it as it was when Rix Nicholas used it, she says.

It must have been a happy place for her; her own patch of bohemia where art and small theatre performances were held on the little stage up one end of the room.

Wright sends me photos of the family, all dressed up in costumes, with Rix Nicholas looking particularly grand. This was all in the days surrounding that wonderful 1930s photo of her in jodhpurs, but well before eye troubles in the 1950s meant she could no longer see clearly enough to paint properly, before developing Parkinson's disease as she approached death.

The studio remains, though: neat, quiet and uninhabited, full of stories and art, in the landscape she so loved.

***Hilda Rix Nicholas: The man for the job* exhibition was at Bendigo Art Gallery until April 5 2010.**

www.bendigoartgallery.com.au