ALFRED COLEMAN AND HIS WATERCOLOUR SKETCHES

Kerry Heckenberg examines six watercolours by Alfred Coleman and what they say about the wider Australian art scene of the time.

A TALE OF THREE PORTRAITS

Professor Emeritus Laurie Hargreaves discusses three portraits by Ray Crooke in the light of correspondence held by the Fryer Library.

MEN OF FLOWERS

Cassie Doyle explores this stunning title from the Library’s collection of Artists’ books.

THE MADONNA OF THE SPRINGBOK RAIN

Silvana Gardiner discusses the layers of meaning in her Madonna triptych.

BOOK OF HOURS

The recent acquisition of a single illuminated leaf and its use in teaching are discussed by Elizabeth Aley and Stephanie Musgrave.

THE HALF DOZEN GROUP OF ARTISTS

An examination of the history of this small but significant artists’ group by PhD candidate Judy Hamilton.

PAT CORRIGAN

Samantha Littley of the UQ Art Museum and Percy Whiteway of Fryer Library talk about the significant gifts that Patrick Corrigan AM has made to The University of Queensland.

WHAT’S NEW

Fryer congratulates two award winners, notes a major philanthropic donation to UQ, profiles an interesting addition to its collection of artworks, and provides an update on its digitisation efforts.

FRIENDS OF FRYER

A look at events enjoyed by the Friends, and upcoming activities.

FRONT AND BACK COVER: A Coleman, [Street scene with Perfect Cheese Co building], ART00550, Fryer Library, The University of Queensland Library.

KERRY HECKENBERG Examines SIX WaterCOLOURS BY ALFRED COLEMAN AND WHAT THEY SAY ABOUT THE WIDER AUSTRALIAN ART SCENE OF THE TIME.

Included in the Fryer Library pictorial collection are six watercolour sketches by Victorian artist Alfred Coleman. The artist is little-known today, but his sketches are charming and skilful depictions of suburban streetscapes and coastal scenes with boats, trees and water. They are undated and unidentifiable except in general terms. How does Coleman fit into the story of Australian art? What can we learn about the artist and his subjects? This article will present hitherto unpublished biographical details about the artist and his career that point to an interesting moment in Australian art history as professional bodies and artistic networks were being consolidated, and challenged, in the first half of the twentieth century. Coleman’s sketches reveal a triumph of perseverance on the part of the artist. They also point to significant developments in city life and recreational activities in Australia at this time.

Alfred Benjamin Coleman was born in Collingwood, Melbourne, in 1865, the son of a furniture-maker. This became his profession as well, as entries in Electoral Rolls between 1909 and 1942 attest. His business seems to have supported a comfortable life. Alfred was able to marry and had a son and a daughter. From the early 1920s he lived with his family at ‘The Wattle’, 256 Como Parade in Mordialloc, a Melbourne suburb on the eastern edge of Port Phillip Bay, until his death in 1948, aged sixty-two. A tiny obituary in the Melbourne Argus, however, gives no hinting of this business, but rather celebrates him as an active painter:

Mr Alfred Coleman, of Como pole, Mordialloc, died yesterday after a brief illness, aged 62 years. A well-known landscape and seascape artist, he frequently exhibited his oils and watercolours in Melbourne galleries. He was on the council of the Victorian Artists’ Society, and a member of the Twenty Painters’ Society, the South Australian Artists’ Society, and the Arts and Crafts Club. He leaves a widow and a son and daughter.

Above: A Coleman, [Beach scene], ART00551, Fryer Library, The University of Queensland Library.

Painting seems to have been pursued in his spare time and on holidays. And it was only in the 1930s when he was in his late forties or early fifties that his career took off. The earliest newspaper review of his work that I have found is dated April 1934: Arthur Streeton describes a one-man show by Coleman at the Athenaeum Gallery in largely positive terms, commenting as far as they go the canvasses are brilliant in light and general effect although he would like to see interest in idiosyncratic forms in some future exhibition. He also notes the artist’s characteristic...
A Tale of Three Populists

PROFESSOR EMERITUS LAURIE HERGENHAN DISCUSSES THREE PORTRAITS BY RAY CROKE IN THE LIGHT OF CORRESPONDENCE HELD BY THE FRYER LIBRARY.

The University of Queensland owns three notable portrait paintings by Ray Croke of Herbert and his wife, Sadie, and of Zelman Cowan, one-time Vice-Chancellor of the University (1957–77) and Governor-General of Australia (1977–80). The Fryer Library holds correspondence about the portraits which tells a fascinating story.

This story really begins in 1970 when I published, as editor of Australian Literary Studies, the text of a speech Xavier had given at the Adelaide Festival on "The writing of Capricornis". After I moved from Tasmania to The University of Queensland in 1971, Xavier invited me to visit him at his cottage at Redcliffe, Cairns, then a small cluster of houses on the edge of cane fields, with a station on the railway line to Kuranda. Xavier and Sadie showed me with pride a cache of his papers documenting his whole career. They were kept in a large wooden box with Sadie in her 'partry'. She was titular custodian and at my suggestion, Xavier promised that they would eventually donate the papers to the Fryer Library, University of Queensland, as true to his word.

After that, I kept in touch with Xavier, as sympathetic friend and confidant, I read the completed chapters of his final novel, Poor fellow my country, and sent him the rest, as he finished it. In 1981, Xavier's last major work, Sydney (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1984), I, was published.

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Above: This plaque, from the Fryer Library reading room, was commissioned by Sadie and presented with the portrait at the official handover of the papers in 1980. See UQP, 1983, Box 29, Orchet correspondence.
Herbert was reminded of his mother who "never loved anyone, but he added: "No one would ever have said I resembled my mother in any way… even if that harsh uncompro mise no! that you have found at last," I could never go on to fulfill myself, he continued, "knowing that my nature was as harsh as you have so truly shown it to be."

There is perspicacity, if some dramatic exaggeration, in this description. The striking portrait does suggest a cruel inflexibility of purpose, part of an ambivalence that in real life was masked by his artistic desire to promote compassion and a 'kinder society'. Though Crooke doctored the fairy chest, which Xavier was so proud of, in a white singer, there are suggestions of Neanderthal man in the figure: hairy arms, one distended; one leg bent or crossed, elbow resting on a knee, the leg figuring as a hefty haunch. The face is rock-like and lined. It may be that in this ambiguous portrait Crooke depicted the author who, in Capricornia particularly, exposed the sagginess winter of racism in the north, stripping away any veneer of 'civilisation'. The savagery was something which Herbert could both empathise with from his own loveless upbringing and yet attack as an inversion of human fellowship.

Xavier did not take offence at Crooke's portrait, concluding his letter on a friendly note: ... I wish you were near, just to sit with you—or all for you (while you) in your secret wonderful way interested. You have become my dear friend. Regardless, not receiving a prompt reply from Crooke, Xavier took this as a rejection and turned petulant: ... I made a mistake in believing that I could be friends with you ... I could not distinguish the enthusiasm engendered by "a good business deal" for "true affection for me."

Wisely, Crooke had delayed replying to Xavier's comments until he could write about the progress of the dust jacket. Crooke was brief and low-keyed: I was interested in your reactions to the portrait—I wonder if anyone can see us as we see ourselves ... Furthermore by way of mollifying Herbert, Crooke went on to add that he was "very interested in the sketch of your [Irish mother's] background", and he went on to mention his own ties with Ireland.

About this time Zeiman reported to Xavier that he had a very good meeting with Roy Crooke when he was on his way to Calms. He tells me that he proposes to send the printing of you to me when it is completed in a few weeks time. I was delighted with the sketches and I discussed very easily with him a proposal which will get the portrait of you into the University collection at a very low price. I hope that we shall also, in due course, have a portrait of Sadece with it. It means that we shall have portraits of the two of you by a very good painter.

Zeiman's own portrait was apparently a result of his meetings with Crooke. Unfortunately Sadece died in 1979, before her portrait was completed. Xavier became anxious, fearing that in finishing Crooke might lose the spontaneity of the first sketch—which Xavier called "the lovely thing"—by "technifying" it. Crooke understood Xavier's concern but was himself confident, remarking that he had learned not to touch such first studies. Xavier sent one of Sadece's dresses, for the completion.

And all three testify to Crooke's skill as portrait painter, a skill neglected by commentators in favour of the landscape, as Rosemary Dobson had suggested. As a group, the portraits are a memorable commemoration of persons who in real life were fortuitously but closely linked.

LAURE HERGENHAN AO, former UQ English Professor, founding editor of Australian Literary Studies, founding director of the Australian Studies Centre and general editor of UQ's Australian Author series (1975-2001) has published widely. He was co-editor of the 2002 publication Letters: Xavier Herbert.

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2. X Herbert, Letter to Derek Fielding (University Librarian), 15 October 1975, Papers of Sadece and Xavier Herbert, UQUSB, Box 29, Fryer Library, The University of Queensland Library.
5. X Herbert, Letter to Roy Crooke, 4 December 1974, UQLIB, Box 30, Fryer Library, The University of Queensland Library.
7. R Dobson, Focus on Roy Crooke, The University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1971, p. 43.
8. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
23. Two letters portraying Sir Zelman and Sir Zelman are on show in the collection of the National Library of Australia; these are possibly preliminary studies.