

An Artist Lost:

Rediscovering Constance Stokes

Anne Summers AO Ph.D

National Gallery of Australia

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In 1947, shortly after he arrived in Australia to take up his position as Inaugural Professor of Fine Arts at the University of Melbourne, Joseph Burke was asked by an American art magazine to nominate the Australian artists he most admired. He listed six: William Dobell, Sidney Nolan, Arthur Boyd, Ian Fairweather, Russell Drysdale - and Constance Stokes.

Each of these artists, apart from Fairweather were, he said, represented in the National Gallery of Victoria and he "had seen a particularly fine Constance Stokes in the home of Daryl Lindsay".¹ This fine painting was called "Girl in Red Tights" and a few years later, in 1953, it caused a sensation when it was shown in London as part of the Twelve Australian Artists exhibition at the Burlington Galleries.

The eleven other artists in that show, which was organised by the British Council to mark the Queen's coronation, were Arthur Boyd, Russell Drysdale, William Dobell, Sidney Nolan, Lloyd Rees, Justin O'Brien, Donald Friend, Frank Hinder, Ralph Balson, Godfrey Miller and, the only other woman, Jean Bellette. (The show had also travelled to Venice for the Biennale).

Stokes had three works in the exhibition: "Woman Drying her Hair" (c.1946 National Gallery of Victoria), "Reverie" (1950, Art Gallery of South Australia) and "Girl in Red Tights" (c 1948, now National Trust of Victoria).

At the glittering exhibition opening, "Girl in Red Tights" was the star of the show. Sir Phillip Hendy, director of the National Gallery in London, sent Stokes a cheeky note: 'I envy you your girl in red pants—she is the first thing you see when you go into the Gallery, and makes a good receptionist.' The idea for this painting had come when, arriving early one Thursday evening for a life drawing session at George Bell's, Stokes caught the model undressing in preparation. The relatively informal and intimate nature of the pose was the result of this unexpected encounter.

Now everyone in London was talking about it. They weren't talking about Drysdale or Nolan or Boyd or Dobell, they were singing the praises of Constance Stokes. *The Times* critic described it as the 'best picture in London that week' while the *Sunday Observer* said, 'Constance Stokes imparting a glow to her monumental figures has an impressive Girl in Red Tights'.

Sir Kenneth Clark, recently retired as Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford, held a lunch in her honour. Connie had first met Clark in 1949. Sir Keith Murdoch had appointed Clark one of two London buyers for the Felton Bequest, and it was the Bequest that had brought him to Melbourne.

While he was in Melbourne, Clark had acquainted himself with the work of Australia's leading artists. He liked what Sidney Nolan and Russell Drysdale were doing and bought one of each artist's works but he also took note of Constance Stokes. He also loved her drawing, reportedly saying that she was 'the greatest draughtswoman of the century'.

¹ Joseph Burke, Introduction to *Constance Stokes Retrospective Exhibition*, exhibition catalogue, Swan Hill Regional Art Gallery, Victoria, n.d. [1985], no pagination [p 6]

Yet, today, more than fifty years later, few people outside art circles have even heard of Constance Stokes.

What happened?

I first heard the name Constance Stokes in the early 1990s when a curator friend managed to identify her as the artist who, under her maiden name of Constance Parkin, had painted a portrait of my mother in 1933 in Brighton, a suburb of Melbourne.

It had been with our family since 1970 when my grandmother had finally succeeded in her quest to buy the painting. It had taken her nearly 40 years. (Because it had not been a commissioned painting, my family had no rights to it. Rather, the artist had approached my mother, then a 10 year old girl, and asked if she could paint her portrait.)

In 2005, my mother died very suddenly and the painting came to me. I found it having a hypnotic, almost mesmerising affect on me, and decided I would write about how it came to be painted and what had happened to it during all those years before my grandmother had been able to acquire it.

The result was a book *The Lost Mother*, published earlier this year, in which I trace the story of three women, each of whom in their own way was lost.

I tell the story of my mother, the subject of the painting, with whom I had a difficult relationship and who was, therefore, lost to me. There was also, I soon discovered, a second portrait that was - and still is - lost. There was the Russian emigre art collector who bought both paintings and who eventually lost everything in the tumult of World War Two. What had attracted her to these two portraits of the young girl who went on to become my mother?

And then there was the artist, also lost in the sense that her star had faded over the years .

Why hadn't I heard of her? Why wasn't she a household name like the male artists who'd hung alongside her in London and elsewhere? (All of whom, I might add, had also been knighted. She received no recognition whatsoever.)

I had not even seen her name mentioned in the context of the women artists such as Grace Cossington-Smith, Margaret Preston, Stella Bowen, Clarice Beckett and others whose reputations – and works – had been rescued in recent years, often as the result of feminist scholarship.

Why had Stokes remained lost?

I soon found out that she had married and had three children. This was highly unusual for a woman who wanted a career as an artist. None of the women artists I

have just referred to had children and only one of them, Margaret Preston, was married.

Stokes felt that having a family held her back. "You're half-mother and half-painter", she complained.² She never reconciled these two parts of herself.

An important part of my story involved trying to understand what happened to Stokes's career as an artist, to the choices she made between creativity and love - and the consequences of those choices.

It is a long and complex story so I can only hope to share a part of it with you today. I hope that my words will inspire you to learn more about the artist and her work.

Constance Parkin was born in 1906 in Miram Piram in western Victoria and grew up experiencing the total freedom of farm and, then, small country town life. In 1920 the family moved to Melbourne and Connie - as she was always called - and her sisters had to go to school at Genazzano convent, in Kew.

Connie hated school. She was shy and she disliked the conformity the nuns tried to impose on her. But there was one thing she loved and that was the once a week art class. Susan Cochrane, the Scottish art teacher, recognised the talent in the fourteen year old, and - amazingly - persuaded her parents to take Connie out of school, to allow her to take home tuition and begin afternoon classes at the National Gallery School of Victoria.

Ten Years later, she had graduated from the Gallery School and was starting to make her way as an artist.

In July 1930 Connie had been part of a student exhibition, called The Embryos, where her six paintings - three of them striking portraits - received critical praise and where she met the Russian woman, Lydia Mortill, who would become her first patron. Lydia invited Connie to visit her at Tay Creggan, her idiosyncratic mansion at Hawthorn, to paint her portrait.

Connie's "Portrait of Mrs. W. Mortill" exhibited at the Athenaeum Gallery in October 1930 was praised by Arthur Streeton as "liquid and luminous", one of just two paintings from a very large show that he singled out for high praise.

It seemed that Constance Parkin was on her way.

In early 1931 Connie left for Europe. She had won the prestigious National Gallery Travelling Scholarship which paid for her to spend two years in Europe. She

² Hazel de Berg, interview with Constance Stokes, National Library of Australia Oral History Project, 2 DEcember 1865

attended the Royal Academy in London, then travelled to Europe discovering the Old Masters, especially Botticelli, in Italy and El Greco in Spain, and she spent some time studying with the cubist artist Andre Lhote in Paris.

She returned to Australia in early 1933 bubbling over with enthusiasm at all she had learned and anxious to begin work on what would become her first one-woman show in October that year. In about May or June, she was drawn to the face of a young girl she'd spotted at Mass. The portraits of my mother were, I was to discover, included in that one-woman show.

In August she married Eric Stokes, a businessman who she'd known since she was 15 and who had waited for her while she travelled overseas. Eric had no great interest in art although he was clearly proud of his wife who displayed her talents by, among other things, painting portraits of members of his family.

He agreed however to her request that they not live in the suburbs. Connie was determined to hang onto the semi-bohemian life she had enjoyed in Europe (even though her parents had insisted she have a chaperone accompany her for the two years!) so she persuaded Eric that they move into Number 9 Collins Street, a purpose-built building of artists' studios.

There, Constance Stokes as she now was, produced a masterpiece, "The Village" (1935, National Gallery of Victoria) and some drawings but her output was disappointingly small for someone who had the perfect setup, no financial worries and no children to worry about.

Then, in 1936, she became pregnant and, as she told Barbara Blackman years later in an oral history interview, "that was that".³ She and Eric moved to the suburbs and on 22 February, 1937 - her 31st birthday - her son Michael was born. She had three children altogether, the last one being born in 1942.

Her beloved mother had died in October 1936, three years after she had painted the portrait of her that hangs outside this room today (Portrait, 1933, NGA). Understandably, Connie was devastated by that death. She was also totally unprepared for the demands of three small children and "the responsibility of a small human being and no time at all to use my mind".⁴ She appears not to have painted at all between 1935 and 1942. But in 1942, despite having an infant and two toddlers to care for, she began work again, and literarily exploded onto the art world.

Over the next few years Stokes was to produce what are widely agreed to be her masterpieces, "Woman Drying Her Hair" (c.1946, NGV), "Lady with Basket" (1950,

³ Barbara Blackman, interview with Constance Stokes, *National Library Oral History Project*, 22 September 1987

⁴ Constance Stokes, *Journal* 1983

private collection), "Girl in Red Tights" (c.1948, National Trust of Victoria, bequest of Sir Daryl Lindsay), "The Three Graces" (1951, private collection), "The Baptism" (1952, NGV,) and "The Friends" (1953, private collection), as well as a great many drawings and other paintings.

Her successes were reported in the press and such was her standing that, she recalled many years later, there were waiting lists of people wanting to buy her work. In 1952 the (Melbourne) *Herald* made a big fuss about the fact that the NGV had paid two hundred guineas for "The Baptism", noting that she had sold another painting, "The Three Graces" for a similar amount the previous year to a private buyer and yet another to a buyer in London. These were huge prices for the time.

The fifteen years from 1945 to 1960 were Stokes's golden period. She practised what became known as classical modernism, an approach to modern art that retained links to the classical tradition and is characterised by 'its figurative basis, formal order and serene mood'.⁵ She had learned the technique of glazing from George Bell, whose Thursday night life classes she attended religiously although she was a peer rather than a student. She used this technique to magnificent effect in many of the works she created during these years. It was this technique that gave her works the luminosity that so many critics commented on, and which was one of the defining characteristics of her work in the 1940s and 1950s.

Russell Drysdale also used the glazing techniques. Stokes and Drysdale were both members of the George Bell group and they frequently exhibited together, for instance at the 1947 Melbourne Contemporary Artists exhibition at the Athenaeum Gallery, where Stokes's work "Farmer's Family" hung alongside Drysdale's "The Drover's Wife" and "Sofala".

In the August 1949 Bell Group show, Drysdale exhibited "Miss Olley" and "Man Running with Dog", while Stokes had four paintings in the show, among them the sensational "Nude" that Joseph Burke purchased and donated to the University of Melbourne, thereby establishing its art collection. The two artists were peers; their work was seen as being of comparable quality and they even addressed similar themes - although Stokes attracted far higher prices. Yet Drysdale's reputation has been cemented while Stokes's has all but evaporated, at least in the public domain.

In 1993, Andrea Lloyd (who has written a BA Honours thesis on Stokes) drew attention to the similarities between Stokes's work and Drysdale's. Her 1945 work "Road to Ballarat" was a case in point, says Lloyd: 'The strong red colours and the thick glazes were commonly used, although Drysdale, who remains the most visible of the group, is generally regarded as the originator of the style,' she wrote.⁶

⁵ Felicity St John Moore, *Classical Modernism. The George Bell Circle* National Gallery of Victoria, 1992 p. 1

⁶ Andrea Lloyd, "Constance Stokes: A Determined Career" *Gallery* (monthly magazine of the National Gallery of Victoria) March 1993, p.10

But there were also differences. Stokes used the outdoor settings and the group's stylistic experiments to give emphasis to the moods of her figures:

The windswept landscape of "Road to Ballarat" is given added human and social significance by the faceless men who both avoid looking at each other and the changing scenery. Further, these men are blind to the isolation of the woman on the verandah who is condemned to her own static view of the landscape.

In other words, Stokes was beginning to develop a distinctive approach to the classic Australian landscape, to address the anomie between the characters in the landscape, rather than the more usual theme, adopted by many of the male artists, of pitting the people against the land. But after the 1953 show in London she changed direction, describing the work of her peers, Drysdale in particular, as 'too rustic'. 'I was not interested in "Australiana"', she told *The Age* in 1990, the year before she died. 'I wanted to produce something international'.⁷

When you look at the work Stokes produced during this period, it is hard to understand why her star has waned. Even if she'd produced nothing else ever again, these paintings should be enough to warrant her place in the canon of Australian art yet, as Andrea Lloyd points out, she is 'largely ignored in histories that deal with the 1940s and 1950s, the period of her mature art.' This is 'surprising', Lloyd concludes, for she did receive critical praise, her contributions to group exhibitions were highly rated, she was involved in some of the most advanced modernist groups and most prestigious exhibitions of her time, her work commanded high prices and from the 1940s her work was acquired by public galleries, and her career ultimately spanned over sixty years.⁸

Various reasons are advanced. Her output was too small. Joseph Brown is said to have made this complaint when he represented her during the 1970s and some dealers still say this, yet it did not hurt John Brack whose output was also limited but whose work is highly regarded and today sells for millions of dollars.

In 1962 her husband died and Stokes had to, literally, paint her way out of debt. Her second one woman show was held at the Leveson Street Galleries in 1964, thirty one years after her first. By now she had radically changed style, using colour as her main form of expression and this is another reason advanced for her lack of enduring success. Yet other artists, such as Ian Fairweather and Russell Drysdale, have done the same and if anything, enhanced their reputations by doing so.

She is an acquired taste: Dorothy Braund, a fellow—albeit much younger—member of the George Bell group, told me in an interview: 'Stokes was for collectors only, serious collectors'.⁹ Another reason, advanced by Andrea Lloyd and to my mind a very persuasive argument, is that Stokes was constrained by her circumstances and the concomitant need to be respectable at all costs. This need, imposed upon by her husband's family (even if it was unspoken, Stokes certainly felt it) meant she was not a risk-taker or a rebel.

⁷ Louise Bellamy, "Alone, in the Right Way" *Age* 12 June, 1990 p. 14

⁸ Lloyd, "Constance Stokes: Her Life and Art" p. 5

⁹ Dorothy Braund, interview with author, Melbourne, 19 September 2007

She could not, like Drysdale and Sali Herman and other contemporaries, move to the more adventurous art world of Sydney (something the unencumbered Margaret Preston was able to do, leaving Adelaide to seek success there.) She wasn't able to hang out at Heide where artistic ground was being broken.

She did not even look like an artist. I have a photograph of her in my book, painting in her studio in her Toorak home, wearing a twinset! 'She dressed conservatively, not like an artist,' fellow artist Audrey Shoobridge, who was a member of the Victorian Artists' Society and the Lyceum Club with Stokes, told me.¹⁰

Yet there is no doubt she was an artist. She was driven: 'She had to paint like other people had to eat,' says Dorothy Braund. But her need had to be confined within boundaries that would not threaten the status or standing of the family she had married into.

Her patrons, Sir Keith Murdoch, Sir Daryl Lindsay and Professor Joseph Burke, and her art colleague, George Bell, were perfect in this respect. They were modern without being revolutionary; they were establishment. No one could quibble that Stokes was hanging out with reprobates. Bell was also acceptable to Stokes's family because, as Andrea Lloyd points out, 'although modern, Bell was not at all bohemian'. All her life, Andrea Lloyd noted, 'Stokes's choice of teachers and art colleagues ... were taken with an eye to their respectability as well as their sympathetic approaches to art'.¹¹

Is this why Stokes is almost totally ignored today? Was she just too darn respectable to warrant the attention of the critics who determine who gets to be included in the canon? There must be a reason why her name does not appear in most of the standard histories of Australian art.

Robert Hughes does not mention her at all in *The Art of Australia*, his 1966 classic work. Although he had given Stokes a rave newspaper review for her 1964 solo show, Bernard Smith's *Australian Painting* gives her no credit. He merely lists her as one of the artists included in the 1953 London exhibition; he says nothing at all about her works in that show. Nor is she mentioned in his chapters on contemporary art, the rise of modernism and the debates about figurative art. Max Germaine's *Dictionary of Women Artists of Australia* inaccurately describes Stokes as 'a traditional painter'.

Alan McCulloch is the only one to give her any due, with a solid listing in his *Encyclopaedia of Australian Art*. In his reappraisal of modern Australian art, *Rebels and Precursors*, Richard Haese dismisses her and fellow artists Isabel Tweddle and Clive Stephen as 'technically proficient [but] never enterprising'. He could not even do her the favour of an individual appraisal and, even worse, he patronisingly referred to her as 'Connie'. All her friends called her Connie, but she signed her works 'Constance'. A male artist would never be dismissed with a diminutive or a

¹⁰ Audrey Shoobridge, Interview with author, Melbourne 20 September, 2007

¹¹ Lloyd, "Constance Stokes: Her Life and Art" p. 18

nickname. Their friends might have known Russell Drysdale as 'Tas', Albert Tucker as 'Bert' and Nolan used to call himself 'Ned' in his letters to Tucker, but can you imagine art critics referring to them as 'Tas' Drysdale or 'Bert' Tucker or 'Ned' Nolan?

Stokes apparently wasn't modern enough—or the right sort of modern—to have warranted critical appreciation. Perhaps it was because she was, in Joseph Burke's view, 'an artist's artist'.

Charles Bush, the artist who was also a part-owner of the Leveson Street Galleries, wrote in 1974: "She happens to be in the opinion of quite a number of people who know the art world, one of the finest contemporary artists Australia has ever produced. Her integrity is unquestioned and she in no way panders to popular taste, but still to a small group of knowledgeable people her paintings and drawings represent a high watermark in Australian art, using European standards".¹²

I have not yet mentioned her drawings. Here her output was prodigious and her skill made her the envy of other artists. She was taught to draw by Walter Monnington, in London, in 1931. He banned the use of charcoal that had been drilled into her at the National Gallery School in Victoria and she learned to use a pencil. Once she learned the technique, she never looked back. "Connie was the Tiger Woods of drawing," fellow artist Dorothy Braund told me in an interview. "She got it accurate and perfect each time".¹³ The collection of Stokes in the National Gallery of Australia includes three drawings.

In 1985, Ernest Smith, the director of the Swan Hill Regional Art Gallery and a keen Stokes supporter, decided to put on a travelling retrospective of Stokes's work and was successful in getting funding from Victoria's 150th Anniversary Committee as well as the Australia Council and the Victorian Ministry for the Arts. Her last solo show, of current work, had been in April 1981 at the Australian Galleries, and that had been her first exhibition since 1974, when the Mornington Peninsula Arts Centre had put on *Paintings and Drawings 1949–1974*.

The Swan Hill show would be her first - and, so far in 2009, her only - full retrospective. Smith rang the by-now retired Joseph Burke and asked if he would write an introduction for the catalogue.

'I never do introductions,' Burke said.

'It's about Constance Stokes,' Smith recalled he'd said, when I interviewed him in Swan Hill in December 2007.

'I'll do it,' Burke replied.

And he did.

'One of the great achievements of Australian paintings in the 1940s and 1950s was to breathe the new life of the modern movement into certain values and traditions of the Old Masters ...' Burke wrote in the catalogue. 'In this achievement Constance Stokes played a major part.'

¹² Undated and unidentified newspaper article found among Constance Stokes's papers and cited by Andrea Lloyd, "Constance Stokes: Her Life and Art" p. 43

¹³ Dorothy Braund, interview

Yet despite all the praise, Stokes remained dissatisfied.

“I have longed to be a really top painter but life has been against me,” she told Barbara Blackman in 1987.¹⁴ In the last two decades of her life, before her death in 1992, she recorded her dissatisfaction in a series of journals that she kept starting and setting aside.

It is my very great regret that I did not learn her name sooner, so that I could perhaps have talked to her, about her life and her work and - especially - about the two paintings she did of my mother.

Let me finish by telling you a little of that story.

It began in 1933 in the Melbourne beachside suburb of Brighton where my mother, then a 10-year-old schoolgirl, had just attended Sunday Mass at St Joan of Arc’s church. As she was leaving, a young woman approached her, says she is an artist and would like to paint her portrait. Did she think her parents would allow it?

Now we jump to 2005 and I am staring at the portrait which is on the white wall of my house in Sydney.

There is my mother as a ten year old looking down at me. She is dressed in what she described as her “good” clothes: a brown pleated skirt, black stockings, a blue jumper and a red beret. Her plaits hang down in front of her and are obscured by the large book she is holding. It is a children’s version of *Alice in Wonderland*. But it is the eyes that draw you into the picture.

They are big and blue, clear and mesmerising, staring out at me with an expression of astonishing wisdom and maturity. It must have been, I realised, these eyes that attracted the artist to the schoolgirl. She must have seen, or perhaps wanted to see, not just a girlish face but something else, something sage and eternal.

Fortunately, some years earlier Mum had written a short memoir of how she had been approached by the artist. I had urged her to write an account of how she had come to be painted, and how – almost forty years later - the painting was finally brought into our family by her mother, my grandmother. I had heard the story often before but I knew I would forget the details, especially when my mother was no longer around to recount this extraordinary story of circumstance and serendipity.

I brought out this little memoir now and read it again.

Although I had read it many, many times over the years, this time I saw something I had never before focussed on: “Constance painted two portraits of me,” my mother had written, “One in the clothes in which she had first seen me...” Yes, there it was on my wall.

¹⁴ Blackman interview

“The second painting..” A second painting! That stopped me. “The second painting,” she had written, “was done as the Madonna (a veil draped over my head and shoulders) and what happened to that I do not know...”

Mum as the Madonna! What an unusual thing to do! Even for an artist who had recently returned from the museums of Italy where paintings of pubescent girls as Madonnas were commonplace. I don't think too many artists in Melbourne in 1933 were painting Madonnas. Why had she done it?

I decided then that as well as trying to find out more about the painting on my wall, I would also seek out the missing Madonna, the lost mother, and hope that if I found it, I might learn something more about the artist, as well learning more about my mother, through the image created by an artist more than 70 years earlier.

If she had been able to create such a compelling image of my mother in her red beret, I could only imagine what the artist had been able to do with my mother as the Virgin Mary.

I quickly learned that the painting on my wall in Sydney was called *Alice* –rather than *Girl in Red Beret* which is what my family had always thought was its title.

It was, the artist said in an interview near the end of her life, an Alice in Wonderland image and soon it had me going down all sorts of rabbit-holes into previously undreamed of wonderlands. I discovered that the Madonna painting was actually called *A Saint* but because I have not been able to find it - so far, at least - I do not know what the artist was trying to achieve with this religious image.

But I do know this much.

These two portraits of Mum were painted just weeks before the artist's wedding – she married Eric Stokes in August 1933 – and that they were the last pictures she painted as a single woman.

It is likely the portraits represented some of her anxieties about her future.

Perhaps she placed the picture book *Alice and the White Rabbit* in my mother's hands to signify her yearning for the freedom to escape down the rabbit hole that would soon be denied her once she was married.

Painting a young girl as the Madonna, as she told my mother she was doing, might have been a sign of her acceptance that, for a Catholic woman at least, marriage almost inevitably meant motherhood.

I like to think that these two portraits were Constance Stokes's way of mapping out her future, of trying to guess what life held in store for her - as a woman but more importantly, as an artist.

Within a few months of her marriage, it was starting to become very clear. On her marriage certificate, Connie had give her occupation as “artist”. In December she and Eric travelled overseas on a business trip that would be a kind of honeymoon and would allow her to return to the galleries of Europe to study the great masters. As was the practice in those days, husbands and wives had joint passports. But while Eric was still described as a “manufacturer” - as he had been on his marriage certificate - Connie’s job was now listed as “home duties”. It was a chilling foretaste of what was to come.

And what are we to make of Stokes’s very last work?

It was a painting, created in 1990, and it was another Alice. Only this time it was “Alice Tumbling Down the Rabbit Hole”. Falling. Out of control. Was this Stokes’s summation of her artist’s life? What could have been? What wasn’t?