

Ms Margaret Hannah Olley AP

The degree of Doctor of Visual Arts (honoris causa) was conferred upon Margaret Hannah Olley by Chancellor Emeritus Professor Dame Leonie Kramer AC at a Law ceremony held in the Great Hall on 19 May 2000.



Margaret Olley, photo, Tracey Schramm, 'The University of Sydney News', 1 June 2000, University of Sydney Archives.

Citation

Chancellor, I have the honour to present to you Margaret Hannah Olley, AO, for admission to the degree of Doctor of Visual Arts (honoris causa).

Everyone feels he knows Margaret Olley. If he has not seen her in real life, he has on television or in the newspapers. The pretty slightly chubby face; the warm smile; the braided hair, often peeping out from under an absurd home-made hat; the alluring drawl; the general atmosphere of charm tempered by intelligence, taste and shrewdness. We all know that. And to make certain we do, all good artists have drawn or painted that famous face: Dobell, Drysdale, Donald Friend, Jeff Smart, the great Fairweather, Kevin Connor, Judy Cassab - and Margaret Olley. She would be the Grand Old Lady of Australian painting, if only she were old.

Margaret Hannah Olley was born in Lismore in 1923 and hurried off to live in Brisbane, which is over the border. The bulk of her life was spent in that Long Weekend between the two wars, when the Ecole de Paris was at its height. And she took to it with ease. By the age of 24 she had graduated in Technical College in both Brisbane and Sydney; she had come to live in Sydney, which is her preferred Australian home; and she had won her first major art prize, the Mosman Art Prize.

A year later she had her first one-man show at the Macquarie Galleries. And by this time she was a member of that distinguished group of Sydney painters who dominated Australian painting in the 40's and 50's and who have, thanks to the mischief of Robert Hughes, become subsequently known as "The Charm School".

Since then she has gone from strength to strength. She has had solo exhibitions about every other year in London, Sydney or Brisbane. She has won more than twelve major art prizes, the most important of which being probably the Helena Rubinstein Portrait Prize in Western Australia. She is represented in about every major art collection in Australia, but not - horresco referens - in the art collection of the University of Sydney. She has lived in France and there mingled with such important figures as Chagall, Barboulene, Jean Marchaud, Sir Francis Rose and Gertrude Stein.

She has excelled in both drawing and painting. She has done many splendid paintings of Australian landscape, particularly of the countryside around Sofala and Hill End. She has a large number of portraits to her credit, including three or four major ones of Margaret Olley. But, above all, she has made a speciality of oil paintings of interiors and still lives. In this regard she has absorbed the lessons of Cezanne and the Ecole de Paris. Her still lives - what is the plural of still life? - are not mere collections of disparate objects, haphazardly arranged. They are deliberate, if seemingly relaxed, arrangements which demonstrate careful construction, a great sense of colour, beautiful modalities, a control of volume, a skilful use of contrasts, a sense of light, and a sensuous delight in beautiful things. She is Australia's answer to Chardin.

During the 1970's she fell momentarily from critical favour for not displaying a social and political conscience, for being uninvolved in feminist, communist and environmental issues. One Canberra critic said that if one looked at one of the beautiful paintings one would not suspect that motor cars were speeding in the streets. In the heady days the National Gallery of Victoria had a major "art" exhibition which did not contain a single painting. She continued as she was, she felt that a painter should paint, and she said to that Canberra critic "Tant pis". Today those 1970 views seem absurd, and crowds of art lovers thank Olley on bended knees that she did what she did.

Not, of course, that she has no views on matters of politics. Indeed, she made a major contribution to the recent Republic v Monarchy debate.

She has also done two other things. One is encourage the young. There is hardly an art gallery opening that she does not attend and bless. The other is public philanthropy. Through the medium of her Olley Foundation she has lavished largesse on the Art Gallery of NSW, donating such major works as great Degas drawings.

Chancellor, I have great pleasure in presenting Margaret Hannah Olley AO for admission to the degree of Doctor of Visual Arts (honoris causa) and I invite you to confer the degree upon her.