

Transition
By John Downton OAM

Transition is the word all right, from one era to blandness. In the former, there were just a few professional artists who could become well-known, famous and respected from years of solid learning a real skill with paint and brush, and therefore could provide for their families.

Now... every Tom, Dick and Mavis is an artist, as the public has been brainwashed to rave over a blank canvas or a match hanging from a string. Even worse, pressing a few buttons on a computer whereby the computer does all the work flashing images onto a wall with everyone in "Ooohs and Ahhhs" before proceeding onto some other amateur and so-called work of art such as a nail driven into a piece of wood has become the go.

I'm glad I landed where I did as my path started with the real painters. I've been asked to write about my encounters with them, even though to me it is just name dropping. Because the request has come from my good "old" friend John Woodland, here it goes. Now and again, I will add second-hand stories from artists I was with as they are usually of interest.

When just starting out in the world of art, I was told the framers and art materials place to go to was Parkers, near The Rocks, Sydney. It was here, I met Clarie Parker, who watched over the work done by his sons. Clarie was an older gentleman back then, so he had met and done business with most of the well-known and famous artists of the time.

He always had a story about Arthur Streeton, Tom Roberts, the Lindsays and so on. I have regretted that no one thought to get his knowledge down on audio or written record as he had such a wealth of first-hand contacts and fascinating stories in his brilliant memory. He introduced artists to each other and gave advice freely.

At this time, I was a watchmaker and started attending classes at the Royal Art Society of NSW. A fellow student and I became friendly because of our interest and craving for anything in the realm of art. The fellow student, Alex Hall, was a pattern maker. His wooden patterns were a true work of art as they were used for moulding metal parts for new and used shipping including for the Australian Navy, and so needed to satisfy to hundredths of a millimetre exactness.

Through his work, Alex knew a lot of people. His passion in his older age, was art. Being based in the city, he would go to exhibition openings, demonstrations on how to go about painting, art information parties and anything else that came along. He therefore got to know a lot of artists. Alex would take me to places like the Millions Club where at that time they collected the best of art. You had to be invited and MUST wear a tie.

We visited **Dora (Dorothea) Toovey** many times and for some reason Dora took a liking to me and several times asked me to come stay with her. I declined each time, however, because she reminded me too much of my mother. Dora could really paint light into paintings of the sea and was a member of the Royal Art Society of NSW. James (Jimmy) Ranalph Jackson, her estranged husband, was also a member. She lived in their old home near Chinaman's Beach over near the Spit, and Jimmy lived at his studio at Lavender Bay. The old corner building where he worked is still there.

Anyway, Dora had a multitude of visitors and everyone talked about art when visiting. I remember one day in particular when the subject turned to Tom Roberts and his paintings. Someone piped up and said a Tom Roberts painting was stolen from a suburb just across the way from here and as the conversation flourished, she reached under the lounge she was sitting on and pulled up off the floor a Tom Roberts painting and said, "The trouble is, most people don't hide their valuables in the right place". Everybody's jaws dropped open with a gasp.

I reckon Jimmy was a great character, more serious than you think, though he would rave on about how bad the economy was – nothing has changed. One day we met him coming down the stairs, as he lived on the second floor, cursing away. Spotting us as he rushed down the stairs and waving his arms about, he blurted out "I'm going down to buy a loaf of bread and I need a bloody wheelbarrow full of money to do so". We were laughing. Jimmy wasn't. This was him back to his old self after having been hit by a tram and put out of action for some time.

Another time, we arrived at Jimmy's studio and he was laying on a divan, just waking up from a deep sleep. One of the local Rotary Clubs had organised a birthday bash, with Jimmy being the star attraction for the day, with speeches and presentations etc. to happen as it was his birthday. A big dinner in a hall with lots of dignitaries present and no Jimmy. Enquiries were coming in frantically, "Are you alright, Jimmy?". Rubbing sleep from his eyes, he told the Rotarians, "It's too late for me to get there now so just carry on and have a good time and plenty of drink". He then gave us his time as if the whole thing did not really matter.

Jimmy liked images of my work. He told me, quite a few times, when you think a painting is finished, place it facing the wall so it is out of sight for a couple of months. Then turn it around to see straight away any tonal values, shapes, holes, colour, brush work or anything that is out of kilter. This is Jimmy's routine and he was quite right. I have found that I've been able to spot problems by not looking at a painting for just a week or less. Maybe he insisted the longer time because I was a greenhorn then. Thank you for passing on this tip, Jimmy.

After visits to Jimmy's studio, I also realised that he used Alizarin crimson to draw in, which always made the painting richer in colours when others were added – a technique I use to this day.

At the Royal Art Society, one of my teachers was Ken Green. He painted with (what I guess I could call a mellow palette) of soft greens. He always made the application of paint look so easy. One day Alex Hall and I went to see Ken's exhibition and Alex said to me he would very much like to buy a Ken Green work. After looking, he decided to wait a week to further work out in his mind as to which one.

During the week my usual routine took place. Up at 4.30am to get the chores done before driving to Sydney from Werri Beach where I resided, to arrive on the clifftop at Blues Point Reserve, McMahons Point by 8am for morning tuition from Ken, when a person from the Royal Art Society, came rushing down to meet the group saying there would be no lessons in Plein Air today as Ken Green had died last night. Real shock, as he was a very easy-going pleasant person. Alex said we had better go and buy a painting while Ken's

exhibition was still on. By the time we got there, all the paintings had risen in price, and I quote Alex here, “about 5 times the price they were last week because of Ken’s death”.

Another who took classes on the same headland was **Allan Hansen**. His paintings were unmistakable, as they were always overall blue. Not my style, however I still learned from his tuition. One day, he gave a demonstration lesson and painted a few tea tree bushes out near the cliff edge. While the subject chosen was very, very simple, he had gone about constructing a painting. It turned out to be the most magnificent painting. Every student wished to purchase it for themselves. **Leonard Long**, we will get to him soon, always said, “You have to paint or build a painting, not a photograph”. Allan had done that and while much blue was used, the painting was very rich in colour with perfect tonal values. The super simple subject became not just a painting, but a masterpiece of Plein Air.

Arthur Murch was another teacher of mine at the Royal Art Society of NSW. When he was alive, he was well-known around Sydney as he produced, as well as paintings, sculptures of horses etc. for public places. The most famous of his paintings no doubt is the one of mother and child in a round frame that hangs in the Art Gallery of NSW. I urge everyone to go and see it. It is well worth the trip. It usually hangs in the North West end of the Gallery. Arthur Murch took life classes at the Royal Art Society and I was told if I really wanted to become a good artist, life classes were essential. Therefore, as an uneducated bloke from the bush, I fronted up to class. It was a rude awakening for me as there were nude models we had to learn to paint. The advice was right though, it was a real learning curve.

Arthur would stroll around and around, watching painting progress. Every now and then tell a joke. This happened every lesson. He seemed to either like me or what I was doing as he always singled me out, I guess to help progress, and suggested homework, sometimes giving me plaster casts of hands and feet and the Statue of Venus models etc. His purpose was that tonal values on pure white items are so subtle that one has to work really hard to achieve them on canvas. Another work of Arthur Murch that Sydney people would know is the large mural down at the Overseas Passenger Terminal of Sydney Harbour to welcome newcomers to our country.

When Arthur was sick and could not take classes, **Henry Hanke** (Harry) would stand in. He was well-known for his market and town scenes. I owned one of his rural scenes for a time. Sometimes it can be seen at the Eden Killer Whale Museum, NSW. They have a very large collection of Australian Art, so large in fact that only a few paintings are hung at any one time. Their collection includes some of my works and my collection of works of other artists. I gave the people of Eden this large collection when the town was going backwards when times were even harder than they are now. At the end of these ramblings, I will list the names of some of artists included in the collection.

Lloyd Rees who painted “The Road to Berry” which is part of the Art Gallery of NSW collection, also had a house on Werri Beach. When out and about looking for some Plein Air seascapes, I often came across Lloyd sitting on a sand dune looking at the surrounds, sometimes for an hour or more. He would then jump up and go back to his house and paint from memory. It is a technique I use sometimes now if I’m unable to set up for Plein Air work.

Lloyd did this a lot and is why his painting does not look too much like *The Vision*, yet there is nothing wrong with that. Remember what Leonard Long said about building and making a painting, not a photo. Also, the paintings from here are the ones he became most famous for.

Sometimes Lloyd would run out of paint when he really wished to finish a work, so I would lend or give him whatever he wished. The one colour he would run out of mostly was flake white. It is no longer on the market as it is far too dangerous in that it is nothing more than burned lead. When I started painting it was the must-have in your paint box and all the old masters used it. Now there are a few paints one has to be careful with when using oils, *flake white* is not one of them now, thank goodness.

Getting back to Lloyd's work, in the early days he drew the most precise finished drawings, so if a gallery ever puts some on display, put your lipstick and eye shadow on and go see them. When you do, please close your mouth. It is not nice to stand with your jaw dropped.

The people in residence at Werri Beach and Gerringong are all aware of Lloyd Rees because of one publicity stunt (the only thing it can be called). He organised a Plein Air Show emulating the famous Gruner, where Gruner struggled half way up a mountain with a very large canvas and painted for several days. Lloyd with helpers took a large canvas up on top of the eastern side of the Bluff as we locals call it. Everyone in town will give you a story of wind blowing and ropes being used to tie things down. Some say logs were used to hold the canvas and others describe other difficulties encountered. It was the greatest publicity ever as most of the population knows about it which made it a mission achieved. Well done.

When I was a kid down at Eden though, I must admit that I witnessed Lloyd (I was told it was Lloyd Rees) Plein Air painting on the edge of Snug Cove. At around twelve years old, I could not make head nor tail of it, but now I know he was just up to washing it in, and so now it makes a lot of sense to me as a mature artist.

Herbert Gallop was a resident of Gerringong as well. He died before I ever met him, yet I admire his work also. In fact, three of his works are in the Eden Killer Whale Museum collection and when I owned them, they were very much prized. Herbert gave Gerringong a brilliant painting of Boat Harbour, Gerringong from the old times when there was a wharf and steamers and sail used to visit. Those days are long gone; however, the work still draws people to see it. It hangs now in the library, next to the Gerringong Museum and Historical Society. If passing, call in for a look. Many works of his are also in private collections of those who live in the area.

George Duncan was a private teacher I would go to when in Sydney after the 4.30am routine. He was in his 80s then. He was a great teacher who also took a liking to me and my work. Now you can believe this or not. He would take us up to the Pymble dump for lessons. At first, I thought, what is there here to paint? They were great lessons in tonal values, skies, and other subtleties. He and Leonard Long are the two teachers I learned the most from. George exhibited most of his work at, I think it was the Macquarie University Gallery.

Having been forced to take up a watchmaking apprenticeship and I was sent to Canberra in the early days (story in *The Dirty Big Red Book*). I hated every minute of being in Canberra,

though it was there that I received my first 1st prize in a David Jones exhibition. After 12 years of Canberra hell, I escaped back to Werri Beach. I needed a job and after three months went to work for Len Seyffer in Nowra as a watchmaker and would drive to work from Werri Beach each day. One day, Len Seyffer said to me, come and meet one of our local identities, the famous **Leonard Long OAM**. Longie as I cheekily called him when we got to know each other better of course, was a watchmaker by trade before he also became a painter. When he found out I painted a picture or two, we immediately hit off. He invited me to go to his studio just up the street. It was so exciting to see such professional paintings sitting on the floor leaning on the walls. He asked me also to bring some of my work now and again for constructive criticism. Sometimes if it was near lunch time, he and Mary, his wonderful wife, would ask me to stay for lunch.

My paintings improved a lot of over a few months and one day he asked if I could join him on one of his Plein Air trips around the country. After leaving watchmaking (story once again in *The Dirty Big Red Book* of mine), we never looked back and spent 15 years doing 5 major trips a year in the bush and that is where the learning really took off. We held two-man exhibitions together and worked a lot for charity and to acquire a Linear Accelerator for Nowra.

Around the campfire at night (a few times joined by the artist **Michael McCarthy** who resides in Ireland), Longie would tell us stories of artists he had met and worked with. He told about when he was working with Albert Namatjira and how Albert every time before he started to paint, no matter how hot the temperature was, would light a fire and sit right beside it. Also, there is the story of how Albert named all sons Albert and they also paint, so toss a coin when you buy one. Longie spent a lot of time with Aboriginal tribes and told of the time he bundled a young Aboriginal woman into the boot of his car and drove like hell away as men were going to kill her for stumbling on a place where men only were allowed. He saved her life.

As Longie and I travelled all over through every state and territory, he would say, "Let's go and see one of my old artist friends". While in South Australia, we visited and was most welcomed by Ivor Hele. Ivor and his wife lived in one of South Australia's older buildings. I remember the ceilings were the highest that I have ever seen in a dwelling, almost like a palace. On the walls were gigantic paintings, mainly nude and of his wife. Very painterly real works of art. Ivor was born in South Australia and studied in Paris, France and South Australia. He was sent overseas during the Second World War as an official war artist so some of his work is in the Australian War Memorial among many other places. He was awarded a C.B.E. for services to the arts as he taught art in South Australia for many years. He won many prizes including The Archibald five times. Ivor was a very slim person who exuded greatness and was interested in our Plein Air working travels.

On another of our South Australian travels, Longie said, "Let's go and see **David Heysen**. Leonard knew **Hans Heysen** well before he died, and naturally knew David, his son, from previous visits. When we visited this time, it was in the early days well before Hans Heysen's studio and house was even thought of being open to the public. David welcomed us and showed us around. Heysen's studio was built of brick and up on slope above the house. It was just as Hans had left it and the thing I remember most was his trick painting which I'm told is no longer there. It was a canvas that had a square corner part completely and

beautifully painted and finished that you could see was only part of a painting that would eventually cover the whole canvas. This, of course, is not the way a painting is developed and therefore likely trick the viewer if they were not a painter that knows.

Yes! I'm told that Hans was full of fun and loved humour. We were told stories of when the Lindsay boys came down from Sydney, the roar of laughter would permeate from the studio sometimes until 2am in the morning.

David insisted we go into the Heysen house for tea and look at their private collection of Hans' works. That is one thing I will never forget. The richness of colour and tone of paintings of still life that were throughout the house made me stand in silent awe. Around the house on the sideboards and other furniture there were also beautifully arranged vases of the most exquisite perfect flowers from the garden with silverware and doilies on top of polished dark timber. The whole place looked like a place of royalty.

Hans had planted different trees along the driveway to the house, one of which was a pine tree. A pine cone from his tree is in a glass case in my studio and is a prized possession of mine.

In the early days of life on Werri Beach where my brother-in-law lived in Renfrew Road, we got together to hold an exhibition in the surf shed (as it was known then). Bob Holman was his name, and if I turned out as a better person it was because of him and his brother Jack. Anyway, Bob was a self-taught amateur artist who liked to teach locals how to have a go. We were best mates, hence the exhibition. Many locals visited the exhibition, and also many visitors, including Brett Whiteley. Brett told me I was doing really good work but that there was no future in traditional painting anymore. He tried to persuade me towards modern art only. He said you will earn more money and will advance quicker in the art world. He stayed at the exhibition some time talking about his work and trying to convince me modern was the go.

It is interesting that I have done a few modern works, yet still go back to traditional as it makes me work harder. I have been commissioned to paint modern at one stage. There was a \$16 million new house down near the Spit. The owners said they wanted the whole house comprising many rooms, furnished with my traditional work, however on the one condition that a modern painting had to be in the vaulted entrance to the building. Otherwise, I don't get the job. Job done and all were very happy.

At my recent exhibition, a gentleman came in who was just visiting. He was an older rural vet surgeon from Southern NSW. He said he knew Brett Whiteley very well as he lived in Sydney for some time. He also said to me, "You should do like Brett. When he had an exhibition, he had a topless girl out the front, handing out invitations". Then with a giggle said, "Makes you wonder what was going on out the back".

I have also once met **Kenneth Jack** alas when he was slowly going blind. There are other artists that are still alive that I look up to because of their professionalism and brilliant work.

One is **Ian Hansen**. Ian, an ex-Navy Petty Officer and I were sent to Timor when the trouble occurred there. Our brief was, "Put the Navy in the picture". This also is explained in *The*

Dirty Big Red Book. Ian in the art world is one of the real success stories. He has worked on sailing craft and in Antarctica among many other places. His journals of trips are full of paintings and drawings. He has illustrated books and his artwork on canvas is second to none in the marine art world.

John Wilson, a superb landscape artist and teacher, owns and flies his own airplane which I have been aloft in and he uses to fly to teach all over Australia. I have had the privilege of Plein Air Painting with him on many occasions. His magnificent works make me think how can anyone be so perfect when making a painting. He and his wife Cecilia have a gallery at Katoomba in the Blue Mountains. His books are beautifully illustrated and a joy to browse.

Ross Paterson is one of the real gentlemen of the art world. I'm told he was a school teacher before he took to the professional painting. Ross is, in my books, one of the most brilliant of watercolourists and oil painters. It does not matter which work you see - he really makes a painting. I've watched him from a slight distance Plein Air painting at Tumut, NSW, a few times. I owned some of his great work before passing them on in the Downton collection.

I met **Robert Lovett** a number of times as he was friends with Leonard Long. Robert worked as an artist for some time with the Snowy Mountains Hydro Scheme. He also travelled and painted overseas and painted a series of "The Man from Snowy River". Robert painted watercolour and oil paintings and produced books from his paintings as well.

Puff Puff, there are many more I could write about so many my arm would fall off and John Woodland would be tearing his hair out, even though he did ask.

To close, I will list some of the names of artists in the Downton Collection with the Eden Killer Whale Museum, NSW, Australia. But just before we were speaking of great watercolour work, it has been my lifelong ambition to own a **Harold Brocklebank Herbert** work. I have never met the bloke as he has passed on, however, one day if I win the Lotto, that will be one of the first things I do – buy his painting that is.

The names of some of the artists in the Downton Collection:

John Allcot

W.Andrews

J.Ashton

Robyn Bailey

Ray Barnett

Howard Barron

Frederic Bates OAM

Phillip Cooper

John Corby

Joan Dent

Paul Downton

Barbara Farnham

Herbert Gallop

George Gillespie

Helen Goldsmith

Les Graham
Sylvia Hallam
Henery Hanke
Ian Hansen
Christine Hill
Chuzo Inoue
Val Johnson
Ian Kentwell
Eric Lanker
Leonard Long OAM
Robert Lovett
P.W. Martin
Michael McCarthy
Ian McKenzie
Elsie Middleton
P.C. Middleton
Kim Nelson
Ross Paterson
Marilyn Pearce
John Perkins
Douglas Pratt
Ros Psakis
Ron Scobie
Robert Simpson
Ron Stannard
Marjorie Steel
Pamela Thalben-Ball
Terry Webber
John Wilson

For those curious persons, *The Dirty Big Red Book* by John Downton OAM, is on sale for \$30.00. Note, *The Little Red Book* by Mao Ze Dong is one thing, so I went one better to write *The Dirty Big Red Book*. If you read my book, remember parental guidance is recommended. Now, as Australia Post is in a rip off mood, postage and handling is an extra \$20.00. The total comes to \$50.00 AUD with delivery in approximately 2 weeks. To order your copy, please PRINT your name and address clearly and enclose payment via cheque or post office money order addressed to: John Downton 30 Golden Ash Close. Worrigeer NSW 2250 Thank you.