

Frank Payne: The forgotten artist

Curated by Ross Searle

Redland Art Gallery, Cleveland

6 February – 6 March 2011

Frank Payne (1885 – 1976) artist and illustrator, was an independent woman who relied on her many varied artistic skills to become one of Australia's best known illustrators in the 1920s and 30s. Born in Brisbane and christened Frances Mallalieu Payne, but known throughout her life as Frank, she spent most of her professional life in Sydney.

Payne illustrated catalogues for David Jones Ltd and Farmer & Co. Ltd department stores; and drew covers for the 'Australian Woman's Mirror'. Although she married in Sydney and had two sons, she separated from her sea captain husband and continued working. Known professionally as Frank Payne (though often referred to as Mrs A. P. Clinton) she supported herself and her children from her catalogues, magazine covers and part-time work for the Sydney 'Bulletin'. Reputedly, she was among the nation's highest paid women.

This exhibition traces her early achievements in Queensland with a particular focus on works painted around Cleveland, North Stradbroke Island and Southern Moreton Bay; and includes works painted in Sydney and overseas. She died on 11 July 1976 in Sydney.

Frank Payne – Queensland career

Frances Mallalieu Payne is a little remembered Queensland-born artist who was celebrated as a fine artist and commercial designer in the 1920s and 1930s. Frank (as she was known) was born on 7 May 1885 at Kangaroo Point, Brisbane, daughter of English-born parents Arthur Peel Payne, and his wife Julia Finch, née Batchellor. She was educated at All Hallows' Convent and studied at the Brisbane Technical College.

Frank Payne continued her studies overseas and sailed for England in March 1905. In Paris for nine months, she enrolled at the Académie Colarossi, and then studied at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts. At 'La Grande Chaumière' she was taught black-and-white work by Théophile-Alexandre Steinlen, a famous Parisian poster artist. Back in London, she worked in Frank Brangwyn's studio and did her most serious study there. During the summers she travelled extensively through England (1905), Brittany, France (1906), and elsewhere on the Continent (1907).

Of particular interest are the artworks Payne painted after returning to Brisbane in 1907. A seminal work painted before her departure to Sydney in 1919 depicts Swan Bay, North Stradbroke Island. The atmospheric treatment of the sunlit haze painted on an unprimed wooden panel emphasises the horizontal relationship between sky, sea and shore. Painted 'en plein air' a French expression which means in the 'open air'; describes the act of painting outdoors directly in the landscape and exemplifies the influences she absorbed during her art studies in Europe.

Frank Payne – Working methods

Little of Frank Payne's Queensland work has survived and it is thought that fewer than a dozen oil paintings and watercolours exist. We are fortunate to have a large number of sketchbook drawings that Frank Payne made around Cleveland, North Stradbroke Island and Southern Moreton Bay. A sketchbook is frequently used by artists for drawing or painting as a part of their creative process and helps to record, organise and clarify ideas and perceptions of daily events, objects and places from the everyday life experiences and from imagination and memory. Frank Payne carried these sketchbooks with her on trips to Cleveland and surrounding districts. Many of the pages contain notations, record the time of day and have traces of colour.

Frank Payne – Portrait studies

At Brisbane Technical College Frank Payne trained as a portrait painter. She studied under Godfrey Rivers, an English trained artist who attended the Slade School and exhibited with the Royal Academy before coming to Australia in 1889. Her Brisbane studies fired her with an ambition to travel to and study in England and Europe. From the time of her departure until her return to Brisbane two and half years later, Payne wrote a regular series of articles for the Brisbane 'Courier' in which she described her travels and her art studies.

While overseas she was influenced by the more progressive trends in art at the time. The way she built up form with controlled line and economical use of space are features of her fine art training, learned from the much-admired draughtsmanship of the English painter and etcher Frank Brangwyn and his assistant teachers. Payne often said that Brangwyn was a major influence and that, among all her studies, the time spent in his studio was the most influential.

In contact with many prominent women artists, Payne numbered among her friends Jessie Traill, Ethel Carrick Fox (acting as an executor of Carrick's estate) and the writer Dorothea Mackellar. The portrait of Jessie Traill in fancy dress was probably painted in the early 1920s and may have been painted as an entry for the Archibald Prize. She also exhibited oil and watercolour paintings of children (often her own sons) in relaxed unposed settings. Her reputation as a painter rested largely on her studies of children, which were very popular at the time.

Frank Payne – Later career and travels to Asia and North Africa

Payne took an active interest in the status of women artists and was from 1919, a foundation member of the Society of Women Painters, serving on the society's committees and council for many years, and, from 1921, contributed to every annual exhibition. Founding president (1934) of the Women's Industrial Arts Society, she was awarded the King George VI coronation medal in 1937. She was also ready to promote the careers of younger artists such as Daphne Mayo and Lloyd Rees

She continued to paint well into her later years, and held exhibitions at the Moreton Galleries, Brisbane, in 1948 and the Grosvenor Galleries, Sydney, in 1952. Old age may have slowed her but it did not stop her from working. She spent nine months in Singapore in 1954, producing a number of paintings of her stay there which depict the local life and people. There were also trips to north Africa. Her early training in Europe and England, with its emphasis on tightly controlled composition and economical use of space (much of which she learned from Brangwyn), is still evident in these later works.