

Joan Holt's portraits need homes in Canberra

September 19, 2014

☆ Read later



Sally Pryor

Arts Editor at The Canberra Times.

[View more articles from Sally Pryor](#)

[Follow Sally on Twitter](#) [Follow Sally on Google+](#) [Email Sally](#)

She was a prolific artist who gave **Please Log in to add this Article to ★ My Clippings** 00 of her works desperately need a home.

submit

[Email article](#) [Print](#)



Joan Holt and friends.

When Charlotte Bunt was growing up, she knew never to enter her mother's studio when she could hear classical music playing.

The music, which drifted out from the studio almost every day, meant that her mother was busy painting and couldn't be disturbed.

And yet, despite working throughout her life and painting prolifically, Joan Holt never held an exhibition or sold a painting, preferring instead to give away portraits to their subjects, or let the works pile up in their dozens in her studio.

Now, nine years after her death, her daughter has a shedful of art works she doesn't know what to do with. Among the landscapes and abstract works are at least 200 portraits of people Bunt has never met, and she is hoping that someone, somewhere, might help take them off her hands.

"You have to be famous at the National Portrait Gallery, and maybe one day she will be recognised, but everyone I've spoken to, whether they're well known in the arts or not, says 'That's a huge lifetime of work, you can't throw it out'," Bunt says. "But at the same time, I can't lug it around forever."

Born in 1926, Holt grew up in Sydney in a well-to-do family, many of whom were judges, and began painting and drawing from an early age. When she was 15, she was introduced to the famous artist and pioneer of modernist painting, Grace Cossington-Smith, who lived nearby and offered to give her art lessons.

"She took my mother under her wing and encouraged her, and encouraged my grandmother to encourage my mother to continue," Bunt says.

Holt was sent to boarding school at the New England Girls' School, and later studied at the Dattilo-Rubbo School of Art, where she met people like John Olsen. In her early 20s, she travelled to Europe, taught art and met other artists, including the British abstract expressionist painter John Copnall.

When she returned to Australia and married the scientist John Bunt, the two moved in artistic circles and Holt continued to paint.



Portrait of a farmer painted by Joan Holt when she was 21.



Joan Holt.



One of Joan Holt's unnamed portraits.

The couple has two children and the family lived for a time in the United States. Bunt spent her teenage years in Florida, until her parents divorced and her mother moved back to Australia. She eventually remarried and settled with her two children in Canberra, and threw herself into the artistic community.

"She fell in love with Canberra, she loved everything about it. She would go to the art gallery literally every single weekend, on her own," says Bunt. "She'd paint with other people, do portraits and give them away. A lot of paintings she didn't like, and she threw them in the tip, and then all the rest of her work from back when I was a child is all in this shed."

Bunt, herself an artist with a background in theatre, is now selling the Burra property where Holt spent her final years, and has been slowly going through her mother's papers and artworks.

She has been taken aback to read letters from people like Copnall, filled with encouragement, imploring her to keep painting and referring to her inability to finish her paintings - something Bunt had always thought was just a family joke. She says it's clear that her mother had talent, and can't bear to throw the works away.

"I just don't feel that it's right for me to lug all this stuff around," she says. "My mother had a very strong influence on me. She was one of those quietly strong women. She had piercing blue eyes and she was really critical - not in bad way, she just loved looking at people and then getting that down."

Among her books are works on pioneering women, and while she was a relatively shy person, she was passionate in her painting.

"She wasn't one to big note herself - she preferred to just quietly achieve," Bunt says. "But somewhere along the line, she seemed to give up on herself, or thought she had all the time in the world. She did painting after painting, and never finished any - something went wrong in there somewhere."

While Bunt plans to keep some of the works, including several drawings, a portrait that was entered into the Archibald in 1984, and a work for which she won a prize in her 20s, it's the dozens of portraits that bother her.

"They're strangers. There are 200 or more of people I don't even know from Canberra, and they're looking back at me and I'm thinking, I don't really know what to do with you," she says.

In the meantime, Bunt has created a website to display as many of Holt's works as possible, in the hope that someone can advise her. And perhaps someone might even recognise one of the people in the portraits.

Visit joanholt.tk to see Joan Holt's work. If you have any advice for Charlotte Bunt, know anyone in the portraits, have memories of Joan Holt or are interested in any of the works, email Charlotte Bunt at cmeany@bigpond.com.

 submit

 Email article  Print