

Review Exhibition

Creating Taste: The Collection of Joe and Rose Skinner

Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, University of Western Australia, Perth

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This exhibition celebrates the remarkable collection of The Skinners – the owners of Perth’s first commercial art gallery and the city’s unofficial arbiters of taste

WORDS: John Cruthers



Top: Rose and Joe Skinner's apartment photographed in 1974
Above: The Skinner's salon-style hang replicated at the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery

In 1958 Rose and Joe Skinner opened Skinner Galleries, Perth's first commercial contemporary art space. During the following years the gallery introduced local audiences to the best new Australian art, building a following for the cutting-edge artists of the time – Sidney Nolan, Arthur Boyd, John Passmore, Charles Blackman and Sam Fullbrook – as well as a slew of younger local artists. Skinner Galleries generated a circle of enthusiastic and committed collectors who established Perth as a nationally significant centre for serious art collecting.

Along the way Joe and Rose built their own collection, focusing on mid-career Australian artists whose work appealed to them. Eighteen years later, in 1976, they retired from the gallery scene, generously donating the bulk of their collection to the University of Western Australia. In retrospect, this bequest was a far-sighted if not visionary gesture.

Creating Taste: The Collection of Joe and Rose Skinner is an exhibition of works from the Skinner Bequest, supplemented by additional works either owned by the Skinner family or purchased from Skinner Galleries. This remarkable exhibition not only showcases the cultural legacy of this extraordinary couple, but also provides a fascinating insight into how people build collections, and what constitutes a truly great collection.

Rose was the driving force behind the gallery. The daughter of Polish immigrants who settled in Melbourne, she was well travelled and passionate about literature and art. She had been married twice and had run a successful carpet business before marrying property owner and developer Josiah (Joe) Skinner. Frustrated by the lack of a decent local

art venue, Rose decided to start her own commercial gallery/rental space/arts centre in one of Joe's buildings. Envisaging a place where all the arts could find a home, she met with arts organisations, consulted with the directors of Australia's state galleries and even wrote to leading international figures, including John Russell, art critic for the Sunday Times in London.

Her mix of ambition and altruism is revealed in a letter she sent out to promote the gallery: she ended by quoting author Hendrick Van Loon: "There is only one way to improve the taste of a nation. It cannot be done in a hurry and it cannot be done by force. It can only be done by exposing people patiently and systematically and continually to what is truly 'good' – to that which is truly 'noble' in the sense it deserves to be known."

Even though she was in her mid 60s, Rose Skinner had the energy, style and charm to carry others with her on her quest to civilise Perth through art. In a modern building in Malcolm Street, she ran solo shows of progressive east coast artists and group shows of younger local artists as well as organising art prizes and events. And accompanying all these were lectures and dinners to introduce artists to the growing number of collectors. When the Art Gallery of Western Australia showed little interest in supporting her efforts, Rose began lobbying – writing to newspapers and arranging visits by international art luminaries such as Herbert Read, John Russell, Robert Melville and Patrick Heron. Artist Brian McKay recalls meeting Herbert Read at Robert Juniper's house: "I was in such awe of him I could hardly breathe. It seemed so improbable that someone as eminent as he would deign to visit little old Perth".

Rose also led by example. She avidly bought the work of her artists and displayed it in her stylish modern apartment behind the gallery. One wall of the apartment, salon hung, featured in an article on the collection in *Art & Australia* in 1974. This display has been re-created in the exhibition, and powerfully demonstrates Rose's creative flair.

The exhibition itself is spaciouly laid out in the newly refurbished Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery. Built around the 68 works in the bequest, another 30 works have been added to flesh out the holdings of key local artists like Howard Taylor and Robert Juniper.

Walking into the show is like entering a time capsule. With very few exceptions, the work was purchased during the life of the gallery, providing a concentrated snapshot of the best Australian art of the era bought without the benefit of historical hindsight. Careers unfold on the walls, and the old antagonisms of Australian art are played out, especially the figurative versus abstract debate that led to the formation in 1959 of the group of artists known as the Antipodeans. How this shift was dealt with individually is shown in the five works by John Passmore and, less convincingly, in two works by Lawrence Daws (an artist who Rose was pleased to exhibit but tellingly did not collect).

Even in a material sense the show takes you back: virtually all the works are still in their original frames, with thin gold mouldings, flat wood and linen slips.

It's interesting how few of the paintings are in the standard histories or retrospective catalogues: walking through the exhibition becomes a succession of discoveries of "new" works by artists. Partly this is because

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the collection is in Perth and has only occasionally been shown in the last 25 years, but also it's because Rose clearly didn't care for "masterpiece" pictures, the ostentatiously grand or important. She had a deep understanding of her artists' work and she trusted her eye.

Indeed, it's fortunate for Western Australia that this self-appointed arbiter of taste had such an unerring sense of the good and noble. Judging from her collection, Rose was a uniquely gifted collector. She chose only those artists whose work appealed to her, and she collected them in depth. She worked to make unified groups of each artist's work, based on her perceptions of their strengths, and her own sensibility. Nolan, Boyd, Passmore, Blackman, Fullbrook and Williams all benefited from this approach. Fred Williams, for example, is represented by a superb group of seven gouaches, ranging from about 1949 to 1974. They show the development of his approach to the wooded landscape, and culminate in an uncompromising oil, *Foothills landscape* (1968). The jewel in this selection is the Monet-like *Seascape* (1974), a late purchase through which one can feel Rose's joy in being able to exhibit Williams – by then the undisputed king of local landscape painting – as equally adept at representing water.

With Sidney Nolan, for whom Rose was a major agent, she was drawn to his lyrical side. Three paintings from 1961–62 show the artist at his poetic best, evoking interior space and states of mind through evanescent outback landscapes. None of these could be called a major work, but the group is so compelling that one is forced to rethink one's ideas about what is most significant and valuable in his work. The same slightly unsettling but

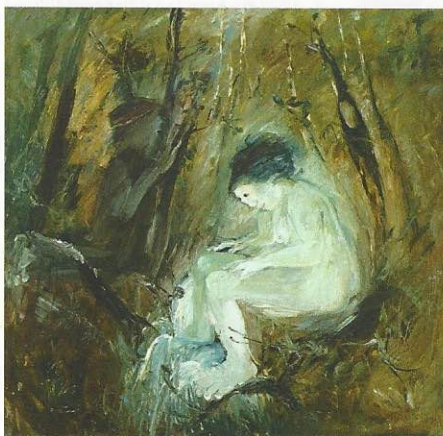
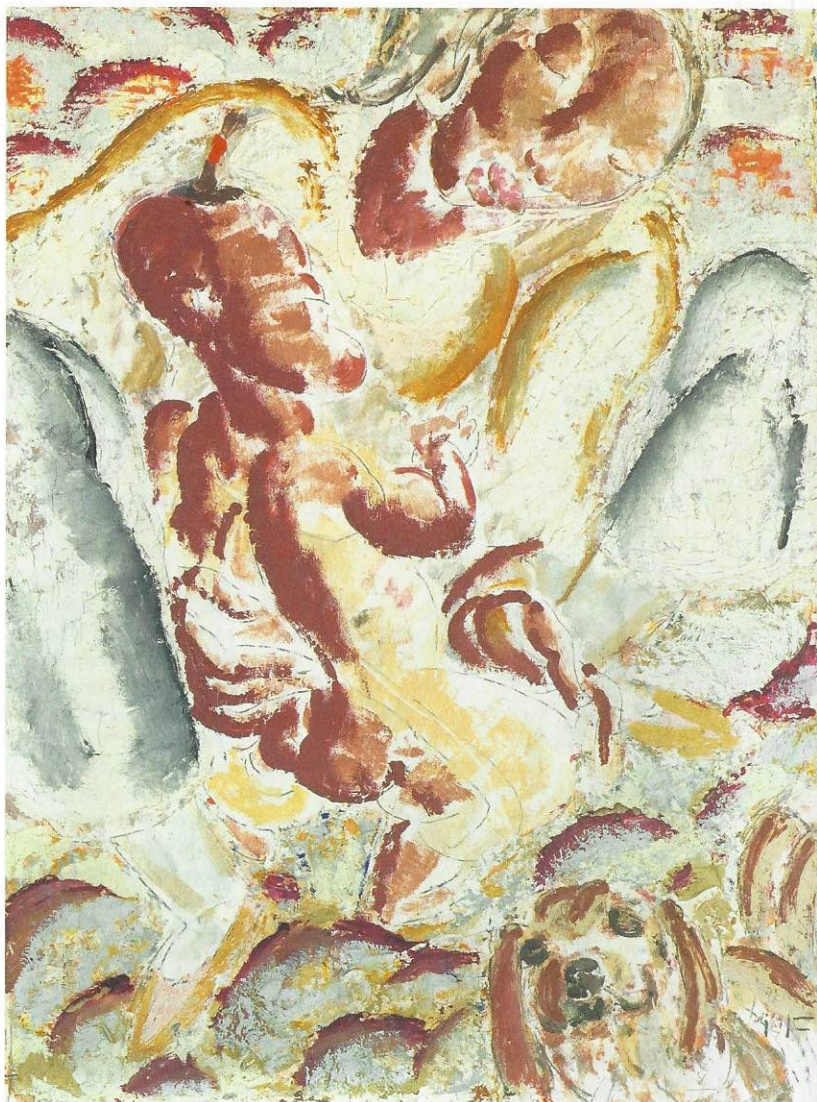
satisfying feeling comes about from looking at the groups of work by Arthur Boyd and Sam Fullbrook, to mention just two.

The most unexpected group of works in the collection is by an artist Rose didn't exhibit. In December 1953 Joe Skinner walked into London's Redfern Galleries to enquire about an "obscure" artist who'd shown there previously – Ian Fairweather. A group of paintings left over from an exhibition of his work in the 1940s was brought out from the stockroom, and Joe bought the lot. Rose bought four more in 1970–71, all from the mid 1930s. The four in the bequest provide undoubted proof, if it was needed, that Fairweather's dismissal of his early work as mere "tourist pictures" is laughable. Organised by his gracefully cursive Slade School line, the bustle of Peking circa 1936 is rendered through roughly scumbled but exquisite oil paint into what must be some of Australia's greatest post-impressionist paintings.

I left this exhibition with goose bumps. True, I grew up in Perth in the '60s and visited the gallery in my role as a teenage art critic, so nostalgia may have played a part. But more importantly, these pictures and the way they've been put together speak so clearly of a remarkable collector.

Rose Skinner's broader legacy is in Perth's thriving art scene, and the major collections built up in the last three decades – Holmes a Court, Wesfarmers and Kerry Stokes. But the more personal legacy of her collection is an enduring insight into her extraordinary perception and sensitivity as a nurturer of artistic talent and a collector.

This exhibition, along with its accompanying catalogue, will ensure that it is better known in the history of Australian art and collecting.



1 Ian Fairweather, *Mother and Child* (1935), oil and pencil on paper 2 Arthur Boyd, *Susannah and the Elders* (1972), oil on hardboard 3 Charles Blackman, *Facade* (1959), oil on canvas