



THE TORRANCE ARTWORKS COLLECTION



A collection of artworks hanging in the Members' Bar were created by Brisbane artist William Torrance (1912-1988)

The collection was purchased from his estate by the Club.

We thank the History Interest Group and other volunteers, especially Lieutenant Colonel Stephen Maitland, who have researched and prepared these Notes. The series will be progressively expanded and developed. They are intended as casual reading for the benefit of Members, who are encouraged to advise of any inaccuracies in the material.

Introduction

Opposite the Members Bar of the United Service Club is a striking portrait of WW2 Australian soldier in uniform with slouch hat. It is actually a self-portrait by William Torrance (1912 - 1988)¹.

There is a number of other artworks, (including watercolours and pastels) also hanging on the walls of the Members Bar and the Military Bar that depict scenes that Torrance saw during his war service. They are themed with a dark-green mounting mat and are easily recognised as a series.

The collection was purchased by the United Service Club after his death. The then-President LTCOL Stephen Maitland, has provided this background information to provide the background story and colour behind the Torrance Collection.

Background to the Artist:

Torrance was born in Armidale, NSW in May 1912, but lived most of his life in Brisbane.

His father (Robert Macalister Torrance) was born in Glasgow, Scotland in 1879 and was a French Polisher and piano tuner. He had served in South Africa for 18 months in the British Army. He enlisted in the AIF in July 1917, and served in the Australian Army Medical Corps (# 18321). He embarked for England in October 1917, and served 5 Field Ambulance in France after the Armistice. He returned to Australia in July 1919 and was demobilised. He died in 1944.

His mother (Margaret Ann) was born in Queensland in 1893 and died in 1961. He had one sister (Dorothy) born in 1908, who never married and died in 1969.

William passed his State Scholarship exam and qualified in Freehand Drawing at Technical College. He served during the Second World War (see below). At his enlistment he was described as being a single, self-employed commercial artist, living at Birdwood Street, Coorparoo - his parents' home.

Torrance never married. After his discharge in 1946 he lived with his mother until her death in 1961, and then as a recluse in Rocklea.

He died of leukaemia in December 1988 at the Greenslopes Repatriation Hospital; and his estate was left to the Queensland Cancer Fund.

Military Service:

William was a member of 1st Survey Company RAE (a Militia unit) from September 1940 (#Q15137), and was mobilised in December of that year into Northern Command Survey Company at Kelvin Grove, Brisbane and promoted Corporal. In January 1941 he was posted to 1 Australian Field Survey Company, and was promoted sergeant in December of that year. He was taken on strength of the Second AIF -as QX 40043- and posted into 5 Australian Field Survey Company in Townsville in August 1942.

In February 1943 he marched into 2/1 Australian Army Topographic Survey Company for "special duty" with "York Force" and embarked for Thursday Island. Promoted W02 in October 1943. He later served with 5 Australian Field Survey Company in Morotai (and also possibly Wewak and Balikpapan) from December 1944 to October 1945. Even in those times he was rarely without pen or pencil, and some of his wartime sketches were drawn on the back of maps to overcome the shortage of paper.

He was demobilised in February 1946 as a Warrant Officer Class 2, and was awarded the Pacific Star, War Medal 1939-45, and Australian Service Medal. It appears that his drafting and sketching skills were valued by the Army.

¹ Sometimes known as "Bill", our artist is not to be confused with the American artist of the same era - William Fairfield Torrance (1900-1985).

His Art

Bill had artistic works as both an author and a painter and an enduring passion for the sea and sailing vessels.

He wrote and illustrated "Steamers on the River: from Ipswich to the Sea" [1986, published by the Author]² and prior to his death he delivered a manuscript to his publisher entitled "Motor Vessels of the Brisbane River", but it is believed it was never published.

The post-war years of the 40s and 50s appear to be his most active as a painter. The bulk of his oils and watercolours date from this period, as he spent his time alternating between his art, his night job as a mail sorter and caring for his widowed mother until her death in 1960. He also took part in many exhibitions.

Many times between 1950 and 1960, he was among the finalists for the Archibald and Wynne prizes and his work hung alongside, some prestigious company - Lloyd Rees, Russell Drysdale and William Dobell for example -but he remained obscure.

He was an Archibald Prize finalist in 1957 with painting "Artist's Mother". He also entered the Wynne and Sulman Prize exhibitions in the 1940's and 1950's.

His prime subject was shipping - and he reputedly had drawn or painted every ship to enter the port of Brisbane from 1946 to the 1970's.

The Royal Albert Hotel in Brisbane (in the old Perry House at the corner of Edward and Elizabeth Streets) reportedly had the largest collection of Torrance paintings.

He rarely or never sold a work and on his death a vast collection of approximately 400 paintings was at his home (in addition to sketches and drawings).

Approximately 70 were sold as part of the first disposal (netting some \$30,000) - the auction was through Cameron and Linda McTavish's Trilogy Gallery - and the Johnsonian Club, the USC, and the Maritime Museum conducted exhibitions of his works.

Acquisition by the USC

In 1989 as part of the first disposal of his estate, several paintings by William Torrance were acquired by the USC.

The works, almost all of which bear a title plaque, are:

- Self Portrait 1940. This was presented to the Club by Trilogy Gallery, in recognition of the Club's purchases of Torrance's works and support of the sale program.
- Cairns Waterfront
- Thursday Island Slipway
- Army Camp
- Moratai
- Japanese Surrender Moratai 1945
- Entertaining the troops Moratai 1945
- Untitled (Army Camp and bay - Moratai?) price not known

As an aside, LTCOL Maitland also acquired some of Torrance's work at the same time as the Club. In undertaking the research for this Note, he discovered, behind one of those paintings, the Gallery's description of the artist that was prepared to support the sale.

The Gallery's notes provide extra detail and are at **Attachment 1**.

² LTCOL Maitland presented a copy (signed by the author) to the Club Library in August 2017

GALLERY NOTES (at time of sale)
WILLIAM TORRANCE

To briefly sketch the history of Artist William Torrance, the first lines are drawn with his birth in 1912 in Armidale NSW., the son of a piano tuner.

He grew up in the seaside suburb of Manly in Queensland, on the skirts of Moreton Bay, where his love of the sea and sailing vessels was born and grew with him.

His talent for art, although practised, was not formally trained until he reached adulthood in the mid-1930s when he attended night classes at the Brisbane Central Technical College. It would appear he was a star pupil, studying free-hand drawing, and receiving Honours and prizes for his efforts, not to mention great encouragement from his instructors, Martyn Roberts and WE Swan. He rejected an available and much safer career in Commercial Art, preferring to concentrate on his oils and entering them fairly successfully in various small art competitions.

With the outbreak of war, Torrance joined the 5th Field Survey Corps, serving with his unit in North Queensland, Cape York, then to Thursday Island and Morotai in Indonesia. Even in these times he was rarely without pen or pencil, and some of his wartime sketches were drawn on the back of maps to beat the paper shortage. It seems that the tightness and the frugality of the War years were reflective Torrance's lifestyle, for he continued to work on in the most impoverished of circumstances.

Despite this, the post-war years of the 40s and 50s appear to be his most active. The bulk of his oils and watercolours date from this period, as he spent his time alternating between his art, his night job as a mail sorter and caring for his widowed mother until her death in 1960. He also took part in many exhibitions. Many times between 1950 and 1960, he was among the finalists for the Archibald and Wynne prizes and his work hung alongside, some prestigious company - Lloyd Rees, Russell Drysdale and William Dobell for example -but he remained obscure.

He made several voyages overseas in the 1950s and 60s, seeing first-hand the art of the European masters and painting many of their scenes. But it seems that exotic locales did not excite his palette as well as the Australian landscape, or his other great love, the Sea. During the 70s he committed himself to writing and illustrating -either with his drawings or his photographs -Queensland's Maritime history, thoroughly documenting every steamship that entered the Brisbane River. It resulted in his first book 'Steamers on the River'. Finishing a second book about motor ships in the 30s became an urgent obsession as cancer began to have its effect, but he was able to get a final draft to the printer before he succumbed.

It was not, by any means, an overly dramatic or adventurous life. In many ways it was a tragic one, that a man so talented and committed to art, energetic, outgoing and determined, could gradually because of lack of recognition and a series of personal tragedies -become so lonely, insecure and reclusive. Yet he never turned his back on his art, until finally his hand and eye began to fail in the 80s.

However, this was a life, even in its darkest times, that was punctuated with bright dashes of colour that made up the art of William Torrance.

To summarize his style, it might be easiest to imagine the lessons of colour and light taught by the Impressionists applied to the golden tones of Australian land and sea scapes and particularly by the grandeur of Maritime Art. His canvases, painted broadly and thickly, and his subtly graceful watercolours hold much the same tranquil charm as the works of Vida Lahey and J.J. Hilder, as well as offering insights into a world a few decades younger. His flair for Portraiture shines out despite their small number, and his lighter pastel and ink studies are filled with quiet feeling, a rare commodity added to his prowess for proportion and detail. There is much about all these to be admired and enjoyed.

In accordance with his last wish, the art of William Torrance is being collected and readied for many exhibitions. During his lifetime, he had neither the desire or talent for self-promotion, nor any

ambition for public acclaim, but history will judge his true worth. Perhaps with this, a valuable Queensland Artist will receive final recognition for a lifetime's dedication.

