

TIMELINES

Timelines@smh.com.au
(02) 9282 2742

NORMA REDPATH 1928-2013

Sculptor carved a niche in world art

Norma Redpath's achievements mark her as one of the outstanding Australian sculptors of her generation. Her carved works of the 1950s, the exquisite bronzetti of the 1960s and her monumental public works each speak of an engagement with international sculpture.

Redpath was born on November 20, 1928, the younger of two daughters to ceramic designer Harry Redpath and his wife, Dorothy. She grew up in Canterbury, Melbourne, and went to Strathcona Baptist Girls Grammar School.

In 1943, Redpath enrolled in a commercial art course at Swinburne Institute of Technology, but her studies were interrupted the following year when she contracted tuberculosis. A long convalescence gave her the opportunity, in her words, "to develop, question and think", and when she returned to Swinburne she switched courses, studying painting from 1946 to 1948. Dissatisfaction with her own development led her to abandon painting and enrol at the Royal Melbourne Technical College to study sculpture from 1949 to 1951.

In 1950, she first exhibited with the Victorian Sculptors Society (VSS), showing a Huon pine carving, *Ovoid* (NGV collection). The fully abstract work demonstrated an advanced appreciation of negative form and revealed the impact of Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore. Following their lead, Redpath also experimented with stringed forms, using this technique for her first commission: a freestanding abstract in plaster for W.G. Apps funeral home, St Kilda, that the Contemporary Arts Society of Victoria would later commend to visitors at the 1956 Melbourne Olympics as a rare example of modern Australian sculpture.

Redpath made an immediate and dramatic impact upon a then rather barren Melbourne arts scene. Karl Duldig selected her *Standing Figures* in cherry wood for the Stanley Hammond Prize at the 1953 VSS exhibition. At the 1955 exhibition, she was awarded honourable mention for a carving in maple, *Deposition* (Newman College collection). Her early work attracted the attention of three sculptors then newly arrived in Australia: Julius Kuhn (later Kane), Inge King and Clifford Last, who invited her to join them under the aegis of the Group of Four. Together they held two exhibitions at the University of Melbourne's architecture school, in 1953 and 1955. During these years, she also taught art at Korowa Church of England Girls Grammar School.

In 1956 Redpath sailed for Italy, marking the beginning of a lifelong engagement with that country. She studied Italian at Perugia's Università per Stranieri (University for Foreigners). With encouragement from colleague Lenton Parr and a letter of reference from Ola Cohn she applied for work with Henry Moore, who demurred; a gentlemanly bias against female assistants possibly influenced matters.

Remaining in Rome, in 1957 Redpath cast her first two works at a foundry – recommended by Pericle Fazzini – and found the process liberated her from much time-consuming manual labour, allowing her to focus on the creative genesis of new works.

Nevertheless, upon her return to Australia in 1958, she continued to work in wood. She was one of 10 artists invited to submit a mural design for the University of Melbourne's new Baillieu Library foyer and her winning entry – installed in 1959 – was a relief carving in silky oak, employing semi-abstract human forms to symbolise the competition's set theme.

Similar organic-derived forms appeared in a series of large woodcarvings, including *Boy and Horse* (Newcastle Region Art Gallery) and *Family Group* (private collection). These were both shown in 1959 at the NGV in the controversial Six Sculptors exhibition, which was the first display of contemporary sculpture ever held at that gallery. Afterwards



No cultural cringe ... Norma Redpath in 1964; (below) Treasury Fountain, one of her many revered public works. Photo: National Portrait Gallery

Redpath and her co-exhibitors, along with Lenton Parr, formed a new group, Centre Five, with the aim of highlighting the plight of modern abstract sculpture in Australia.

By 1961, Redpath conceived her work in terms of cast bronze. At the first of the ground breaking Mildura sculpture exhibitions, in 1961, she won the prize for monumental sculpture with *Dawn Figure*, a plaster intended for casting.

In the same year she won the Italian Government Scholarship and the Althea Dyason Bequest Grant (awarded by the Art Gallery of NSW), allowing her to return to Italy in 1962 to study at the prestigious Brera Academy in Milan. While there, the sculptor Luciano Minguzzi gave her the address of his foundry: the Fonderia Battaglia. During the next two decades, this became Redpath's home away from home, where she mixed with leading Italian sculptors, including Arnaldo Pomodoro, whom she briefed on developments in Australian sculpture. Far from suffering from cultural cringe, Redpath successfully held her own in Milan, proselytising about modern sculpture in the heartland of classical Western culture.

Her first solo show, held in 1963 at Melbourne's Gallery A, was an astonishing critical and commercial success. Professor Bernard Smith later ranked Redpath as "one of the most impressive Australian sculptors at work today", describing her work as having "a monumental sculptural presence of a kind rarely seen here". Included were *Dawn Sentinel* (NGV collection), a towering bronze that again won first prize at the next Mildura exhibition, *Uccello Rapace* (NGA collection) and *Immortal Warrior* (Reserve Bank of Australia), which later won the first Transfield Prize for Sculpture in 1966 and was exhibited outside the Australian Pavilion at the 1967 World Expo in Montreal.

In 1965, Redpath received the most significant commission of her career: the Treasury Fountain, Canberra. Modelled and cast in Milan, with hydraulics designed and tested in Torino and Cagliari, the fountain was an enormous undertaking. When it was unveiled in 1969, painter and critic James Gleeson declared it Redpath's masterpiece, likening the play of water between the two sculptural elements to a naval battle that was "less a decoration than a



morality in water and metal". The commission led to her being awarded an OBE in 1970.

Three significant commissions from the 1970s also featured fragments of capital heads upon a simple column. These were done for the Reserve Bank in Brisbane (1968-71), the ANU School of Music in Canberra (1972-76), and the University of Melbourne (1970-74), where she designed, pro bono, the memorial to her late partner Sydney Rubbo, professor of microbiology.

In 1972, Redpath was awarded a Creative Fellowship at ANU. Her chief project there was the design of *Piccola Citta*, an "environmental sculpture" for a public plaza. It was never commissioned because of the its formidable costs.

In the late 1970s, Redpath retreated from studio work, instead detailing potential projects in a manuscript titled *Ideas and Images*. In this she referred to the writings of architect Christian Norberg-Schulz, whose term "genius loci" she understood as denoting "the intangible state and possible magic dimension of human experience in relation to a site".

Her final major commission, *Paesaggio Cariatide*, was received in 1980 and installed five years later in the foyer of the State Bank Centre in Melbourne's Bourke Street. In 2003, the work was donated to the McClelland Gallery. During her final two decades, Redpath continued to produce wax maquettes and regularly advised upon matters of conservation of her major commissions. She was awarded an honorary doctorate from Swinburne University in 2006.

She was twice married: first to Franco Puccinelli, then in 1974 to naval engineer Antonio de Altamer, who died in 2000.

Norma Redpath is survived by her cousin Eric and Rubbo's children, with whom she maintained a close friendship, particularly Anna and Mark, as well as Mark's wife, Wendy, and their children, Chloe, Cree, Nick and Joe.

Jane Eckett