Tony Twigg

**Fairweather, Ian (1891 - 1974)**

Ian Fairweather was a modernist painter who immigrated to Australia from Scotland. Unlike most European migrants to Australia who sailed from the west across the Indian Ocean, Ian Fairweather came from the east, through Asia, on a journey that became the subject of his work as an artist and defined his contribution to Australian art. Therefore, central to Fairweather’s understanding of painting were periods spent working in Bali and China that introduced him to a way of drawing that was radically different to the method taught at London’s Slade School where he studied. In Bali he worked at the edge of the cross-cultural art movement, *Pita Maha,* fostered by Walter Spies that introduced him to a meandering line. It flowed around subjects and in classical Kamasan style painting was highlighted with red. Fairweather adopted both mannerisms. In China he encountered calligraphy, an art he described as beautiful and austere that became the rigorous mode of his own expression. Fairweather devised a landscape of humanity drawn from Asia that found a deep resonance in the Australian psyche. He was possibly the first of the modern Australian painters to paint as a native might paint.

After his initial art studies and following his service in WWI, Fairweather travelled through Canada to Shanghai where he spent four years working as a civil servant. In 1933 he decided to become an artist and travelled to Bali. It was the beginning of an odyssey, intermittently travelling and painting in the Philippines, China, Australia and India that irrevocably lead him to Australia.

Fairweather came to Australia four times. In 1934 he briefly visited Melbourne. While his work floundered, Jock Frater introduced him to a circle of modernist artists who drew him into Australia’s artistic life. He went to Queensland in 1938, working at Sandgate and Malay Town near Cains before serving in WWII. Returning in 1943, he stayed until 1952 when he was driven to “escape” on a raft. In 1953 at sixty-two he settled on Bribi Island where he found serenity and made a body of work that identified him as Australia’s most influential abstract artist of the mid 20th century.

In *Anak Bayan* (1957) Fairweather painted the procession of a religious sculpture known as Black Nazarene, during Holy Week in Manilla in the 1930s, when he lived there. The title is Filipino slang meaning native and the painting is peppered with observations of the procession. We see the bare feet of Nazarene devotees, a boy carrying a candle with a sweat-protecting towel tucked into his shirt collar, the peasant Madonna and a man prostrating himself along the bottom of the painting.

Commenting further on the distinction between occidental and oriental art, Fairweather observed, “You see, the portrait painter must subdue his own personality…to that of the sitter…I like the Chinese resent this…The individual is not as important, fundamentally, as the whole human structure.”



*Anak Bayan,* 1957, gouache on cardboard on hardboard, 96.8 x 227.3

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**References and further reading**

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