

= Constance Stokes =

Constance Stokes ( née Parkin , 22 February 1906 ? 14 July 1991 ) was a modernist Australian painter who worked in Victoria . She trained at the National Gallery of Victoria Art School until 1929 , winning a scholarship to continue her study at London 's Royal Academy of Arts . Although Stokes painted few works in the 1930s , her paintings and drawings were exhibited from the 1940s onwards . She was one of only two women , and two Victorians , included in a major exhibition of twelve Australian artists that travelled to Canada , the United Kingdom and Italy in the early 1950s .

Influenced by George Bell , Stokes was part of the Melbourne Contemporary Artists , a group Bell established in 1940 . Her works continued to be well @-@ regarded for many years after the group 's formation , in contrast to those by many of her Victorian modernist colleagues , with favourable reviews from critics such as Sir Philip Hendy in the United Kingdom and Bernard William Smith in Australia .

Her husband 's early death in 1962 forced Stokes to return to painting as a career , resulting in a successful one @-@ woman show in 1964 , her first in thirty years . She continued to paint and exhibit through the 1970s and 1980s , and was the subject of a retrospective exhibition that toured Victorian regional galleries including Swan Hill Regional Art Gallery and Geelong Art Gallery in 1985 . She died in 1991 and is little @-@ known in comparison to some other women artists including Grace Cossington Smith and Clarice Beckett , but her fortunes were revived somewhat as a central figure in Anne Summers ' 2009 book *The Lost Mother* . Her art is represented in most major Australian galleries , including the National Gallery of Australia and the National Gallery of Victoria ; the Art Gallery of New South Wales is the only significant Australian collecting institution not to hold one of her works .

= = Early life and training = =

Constance Parkin was born in 1906 in the hamlet of Miram , near Nhill in western Victoria . The family moved to Melbourne in 1920 , where she completed her schooling at Genazzano convent in the suburb of Kew . Constance was short , just under five feet tall , and had dark hair . She trained between 1925 and 1929 at the National Gallery of Victoria Art School in Melbourne . Over the summer of 1925 ? 1926 the Gallery held a competition for its students , who were asked to paint " holiday subjects " ; Constance won the prize for a landscape . The competition was judged by artist George Bell , who would have a continuing influence over her artistic career .

In 1930 , Stokes was among artists who exhibited at a Melbourne gallery , the Athenaeum . Her painting , *Portrait of Mrs. W. Mortill* , was one of only two to draw praise from prominent member of the Heidelberg School , Arthur Streeton , who described the work as a " rare attraction " that was " liquid and luminous " . At the end of her studies , Stokes won the National Gallery of Victoria Art School 's prestigious National Gallery Travelling Scholarship , which allowed her to continue her training at the Royal Academy of Arts in London . In addition to her education at the Royal Academy , she studied under the French cubist painter and sculptor André Lhote in Paris in 1932 . The following year she returned to Australia , where she married businessman Eric Stokes . The family settled in Collins Street , Melbourne , and Stokes had three children between 1937 and 1942 . In later years , Stokes had a studio in the family home in Toorak , a modernist house designed by architect Edward Billson .

= = Artistic career = =

= = = Early career : 1934 to 1952 = = =

Stokes returned from a European honeymoon in 1934 , but she produced few works in the years immediately following . Although the Collins Street apartment had become a full @-@ time studio for Stokes , only two paintings and two sketches from the period are known . The most notable is *The*

Village ( c.1933 ? 1935 ) , influenced , according to Stokes ' own account , by the post @-@ impressionist and portraitist Augustus John . This work was hung in the inaugural exhibition of the Contemporary Art Society , held at the National Gallery of Victoria . It was included in a travelling exhibition that appeared in New York 's Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1941 and later in Canada . In 1946 , Stokes presented the work to the National Gallery of Victoria .

In the mid @-@ twentieth century , there were divisions in the Melbourne art scene , which became intertwined with the complex cultural politics of the Cold War era . In the late 1940s , there was a move against modernism in art , and tonalism came into favour . Partly as a reaction to this development , artist George Bell established an exhibiting group called the Melbourne Contemporary Artists in 1940 . Bell was a former war artist and influential member of the Victorian artistic establishment , who after World War II was appointed to teach at the National Gallery of Victoria 's painting school . Influenced by Bell , Stokes was among the artists for whom modernism was a strong influence , and who exhibited with the Melbourne Contemporary Artists . Other members of the group included Russell Drysdale and Sali Herman .

Stokes ' artistry endured , while that of some of her modernist colleagues did not . By 1945 , when the Melbourne Contemporary Artists held one of their exhibitions , art critic Alan McCulloch observed that the works were increasingly lacking in originality and that the former standards of the group were being maintained by only a few members . One of those was Stokes , whose work *The Family* he praised as " strongly designed and sensitively modelled " . The following year , though , McCulloch was more upbeat , describing the show as their best to date , while again complementing Stokes on her " rich and opulent pictures " . Six years later , when the group exhibited in 1952 , the critic for Melbourne 's *Argus* was as unimpressed as had been McCulloch in 1945 . Suggesting that the show demonstrated that Melbourne 's art scene lacked innovation , he nevertheless singled out a small number of works for praise . One of these was Stokes ' *Christ with Simon and Andrew* , which he thought showed " richness and feeling " .

While Stokes was being praised at home in Melbourne , one of her portraits was among six paintings owned by the National Gallery of Victoria that were loaned for an exhibition on the other side of the country , in Perth . The city 's newspaper , *The West Australian* , chose Stokes ' picture to illustrate its story on the exhibition . Calling it *Girl Drying Her Hair* , the paper described the work as " notable for its patient handling , use of bright colour and skilful blending of figure and background " . The National Gallery of Victoria refers to the work as *Woman Drying Her Hair* , which it had acquired in 1947 at the behest of curator and artist Daryl Lindsay . It was soon to travel a great deal further than to Perth .

= = = Later career : 1953 to 1989 = = =

In 1953 , at the request of Prime Minister Robert Menzies and the British Arts Council , an exhibition of the works of twelve Australian artists was assembled . It was shown in London , five regional British cities , and at the Venice Biennale . Of the twelve artists selected for inclusion , only two were from Victoria , the rest being from New South Wales ; Stokes was one of the Victorians . Her three works , including *Woman Drying Her Hair* , hung alongside those of Australia 's most prominent mid @-@ twentieth @-@ century artists , including Arthur Boyd , Russell Drysdale , William Dobell , Sidney Nolan , Lloyd Rees , Donald Friend and Frank Hinder . Despite these prominent painters being selected for inclusion , when the exhibition appeared in London , Stokes ' *Girl in Red Tights* drew critical attention and acclaim . Admired by the director of the National Gallery Sir Philip Hendy , the work was proclaimed by the art critic at *The Times* as the " best picture in London that week " . Some artists in Sydney were not so impressed . A meeting of the Royal Art Society of New South Wales urged Prime Minister Menzies to intervene , members describing the paintings as " the worst ever gathered in one place " . However , the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board member who announced the exhibition considered that it would represent the most substantial promotion Australian art would have experienced to that time . The following year , Joseph Burke , Professor of Fine Arts at the University of Melbourne , praised Stokes ' painting , making particular reference to her work that had so entranced viewers at the 1953 exhibition . " Constance Stokes " , he wrote ,

was a painter who " announced the pursuit of the classical ideal as [ her ] aim . [ Her ] Girl in Red Tights , with its Venetian richness of colouring , ably sustains the monumental harmony of the classical tradition . "

Religious subjects appear regularly in Stokes ' paintings ; one such work , The Baptism , is in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria . Despite her recurring attention to such subjects , however , the artist entered the Blake Prize for Religious Art only once , in 1953 . Esmond George , critic at Adelaide newspaper The Mail , admired the ( unidentified ) work as having " strong art interest " . Stokes ' interest in the Prize was not so strong as to prompt her to enter again . She told an interviewer that " abstract painting took over " .

Eric Stokes died unexpectedly in 1962 , an experience which left Constance bereft ; a long @-@ time friend said that she never really recovered . Faced with a substantial mortgage to service , Stokes returned to work : painting . Two years later , she opened her first one @-@ woman show in over thirty years . It comprised 43 works , with the 27 paintings priced dearly , at upwards of 150 guineas . The exhibition was a success both financially and critically : Stokes earned over 4000 guineas , and the exhibition attracted praise from art historian and critic Bernard William Smith . Throughout the 1960s , 1970s and 1980s , she painted and held shows ; this later phase of her work was based on a stronger , if lighter , colour palette and reflected the influence of the art of Henri Matisse , whom Stokes admired . There was also a change in her subject matter , from " classically conceived " still lifes , groups of figures and nudes , to more decorative themes . Stokes ' works continued to be well received , having been included in the 1975 exhibition Australian women artists at the University of Melbourne , and the Regional Galleries Association of Victoria 's 1977 touring exhibition The heroic years of Australian painting , 1940 ? 1965 . Stokes ' last painting was Alice Tumbling Down the Rabbit Hole , painted around 1989 ; she died in Melbourne in 1991 .

= = Legacy = =

The standard reference work , McCulloch 's Encyclopedia of Australian Art , describes Stokes as " a leading figure in the modernist movement in Victoria " . Not all critics regard Stokes ' work so favourably , however . Art historian Christopher Heathcote acknowledges the recognition of Stokes ' work by her contemporaries , but goes on to say that " strong staff support [ at Melbourne University ] for a few lesser practitioners , such as Constance Stokes ... hardly aided the appreciation of the better local work . " Though she appears in McCulloch 's guide , few other reviews of Australian art recognise Stokes . Exceptions , according to feminist writer Anne Summers , include Ursula Hoff 's Masterpieces of the National Gallery of Victoria and Janine Burke 's Australian Women Artists . One Hundred Years 1840 ? 1940 , both of which refer to the well @-@ travelled painting Woman Drying Her Hair . While academic artists and art historians such as Bernard William Smith and Joseph Burke praised Stokes ' work during her lifetime , she faded into relative obscurity . There is , however , a strong market for resale of her works .

Stokes returned to some prominence through a book by Anne Summers , published in 2009 , called The Lost Mother , in which Stokes and her paintings are central to a narrative about Summers ' own family . Summers contrasts Stokes ' ongoing obscurity with the dramatic resurrection of the oeuvre of artists Grace Cossington Smith and Clarice Beckett , both brought to attention by well @-@ regarded gallery curators . Summers considers a number of factors to be involved in Stokes ' fate , including her association with George Bell , whose destruction of many of his early pictures , propensity to keep reworking his old pieces , and artistic conservatism , all limited his subsequent reputation . Summers also points to the lack of a high @-@ profile champion of Stokes ' work , and her Melbournian identity in a time when " Sydney was where the ideas and the experimentation were and the place where reputations were made " . Historian Helen Topliss takes a slightly different view , emphasising that Stokes was " deflected " from her career by raising a family .

A retrospective exhibition of Stokes ' paintings toured Victorian regional galleries including Swan Hill Regional Gallery and Geelong Art Gallery in 1985 . The next year , an exhibition of her work toured several state galleries and the S.H. Irvin gallery in Sydney . In 1992 , her works were displayed in the National Gallery of Victoria 's exhibition Classical Modernism : The George Bell

Circle , while in 1993 the same gallery curated an exhibition of her paintings and drawings .

Most major Australian collections hold works by Stokes : The Village is one of thirteen in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria . Closely associated with Victoria , and in particular the cultural milieu of Melbourne , Stokes is well represented in the galleries of that state . These include the Ballarat Fine Art Gallery , Benalla Art Gallery , Geelong Art Gallery , Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery , and Swan Hill Regional Gallery . Other public galleries holding works by Stokes include the National Gallery of Australia , the Art Gallery of South Australia , the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory , and the Queensland Art Gallery . The Art Gallery of New South Wales is alone among the major Australian institutions in not holding any of her paintings or drawings .