

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE6017

Pitts, Lilian Louisa

(1872 - 1947)

Born	1 January, 1872, Bairnsdale Victoria Australia
Died	31 December, 1947, Victoria Australia
Occupation	Professional photographer

Summary

Lilian Louisa Pitts (L.L.P.) was a professional photographer working in northern Victoria. L.L.P was known for her thematic photographic albums, her postcards, and for capturing the life of the community in which she lived.

Details

Lilian Louisa Pitts (L.L.P.) was born in Bairnsdale, Victoria, into an affluent Methodist family. She was one of eight children. Her father owned a flour milling business which was greatly impacted by the Depression of the 1890s. As a result the Pitt family was forced to move away from Bairnsdale, and join other pioneering families in establishing a small community in northern Victoria. The family introduced irrigation into the area and set up a stone fruit orchard. L.L.P. was between 17 and 20 years of age at this time.

L.L.P. was heavily involved in the church and broader community: she was the church organist, taught Sunday school classes as well as a bible class for young men, gave piano lessons and led the choir. L.L.P. wrote mini-musicals with witty songs, and was involved in the production, direction and costuming of these works. However, she was apparently 'too modest to perform herself' (Australian Gallery Directors Council 25).

In 1920, L.L.P. developed a kit for the teaching of music entitled *Retain Theory*, which she patented and advertised in music magazines. She also marketed it by producing postcards. Despite these efforts the kit was not a commercial success.

L.L.P.'s earliest photographs can be dated back to 1904, when she was 30 years old. These early works show her considerable technical ability and understanding of composition. She was also known for her improvisational ingenuity. After forgetting the black cloth required for a session, 'she hopped behind some bushes and took off her black petticoats' (Australian Gallery Directors Council 26).

In 1907, L.L.P. began studying still-life painting under the tuition of A.M.E. (Alice) Bale in Melbourne. By 1908, L.L.P.'s photographic skills had developed to the point that she was producing postcards of substantial quality depicting her neighbours, family and friends; these were often in series format. The fees she sought for her work as a photographer were reported to be quite modest. L.L.P. produced 100 photographs and a number of large thematic albums – these are now held by the National Gallery of Australia. Thematically, these albums depicted people in the landscape. Eight of these have survived. L.L.P. also produced a number of smaller albums which depicted special events, such as a holiday to the snow, a trip to Tasmania or even fictitious trips, in which she featured her nieces and nephews.

L.L.P. did not drive a car herself, so most of her photographs were taken while on trips with her family, or at picnics. She travelled around Victoria using a horse and buggy, capturing landscapes and creating genre images of the outdoors. L.L.P. sometimes staged her photographs to make them appear as if they were taken indoors.

L.L.P. entered her photographs of children into competitions such as the MacRobertson's Chocolates Christmas Stocking competition, in which she won a prize. Some of her photographs were also published in newspapers such as *The Weekly Times*.

L.L.P. developed a close friendship with the photographer J.P. (Jas) Campbell, who would visit L.L.P. in Merrigum during the period 1908-1914. The two would travel together on photographic expeditions, where they would exchange ideas and critique each other's work. L.L.P. had built a cottage for Campbell, but he did not return after WW1.

In the 1920s L.L.P.'s photography centred on recording the lives of her nieces as they grew up. Over the following 20 years photography became less of a focus for L.L.P.'s artistic practice. It is possible that the impact of the Great Depression and the costs involved with practising photography may have affected her choice of work. L.L.P. eventually shifted to teaching oil painting to young women. One of the last photographs attributed to L.L.P. took for a subject her painting group, with their easels set up in an orchard. Lilian Louisa Pitts died in 1947.

Technical

L.L.P. used a 4 x 6 ½ inch plate camera, possibly a Thornton Pickard, and a tripod and black cloth. Her practical versatility has been well noted. Her darkroom was set up in her parents' cellar (Australian Gallery Directors Council 26).

Collections

Museum of Victoria

National Gallery of Australia

Events

1904 - 1920

1981 - 1981

Lilian Pitt's work featured in *Australian Women Photographers 1840-1950*

Published resources

Book

Merrigum Frank, Pitts, Lillian Louisa, 1989

Three of Us and Mount Buffalo, Pitts, Lillian Louisa, Palamountain, Irene and Potts, Winifred Annie, 2004

Unremarkable Women? The Life and Times of Lillian Louisa Pitts, Photographer, Cook, Valda Dorothy, 1992

Australian Women Photographers 1840 - 1960, Hall, Barbara and Mather, Jenni, 1986

Magazine article

A First For Women Photographers in Australia: Quick Thinking and Ladders Got the Top Shots, Bowen, Jill, 1981,
<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article55457051>

Exhibition Catalogue

Australian Women Photographers 1840-1950, 1981

Edited Book

Heritage : the national women's art book, 500 works by 500 Australian women artists from colonial times to 1955, Kerr, Joan, 1995

Author Details

Anne Maxwell (with Morfia Grondas and Lucy Van)

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