Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE1126

Geach, Portia Swanston

(1873 - 1959)

Born	24 December, 1873
Died	31 December, 1959
Occupation	Artist, Women's rights activist

Summary

Artist and feminist, Portia Geach was born on 24 December 1873 in Melbourne, Victoria. She studied design in 1890-92 and painting from 1893 to 1896 at the Melbourne National Gallery schools. Late in 1896 she won a scholarship to the schools of the Royal Academy of Arts in London, where she studied for four years. She also worked in Paris and exhibited in England, Paris and New York. On her return to Australia she held numerous exhibitions first in Melbourne and then in Sydney when she moved there with her family in 1904.

On her return to Sydney from a visit to the United States of America in 1917 Portia, influenced by a meeting of a housewives' association she had attended in New York, founded and was president of the New South Wales Housewives' Association. It aimed to educate women in the principles of proper nutrition and to aid them in their struggles against profiteering and rising food prices. In 1928 she reorganised the association as the Housewives' Progressive Association. For many years she was also president of the Federated Association of Australian Housewives.

Details

Back in Melbourne in 1901 after extensive overseas studies, Portia held an exhibition in her Collins Street studio. Portraits became her specialty and she later painted Edith Cowan which hangs in Parliament House, Perth, and (Sir) John Quick which was accepted and hung in the National Library, Canberra. She also painted murals and was a member of the Victorian Artists' Society. Around 1904 her family moved to Sydney, where in 1914 she exhibited mainly oils and watercolours of the shores of Sydney Harbour and Victorian rural scenes, with some portraits.

In the Sydney Morning Herald and over the radio she frequently expressed her views on such subjects as buying Empire goods, the use of preservatives in foodstuffs, the date-stamping of eggs, the marking of lamb and the high price of milk and bread. Active on the committee of the National Council of Women of New South Wales, Geach was a delegate to the International Council of Women's conference in Washington in 1925. She believed in equal pay for men and women and the right of women to hold public office. In 1926, while overseas, she exhibited at the salon of the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts, Paris.

In 1941 of Portia was expelled from the Housewives Progressive Association after years of rivalry with its paid chairwoman of directors Eleanor Glencross. Geach also alleged that the association had been working in cooperation with the Meadow-Lea Margarine Co. Pty Ltd. In 1947 she formed the breakaway Progressive Housewives' Association and was president until 1957. She also served on the council of the Australian Women's Movement against Socialisation from 1947, and belonged to the Women's Club, Sydney, and the Lyceum Club, Melbourne.

Geach's sister Kate provided in her estate for an annual £1,000 prize, known as the Portia Geach Memorial Art Award, for a portrait by a woman artist (for a complete list of winners, see http://www.trust.com.au/Content.aspx?topicID=71).

Published resources

Journal Article
From "Thrift" to "Scientific Spending": The Sydney Housewives' Association between the Wars, Foley, Meredith, 1984

Resource Section
Geach, Portia Swanston (1873 - 1959), Wright, Andree, 2006,
http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A080650b.htm

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Archival resources

Mitchell and Dixson Libraries Manuscripts Collection
Progressive Housewives' Association - records, 1939-1970

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