

PARIS to MONARO

Pleasures from the studio of
HILDA RIX NICHOLAS

About the exhibition

Paris to Monaro: Pleasures from the studio of Hilda Rix Nicholas tells the story of one of the many twentieth-century settlers of the ACT and surrounding region who came in curiosity and hope, bringing a rich personal history and wide experience of the world. The exhibition includes over 200 works and objects including costumes, minikins, paper ephemera, artists' materials, household objects and drawings and paintings from 1907 to 1961. Many of these works of art and objects are on public display for the first time with artefacts, furniture, garments, and travel souvenirs brought directly from the studio Hilda Rix Nicholas designed and created for herself at Knockalong. The exhibition features a recreation of her studio and paintings of the other studios in which she has worked. Hilda Rix Nicholas travelled widely between 1907 and 1926, spending long periods in London and Paris, where her work was admired and exhibited. During this time Hilda Rix Nicholas made two significant visits to Morocco. Having come home with her paintings and exotic mementoes, she visited the Monaro for the first time in 1922, painting several key works. In 1927 she returned to Canberra to paint on Red Hill and Mount Pleasant. Around this time she resumed her acquaintance with a grazier, Edgar Wright, whose grandfather had owned Lanyon. They were married in 1928, moved to his property, Knockalong, near Delegate, and together established a flourishing homestead with the raw and burgeoning Canberra its closest 'city'.

About the resource

This resource, structured around the biography of the artist Hilda Rix Nicholas, is a companion to the exhibition *Paris to Monaro: Pleasures from the studio of Hilda Rix Nicholas*. With a focus on selected

works it provides questions and activities to prepare students to visit the exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery or online at portrait.gov.au, questions for discussion in the exhibition and post visit extension questions and activity.

The resource has strong connections with the Australian Curriculum and is designed primarily for upper primary to middle school teachers of English, History and Visual Arts to engage students with the themes, ideas and stories of the paintings, drawings, ephemera and objects in the exhibition.

Curriculum links include:

Visual Arts: the exhibition can be examined through practices and processes (including technique, medium, and materials) and viewpoints. The exhibition encourages exploration of the students own ideas for art-making that relates to their personal background and experience. Students are encouraged to develop an understanding of the ways audiences construct multiple meanings in response to art works.

History: the paintings, drawings and objects can be interrogated through the lens of the past and present, beliefs and values as well as a study of World War 1 along with its effects. Students are encouraged to identify a range of questions to stimulate historical enquiry.

English: the ideas, experiences and art works in the exhibition can be used to create inspired texts and include literary references and illustrations.

Themes include:

- Autobiography
- Australia and World War 1
- Family, loss and longing
- Land and identity
- Travel and the exotic
- Nationalism
- Time and place
- Role of women

National Portrait Gallery

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Tell us what you think

The National Portrait Gallery is committed to providing opportunities for all audiences to access exhibitions and the Collection. We welcome any comments or suggestions about this learning resource. Please contact Amanda Andlee Poland, Manager, Learning Programs amanda.poland@npg.gov.au 02 6102 7062.

NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY EXHIBITION

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PARIS to MONARO

National Portrait Gallery Learning resource

For the students

Before the visit to the exhibition

Autobiography

- Create a still-life of objects that are special to you or hold some memories such as travel or significant events. Arrange them and draw them, considering composition and meaning. Share with three other students and ask them to describe the person in your art work, after close viewing. Discuss their interpretations. (VISUAL ARTS)

Land and identity

- Research a number of artists who have represented the Australian landscape in the 1900s through oil painting. Annotate their key ideas about the Australian landscape (VISUAL ARTS)
- Experiment with different drawing and painting materials to capture a landscape (VISUAL ARTS)
- Who were Hilda Rix Nicholas' artistic contemporaries in Australia and in Paris? Is there any evidence of their influence? If so, in what ways? (VISUAL ARTS)

Travel and the exotic

- Map the places that Hilda Rix Nicholas visited and lived, and represent them visually in a timeline with information. (HISTORY)
- Research what travel was like at the time Hilda Rix Nicholas went to Europe with her family members. To what extent is travel similar or different today? (HISTORY)
- Dress a sitter in a costume from another place and time. Create an observational drawing of the subject. Include some props as clues to the identity of the sitter. Does this constitute a portrait? Why or why not? (VISUAL ARTS)

Time and Place

- Research the works of Hilda Rix Nicholas by visiting the Gallery's website, www.portrait.gov.au/site/exhibition_subsite_hildarix.php and place her work within a period of history. Choose 3-5 works and place them in chronological order. What was this period of history like? Describe the period including key world events. (HISTORY)
- How were purchases made by those living in rural Australia? How might they have purchased furnishings for domestic use in the 1930s? Research the local papers for the Delegate NSW region or your local area in the 1930s. (HISTORY)

Role of Women

- Think about the life experiences of Hilda Rix Nicholas. List 8-12 key social/cultural differences compared to a particular woman's life today? (HISTORY)

In the Gallery

Autobiography

- Find connections between the objects and costumes represented in the exhibition with those included in the paintings. What is the purpose of these objects in her work? (VISUAL ARTS)
- Who were the subjects in the paintings? In what ways do you think her relationships with the subjects influenced the way she conveyed the person/people? Use several specific examples to support your argument. (VISUAL ARTS)

Land and identity

- Identify and compare the different materials Hilda Rix Nicholas used. How does the choice of material affect your reading and interpretation of these works? (VISUAL ARTS)
- Which do you consider to be the more successful portraits in the exhibition and why? (VISUAL ARTS)
- Many of Hilda's paintings are brightly coloured. Describe the colours used in one painting being as specific and creative as you can in your description. (ENGLISH)
- Survey the portraits in the exhibition and observe the gaze of the subjects. Where are they looking? How does that impact on our response to the work. Consider the effect of the poses the subjects hold. (ENGLISH)

Time and place

- Are the artworks and objects in the exhibition documents that can be used as evidence to achieve an accurate perspective on the period and social context? (HISTORY)
- What 3 questions would you like to ask one of the subjects about their life? (HISTORY)
- Find an object in the exhibition that you are interested in or are curious about. Make a quick sketch to help you examine it and consider what it is? What is the purpose of the object? Do you have any use for it today? (HISTORY)

Role of Women

- Choose several artworks of women and describe how the women led different lives to the lives of women today. Which aspect would be of most interest for you to research? (HISTORY)

After the visit

Autobiography

- Create a portrait of the artist that tells more than one moment in her life. Consider your choice of media, style, scale, colour and composition. What would you include in the portrait? (VISUAL ARTS)
- Consider the entire exhibition as a portrait of the artist and craft her portrait as a short story or poem? (ENGLISH)

Land and identity

- Draw or paint a view of the Australian rural landscape. To what extent are there any similarities between what Hilda Rix Nicholas painted and yours? (VISUAL ARTS)
- The curator describes Knockalong as a place ... "where her wounded soul healed". Hilda wrote of her first experience of the Monaro region with her travelling companion, Dorothy Richmond "a peace such as I would not have dared dream of has stolen my heart". Write an imagined monologue in the voice of Hilda that captures her character and her experience of living at Knockalong. (ENGLISH)

Time and Place

- Look closely and consider one of the pictures in the exhibition and write a diary entry, letter or news article in the voice of the subject. (ENGLISH)
- Present, plan, rehearse and deliver a presentation that reflects a diversity of viewpoints of the Arab Market Scene based on your impressions of the painting. (ENGLISH)
- Why do you think there is an absence of Indigenous representation in this exhibition and Hilda Rix Nicholas' work? What might this tell you about the time in which she lived? (HISTORY)
- Research the traditional owners of the land that the studio is built on, land that was provided to Hilda's husband's father as a soldier settlement package. (HISTORY)
- Look at the works of the Australian female artists Joy Hester, Margaret Preston, Grace Cossington Smith and Thea Proctor. How do Hilda Rix Nicholas' style and subjects differ to the other artists of her time? (HISTORY)
- What key beliefs and values emerged from Hilda Rix Nicholas' paintings, drawings and objects? How do you think they influenced society? (HISTORY)

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National Portrait Gallery
Learning resource

2.1



*Hilda in front of Burnima,
Bombala 1927*
photograph
Rix Wright Collection

Hilda Rix Nicholas

Emily Hilda Rix Nicholas was born in Ballarat, Victoria on 1 September 1884. She left Australia with her sister, Elsie, and mother, Elizabeth, after her father's death in March 1907. Hilda had trained under Frederick McCubbin at the National Gallery School and exhibited with the Victorian Artists' Society before her journey overseas at age 22. Hilda spent time in London where she studied at the New Art School and in Paris where she attended art classes at the Académie Delécluse and the Grande Chaumière. Hilda and her sister spent several exhilarating periods in Tangier, Morocco and the expatriate artists' colony of Étapes, France.

In quick successions of time Hilda lost both her mother and sister to typhoid fever, neither of whom saw her marry Major George Matson Nicholas in October 1916. Hilda's love was to be short lived as her new husband was killed in action come November in the same year of their marriage. Hilda kept his name and his memory, signing her pictures Emily Hilda Rix Nicholas.

During this time Hilda painted and drew street scenes, personalities and the exotica, some of which she treasured, collected and kept with her in the studios she called home. It is these objects that comprise the glory of her studio at Knockalong, a studio that she created to her own specifications in Delegate, New South Wales. Hilda called this property home from 1928 and lived there with her second husband, Edgar Wright, raising her only child, Rix.

It was at Knockalong in the Monaro plain that Hilda explored the country, created her own magical world, raised her beloved child and painted a patriotic Australia filled with nostalgia and beauty.

"If Mrs Nicholas gives nothing more to Australia than her virile portrayal of the race of sinewy, clear eyed, determined type of sun browned men of the Southern Monaro...she has not worked in vain"
Mary Liddell, 1923



-: Studio :- 38 x 22 - (Inside measurement)

North Elevation of Studio: - + Porch to East - Walls covered blocks - 6 x 8 x 15 -
 Inside Opening of porch 4 ft wide x about 3 ft - Outside chimney measure accordingly.
 Pillars of porch - gum trees - 8 ft high x (16 in diam) - Door 6 ft 4 in x 4 ft 2 in. Porch floor 8 x 10 -
 10 windows - 6 ft wide x 3 ft - Cement - 12 lights - (6 pan)

Sketch of the studio at Knockalong,
Hilda Rix Nicholas
Rix Wright Collection

The Studio at Knockalong

The studio sits at Knockalong in Delegate, on the border of New South Wales and Victoria. Its contents have been largely undisturbed since the death of the artist in 1961.

In 1928, the 44-year-old artist Hilda Rix Nicholas began a new life as the wife of Edgar Wright, owner of the grazing property Knockalong on the Southern Monaro, near Delegate.

Immediately, she embarked on plans to improve the property's homestead and garden and to build a free-standing 'room of her own' to her own, exact specification. Loosely French-provincial in style and as big as a country church, it would have a broad mediaeval-style fireplace, huge windows, a soaring ceiling, a loft and a stage. Incorporating the most picturesque and practical elements of all the studios she had occupied before, it would house paintings that she had made in previous studios, as well as objects that had decorated them. On completion, the Knockalong studio was populated with the miscellany of mementoes the artist had accumulated in foreign lands – robes, clogs, vests, bags, belts, rugs, slippers, furniture, pots and plates – as well as her existing drawings, paintings and artist's materials.

Two major events were staged in the new studio at the end of 1930. The first was the christening of the artist's son, Rix, in an intimate ceremony for which Hilda Wright decorated the space with lilies and tall candles. The second was a Christmas party for 85 adults and children of the district, for which the hosts donned mediaeval costumes that harmonised perfectly with the mood of the space.

The studio offered plenty of scope for the artist to exercise her love of interior decorating. Items she lacked, she ordered, sending detailed drawings of exactly what she wanted to cabinetmakers and drapers in Sydney and Melbourne. When she wrote cheques, she signed herself Wright. But everything she was to make in that purpose-built arena of the imagination, she made as Hilda Rix Nicholas.

“...the atmosphere of old world dignity and quiet and beauty, (if I the architect may say so)” Hilda Rix Nicholas

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4.1



Mrs George Matson Nicholas c. 1917
Hilda Rix Nicholas
pastel, on paper
Bega Valley Art and Craft Society's
Permanent Collection
Bega Valley Regional Gallery

This self portrait of Hilda as artist was completed during her travels, after the death of her first husband in 1916.

Biographical timeline

KEY: red/Australia, black/other

- 1884 Hilda Rix born, Ballarat, Victoria.
- 1902-05 Studied under Frederick McCubbin at the National Gallery School in Melbourne, Victoria.
- 1907 Hilda Rix departs Australia for Europe with her Mother and sister after her father dies.
- 1910-14 Hilda Rix and her family spend time in England, Morocco, France and summers in Étaples, France. During this time she developed a pattern of alternating between painting and drawing, figuration and landscape, antique and contemporary.
- 1911 *Retour de la Chasse* hung on the line at the Salon of the Société des Artistes Français.
- 1913 London, Hilda Rix clips an article from the *Daily Telegraph* about the establishment of new Australian Capital in Australia.
- 1913 Hilda Rix and her family move to Paris.
- 1914 Hilda Rix and her family flee Paris, France with the onset of World War I. Hilda Rix leaves works in Paris with landlady and artist Harry van der Weyden and his wife, Elizabeth.
- 1916 Hilda Rix's sister dies in March and her mother later that year in London, both from typhoid fever.
- 1916 Hilda Rix meets and marries Major George Matson Nicholas, an Australian soldier, in October. Just a few weeks later, in command of the 24th Battalion, he dies at Flers, France.
- 1916-17 Hilda Rix Nicholas draws portraits of Australian soldiers in London.
- 1917 Hilda Rix Nicholas designed Australian-themed costumes for a matinee fundraiser for the Anzac Club and Buffet in London.
- 1918 Hilda Rix Nicholas returns to Melbourne, Australia.
- 1919 Hilda Rix Nicholas settles at Mosman by Sydney Harbour.
- 1922 Hilda Rix Nicholas's exhibition in Melbourne opened by Nellie Melba.
- 1923 Hilda Rix Nicholas's exhibition at Anthony Hordens Fine Art Gallery, Sydney.
- 1922-23 Hilda Rix Nicholas embarks on a summer driving tour, searching for the 'real Australia'. On her journey she meets her future husband, Edgar Wright.
- 1923 Hilda Rix Nicholas has an exhibition of Monaro works in Sydney. Journalist wrote that if she 'gives nothing more to Australia than her virile portrayal of the race of sinewy, clear-eyed, determined type of sun-browned men of the Southern Monaro ... she has not worked in vain.'
- 1924 Hilda Rix Nicholas departs Australia for Paris with her travelling companion, Dorothy Richmond on the Ormond.
- 1925 In Paris Hilda Rix Nicholas has a solo exhibition at Galleries Georges Petit, with works acquired by Musée du Luxembourg. Later in the year she has an exhibition at Beaux Arts Gallery in London. Hilda was the first female Australian artist to have a solo exhibition in both Paris and London with the exhibition then touring to regional galleries throughout the UK.
- 1926 Hilda Rix Nicholas returns to Australia.
- 1927 Hilda Rix Nicholas embarks on a driving trip to Canberra.
- 1927 Hilda Rix Nicholas meets Edgar Wright for the second time.
- 1928 Hilda Rix Nicholas marries Edgar Wright in Melbourne and settles at Knockalong, on the Southern Monaro, near Delegate, NSW and begins to build her studio a few metres from the house.
- 1928 Canberra from Red Hill painting bought by National Gallery of Victoria
- 1930 Hilda Rix Nicholas gives birth, at age 46, to Rix Wright. Rix is christened and a Christmas party for the adults and children of the district is held, both at the recently completed studio.
- 1944 Hilda Rix Nicholas paints *The fleece*, a portrait of Edgar Wright, considered by Dr. Sarah Engeldow as "the great portrait, and indeed a major painting of the last phase of Rix Nicholas's career."
- 1949 Hilda Rix Nicholas's portrait of Howard Ashton was hung in the Archibald Prize, AGSNW
- 1961 Hilda Rix Nicholas dies at age 77 at the Delegate Hospital and was buried on the Knockalong property. She was survived by her husband (for another eighteen years) and her son, Rix.

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Learning resource

5.1



Retour de la chasse 1911
Hilda Rix Nicholas
oil on canvas
Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery

In 1907, when Emily Hilda Rix was a drawing student of Frederick McCubbin's at the National Gallery School, Victoria, her father died. The following year, she, her sister Elsie and their mother Elizabeth (who was also a trained artist) left for England. While not wealthy, they had income enough to rent modest lodgings abroad. In London, Hilda Rix trained under the poster artist John Hassall at the New English Art School in Kensington. The principles of clear illustration that he promoted remained fundamental to her lifelong fine-art practice, re-emerging assertively in her highly-coloured figurative works of the 1930s. Within six months, the trio moved to Paris, where they lived in Montparnasse. Hilda attended life drawing classes at the Académie Delecluse; learned about colour with the American Richard Miller; and went to the Académie de la Grande Chaumière to practise painting light and outdoor scenes. In 1911 one of her works was hung at eye-level in the Salon of the Société des Artistes Français. From 1910, the women spent summers in Étapes, an expatriate artists' colony on the French north coast. They travelled a good deal in Europe, and everywhere they went, collected mementoes.

In 1911 *Retour de la chasse* was hung 'on the line' in a prominent position at the Salon des Artistes Français. This painting of a mounted figure returning from hunting was Hilda Rix Nicholas's first great success. Surprisingly, contemporary reviews described the subject as a 'youth'. The gender of the hunter remains an open question, not resolved by photographs of Hilda Rix with the young mediaeval-garbed Étaplean model. The artist kept the painting all her life.

Questions

What do you think contributes to the success of this painting?
To what extent do you think this painting is an illustration or a portrait?



La Robe Chinoise (The Chinese dress)
c. 1913
Hilda Rix Nicholas
oil on canvas
State Art Collection
Art Gallery of Western Australia

In Paris in 1913, Hilda Rix painted her sister Elsie in a sumptuous Chinese robe of unknown provenance. The Chinese robe was to serve the artist well; she was photographed in it, drew herself in its complementary head-dress and wore it for fancy dress events. She kept the complete outfit all her life.

The painting returned to Australia with Hilda Rix Nicholas in 1918, and was often included in exhibitions of her work. It hung in her Sydney studio, where it was the centrepiece of a Chinese nook, and in her ultimate home at Knockalong. After her death, it went to the Art Gallery of Western Australia.

Hilda Rix loved clothes, and her works express her delight in the weight and fall of different fabrics. In her drawings and paintings of French working-class women, her pleasure in rendering their coarse, puffy skirts, stiff headpieces and clunking clogs is palpable. In Morocco, North Africa, she revelled in the representation of fine voile, rows of bobble buttons, braid and embroidery.

In *La Robe Chinoise*, which has never before been exhibited alongside the Chinese robe itself, the artist set herself the arbitrary challenge of depicting the crease along the left sleeve of the garment. The red threads of the necklace – the beads of which are clearly jade, not glass – rest against the middle joint of the middle finger of Elsie's left hand in the exact centre of the canvas. *La Robe Chinoise* is a 'classic' Rix Nicholas painting in the imperious expression of its subject. Just such a haughty air is notable in the subjects of later paintings.

Questions

Why do you think the artist chose to paint a portrait of her sister wearing this Chinese themed robe?

Think about the concept of identity; how does dressing up affect the notion of who you are?

What words would you use to describe the woman in this portrait?

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7.1



Seller of earthenware pots 1914
Hilda Rix Nicholas
oil on canvas on board
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Several times in the years preceding the First World War, Hilda Rix visited Morocco with her sister Elsie. There, she sketched in the marketplace, painted scenes from the window of their accommodation, and explored the soko.

‘We came into streets of shoe makers,’ she wrote, ‘each square box of a tiny shop framing a wonderful picture ... There were streets of shops where they were making many coloured shoes for women, embroidered in gold and silver thread and gorgeous silks. We could not resist, and each brought a pair. Then there were streets of clothing shops – old and new and I found a flame-coloured woman’s waistcoat embroidered in gold and silver braids ... we returned to the hotel thrilled to the last fibre.’

Equally thrilled, now, is the visitor to the artist’s empty studio, who, gingerly lifting the lid of a travel trunk, lays aside strata of jesters’ hats and bloomers, curtain material, a child’s fairy outfit trimmed with tiny bells, crackly old tissue, to find an appliquéd waistcoat in apricot and violet and a tunic of finest cotton, spangled with stars. In a snake charmer’s basket nearby, are dovetailed pairs of embroidered leather slippers and a tangle of fringed and tasselled bags.

Souvenirs that were in the artist’s extensive luggage when she returned to Australia in 1918 were moved into her studio on its completion in 1930. Before that, she pulled them out to stage ‘An artist’s life in Morocco’, an evening’s informative entertainment at the Delegate School of Arts, featuring her friend, the distinguished elocutionist Miss Carrie Haase. The items comprised the props for an Arab Market Scene, enacted by her fiancé Edgar Wright and his cousin, Paddy Walcott, who was called away to attend a bushfire halfway through.

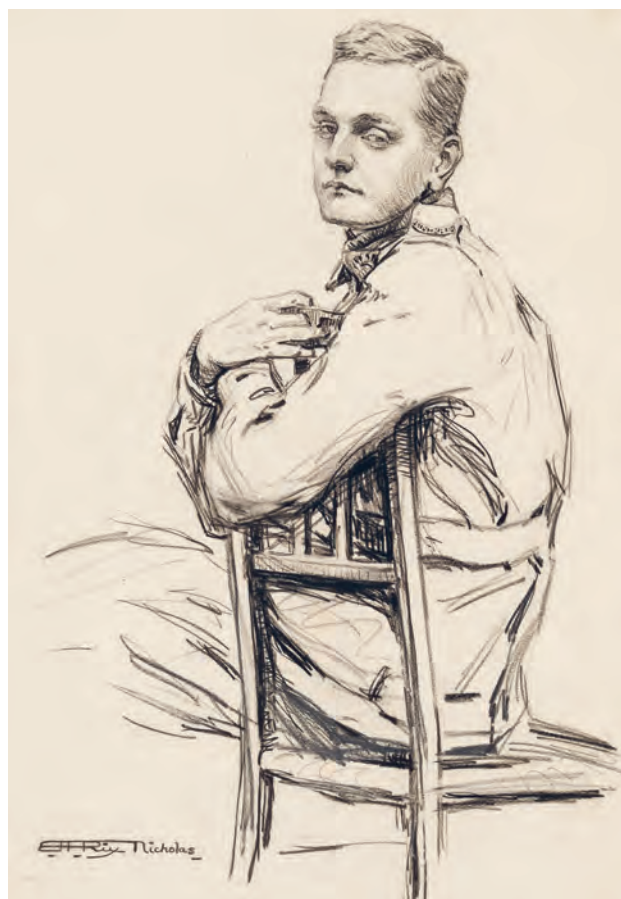
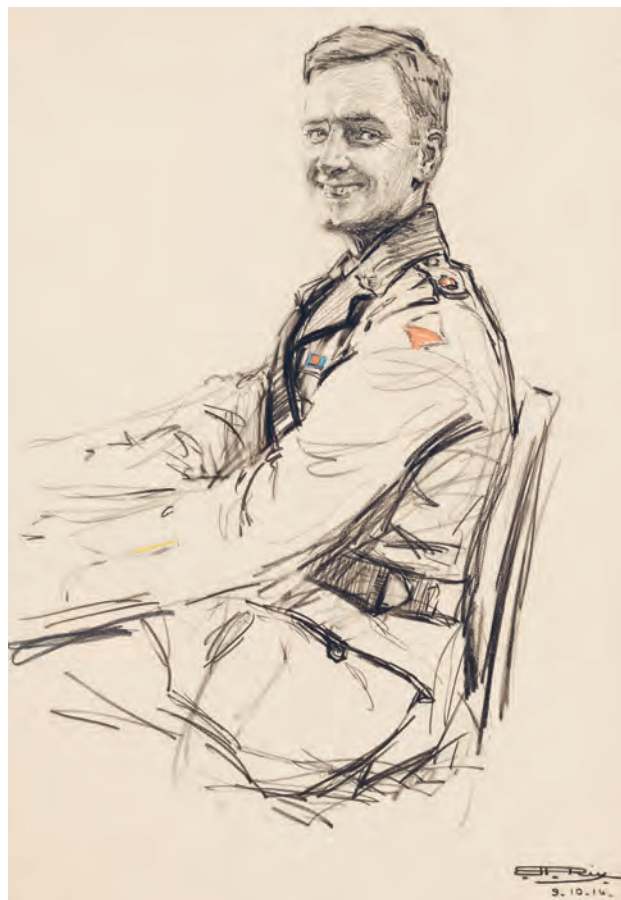
Questions

When you look at this street scene, what can you feel beneath your feet? What is the temperature like? What sounds can you hear? What smells are in the air? Who are you? How old are you? What century do you live in? What time of day is it? What is the weather like? What are you doing? What is your job? What are you wearing? Are your clothes comfortable? From where you are standing, what are the people doing? Who are they, why are they there? Where have you come from? Why are you here? What would you say if you could speak? What happens next?

PARIS to MONARO

National Portrait Gallery
Learning resource

8.1



TOP LEFT:

Frank Nicholas c. 1916
Hilda Rix Nicholas
charcoal and pastel on paper, and card
Rix Wright Collection

TOP RIGHT:

Major George Matson Nicholas DSO
24th Battalion AIF 1916
Hilda Rix Nicholas
charcoal and conté on paper and card
Rix Wright Collection

BOTTOM LEFT:

Falling soldier c. 1916-17
Hilda Rix Nicholas
charcoal and conté on paper and card
Rix Wright Collection

BOTTOM RIGHT:

Athol Nicholas c. 1916
Hilda Rix Nicholas
charcoal and conté on paper and card
Rix Wright Collection

Frank, brother of Major Nicholas,
Hindhead 1917
Hilda Rix Nicholas
pastel and pencil on paper and card
Rix Wright Collection

No one was speaking of a great war when Hilda Rix left Australia for the first time in 1907. She had no reason to suppose that the decade she would spend overseas would bring her as much grief as excitement. With the entry of France and England into the war in August 1914, Elizabeth, Hilda and Elsie Rix were evacuated from the coastal town of Étaples, where they were spending the summer. By the beginning of 1916, both Elsie and Elizabeth had died of typhoid fever in London.

In September 1916 Hilda Rix met Major George Matson Nicholas, an Australian soldier in London. Eldest of five brothers from Trafalgar, Victoria, Nicholas had been wounded at Gallipoli in 1915. At Pozières in July-August 1916 he single-handedly captured a German gun, an action for which he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order. Legend has it that in the town of Étaples, by then the site of an enormous camp teeming with soldiers from the Dominions, he found some of the artworks Hilda Rix had left. Upon his temporary transfer to England, he sought her out at her studio.

Rix and Nicholas married on 7 October 1916. She drew herself, triumphantly, as Mrs George Matson Nicholas; and she drew her husband, looking at her. Within weeks he returned to the front, in charge of the 24th Battalion. He was killed on 14 November. Six months later, in May 1917, the 25th battalion lost 80 percent of its men at Bullecourt.

In 1917, Hilda Rix Nicholas drew her husband's brothers in England. Hilda selected her pencils and crayons with exactitude to convey the scratchiness of wool and serge, the stiffness of leather and the greasiness of bootlaces. The portraits evoke the Australian soldier of legend; raffish, iconoclastic, confident and proud all at once. George's brother lieutenant Bryon Fitzgerald Nicholas was awarded the Military Cross for gallantry before being killed on 9 October 1917. Frank and Athol Nicholas survived the war. The fifth brother, John, was thought to have died in North Africa; he didn't, however, he never came home.

Questions

What strikes you about these drawings?
How do these drawings influence our understanding of World War 1 conflict from an Australian point of view?



The studio, Paris 1925
Hilda Rix Nicholas
oil on canvas
Courtesy of Mr Allen Hunter, Brisbane

After about five years in Australia, Hilda Rix Nicholas decided to return to Europe. With her friend Dorothy 'Dodo' Richmond, she departed on the Ormonde in mid-1924. The trip got off to a brilliant start: the Australian Olympic team was on board, bound, like the young women, for Paris, and if nothing else they provided the artist with the opportunity to draw the human form at its nicest. In Paris, she continued to take drawing classes.

In the marvellous city, the two women lived in a studio opposite the Luxembourg Gardens that had been once occupied by a horse painter, Rosa Bonheur. Hilda painted a seductive picture of the space. Along with her art school sketches, plates and knick knacks, brass candlesticks, throws and kelim rugs were to find their way back to – or be replicated in – her studio at Knockalong on the Southern Monaro, six years later.

In January 1925 the artist pulled off a coup: a solo show at the prestigious Galeries Georges Petit. It included works she had painted on her trips to the Monaro: a heroic representation of Edgar Wright's cousin In Australia, Dorothy's sister Jocelyne personifying Motherhood, and a picture of Mrs Lawson of Craigie as The Monaro Pioneer. The exhibition was a sensation, popular and critically acclaimed, and the picture of Ned Wright was promptly acquired by the Musee du Luxembourg. In London in October 1925 Sir Joseph Cook opened an exhibition of 70 of her works at the Beaux Arts Gallery in London. Having shown at the Royal Academy and the Paris Salon, she returned to Australia in the spring of 1926, quite the international art star and with a wardrobe of outfits that could only have come from Paris.

'The modern art that Rix Nicholas brought back to Australia from her eleven years in Paris and London marks the high point of her career' Catherine Speck 2010

Questions

What can you tell about the artist from her studio?

What are the artistic devices she has applied to create the sense of space in this work?

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10.1



Bringing in the Sheep c. 1936
Hilda Rix Nicholas
oil on canvas
Bega Valley Art and Craft Society's
Permanent collection,
Bega Valley Region Gallery

“as an observer of Australian country life she really came to the fore.” Kerry Loneragan

One of her best-loved paintings is *Bringing in the sheep*, which shows a woman at work sitting confidently on her horse in the Monaro landscape in late afternoon or morning. These images of women on horseback, in Australian pastoral scenes challenged the male-dominated cultural and artistic establishment.

Her women subjects were often the governesses of her son, Rix, and they posed for her in the open air for her to draw and paint. The governesses were often selected for their suitability to model, take care of a child, and as part time jillaroos.

Questions

What is this painting telling us about the role of women in the 1930s?

Look closely at the paint application, brush strokes and use of colour. What do you observe?

What are the similarities of this painting with any other paintings of Australia in the 1930s?

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11.1



The Spanish shawl c. 1936
Hilda Rix Nicholas
oil on linen
Newcastle Art Gallery Collection

The chair on which Edgar Wright posed for the nursery rhyme exhibition of 1936 also appears in *Spanish portrait*, one of the best-preserved of all the artist's paintings. The so-called *Spanish portrait* has been dated at c. 1912 for some time, on the basis that in that year, the artist passed through Spain on the road to Morocco. There never was any evidence, though, that Hilda Rix painted *Spanish portrait* in Spain. The lute in the painting was almost certainly brought back from abroad; it stood in a corner of the artist's studio in Mosman in the early 1920s. In the *Australian Women's Weekly* feature on the artist's studio in 1936, the chair is described as one of her antiques, 'of Spanish origin'. Yet there's no evidence that the ancient looking chair was acquired by the artist in Spain, and shipped back to Australia. On the contrary, antique and of Spanish origin though it may be, it's stamped Myer'.

The Spanish chair is a reminder that the artist created an archaic air in the Knockalong studio – although this is challenging for a contemporary visitor, confronted and enchanted by the motley therein, to comprehend. In the period in which she was devising the space, at the end of February 1930, she purchased the spinning wheel shown in the *Women's Weekly* photographs from the Antique Furnishing Co in Market St Sydney for £3-0-0. On 1 March that year she paid a person called Bert £2-10-0 for an 'old Chair'. The painting known as *Spanish portrait* is linked to the archaic illusion. The more one looks at the work, the less Spanish the subject looks, somehow. In fact, the work now known as *Spanish portrait* is a chronological and geographical crossbreed, painted at Knockalong in the mid-1930s and titled *The Spanish shawl*; its subject is believed to be a neighbour, Valmai McKay, posing in the studio in a Spanish shawl and mantilla plucked from the trunk.

Questions

What do you first notice when you look at this painting and why?
What do you understand of the subject through close observation of the painting?

PAINTS to
MONARO

National Portrait Gallery
Learning resource

12.1



The fleece 1944
Hilda Rix Nicholas
oil on canvas
Rix Wright Collection
Courtesy Jenny Wright

Edgar Wright was the grandson of James Wright, first magistrate of Queanbeyan and pioneer white settler of Lanyon, Cuppacombalong and Booroomba in the Canberra region. Edgar grew up breaking horses, playing polo and cricket. Enlisting in the 53rd battalion in 1915, he spent thirteen months in France. Buried in a shell blast at Passchendaele, he was regurgitated from the earth by another explosion, which left him with severe injuries. Assumed to be dead, he managed to move a finger, was retrieved missing an eye, and spent six months recuperating in England. Repatriated, Edgar managed the family property at Tombong, building up its sheep lines. Under the soldier settlement scheme, he was entitled to take up additional rough acreage nearby. Naming it Knockalong, he set about transforming it into grazing land. The great portrait, and indeed the major painting, of the last phase of Rix Nicholas's career is *The fleece*, a portrait of Edgar Wright painted in 1944. The short thumbnail of the grazier, in the exact longitudinal centre of the composition, anchors the most convincingly-painted staple of Merino wool in Australian art. The picture is arranged in a series of planes, from the table on which the fleece is spread, to the mature and manly figure of Edgar Wright, evaluating his stock-in-trade; through an aperture into the dimness of the shed with its press and soft heaps of fibre; out an open structural frame; across hard-stuffed bales; to a sprinkle of sheep on the grass. On the far side of their paddock stands a gum tree; a mountain, mostly obscure, rises at the picture's furthest point.

“...a great tribute to her husband, who gave her stability and a son; and to the Monaro region where her wounded soul healed.”
Sarah Engeldow 2013

Questions

What do you think is happening in this painting? What are the clues?
In what ways do you think the relationship of the artist and subject has influenced the portrayal of Edgar?

PARIS *to*
MONARO

National Portrait Gallery
Learning resource

13.1



Rix catching the horse c. 1949
Hilda Rix Nicholas
oil on canvas
Rix Wright Collection

In 1930, the year the artist turned 46, she carried off the extraordinary feat of giving birth at Knockalong in early spring, to her first and only child, Rix Wright who is the subject of this portrait.

Rix Wright's adoring mother depicted him at every stage of his development. In his cot; at his desk with his gnome; in his dungarees and extravagantly sun-protective legionnaire's hat; in his sou'wester; and with his daddy, taking the first steps towards fulfilment of his destiny as a wool-man. As time wore on, the daily operation of the boy was entrusted to his governesses, and they, too, found their way into his mother's paintings.

This portrait of Rix aged 19, depicts him as a young man of the Monaro. Proudly, yet confidently gazing out at his mother, the painter, standing before the landscape of the region. Carrying the halter which will allow Rix to take control of the horse he is about to catch. Rix holds an apple, a symbol of love and innocence, but also food that the horse may be tempted and attracted by. Hilda Rix Nicholas painted little after 1950.

"...those of Rix are dreadful - he's going through a less interesting stage of appearance at present" HRN 1938

Questions

Why do you think the artist made this painting?
How would you describe his expression?
What is the role of the landscape in this painting?