



Norman Lindsay and the fight against Wowserism

Norman Lindsay is widely regarded as one of Australia's greatest artists with a genre of his own producing major works in different media including pen-and-ink, wash drawing, etching, engraving, watercolour and oil painting, sculptures and even wood carving, furniture making and children's books. His renowned, often frank and sumptuous nudes, and bacchanalia infusing the Australian landscape with erotic pagan elements, attracted both local and international acclaim and controversy throughout his career.

Born Norman Alfred William Lindsay in 1879 at Creswick, a mining township near Bendigo in rural Victoria, he was the fifth of ten children and almost all were highly talented in art and his siblings Percy, (later Sir) Lionel, Ruby, and Daryl each had their own style and acclaim.

By the early 1900's he was working in Melbourne as a cartoonist for ***The Bulletin*** magazine which was the radical centre of Australian writing and politics and art. In the later words of his son Jack (writer and poet), "... (P)artly through his position on ***The Bulletin*** and partly through the fact that his exhibitions roused the press and the churches to a frantic demand for his suppression, he soon became known to the whole Australian public, whether they were interested in art or not (1)." Lindsay had already become a national figure by the first decade of the new century.

In reviewing Lindsay it is important to realise at that time Australia as a nation was growing up and moving on from its adolescence and undergoing rapid changes. The world of the colonial pioneer so eloquently and romantically described by famous Australian poets such as Banjo Patterson (Waltzing Matilda and The Man From Snowy River) and Henry Lawson (While The Billy Boils) and artists Arthur Streeton and Tom Roberts amongst others, was already disappearing and "...the first cycle of Australian development was ending. The songs and tales of the pioneering independent, the damn-all ramble-eer who had driven the rocky roads and tamed the plesiosaurian continent, were ending (1)." At this time, the process of Federation (formalisation of a constitution and federal and state governments) and the increasing development and importance of the city centres dotted around the coastlines of Australia, which we are familiar with today, had begun and the pioneers were no longer the nation builders.

However, this national evolution also meant that "... (F)or the pioneer as he settles down into a good citizen breeds aggressively a petty-bourgeois philistinism....(1)." Thus it was that Australian society could also be seen as becoming stifling and suffocating, anti-libertine and hostile to new cultures and the arts, and not just its institutions but also the populace were showing a parochial philistinism. In the vernacular of the colonial pioneer or loveable larrikin, Australians were in danger of becoming wowsers : a person or institution who seeks to deprive others of behaviour deemed to be immoral or sinful and to suppress libertine thought and actions.

Lindsay faced this dilemma, this fight against wowserism and "... (I)n the process he became enraged, wounded, embittered, ironic ; but he never lost his faith in the need to continue his work, to hit back, to compromise in nothing (1)." The artist was a determined trailblazer because "... (I)n his exhibited pictures, which attacked the ideas of sin and (*moral?*) pollution, and which affirmed the joyous ruthless fecundity of life, he continually risked persecution and imprisonment. Again and again the bishops and the whole pecksniffian press shouted for his suppression (1)." Lindsay's determination also allowed artists such as Janet Cumberae-Stewart and others to emerge in this modernising Australia.

In an example of the censorship he abhorred, Lindsay took sixteen crates of his paintings, drawings and etchings to the United States to protect them from the war. These were impounded by American officials

when the train they were on caught fire, the crates opened and contents confiscated and subsequently burned as pornography.

This particular oil painting (circa late 1930's) is a superb example of the simple beauty of Lindsay's philosophical expression. In form we see the recumbent and languid figure of Phyllis, head tilted slightly upwards and finger mischievously admonishing, in what appears sumptuous surrounds of cushions and silk drapery. Lindsay studied and admired the classics of literature (Greek, English, French) and the old masters of painting which resonate in his works, and here, Phyllis is almost Grecian or Rubenesque in repose. The condition of this painting is superb and radiates with the vivacity of its colours which adds to the sumptuous feel.

The muse, Phyllis Hall, was one of Lindsay's favourite models and featured in many of his works from 1937 to 1942. Later in an interview, Phyllis said "... (S)he had first posed for him in clothes and hats, later in the nude. Lindsay's paintings left him with a certain libidinous reputation, but Hall said he never offered anything hotter than a cup of tea (2)." Further, "... (H)e was very keen on my head. He said I had Grecian features..." and that "... (H)is work had caused a measure of scandal and some women hid the fact that they modelled for him. Hall had no such inhibitions : I think it's silly to be ashamed of your body...(2)." Phyllis remained friends with Lindsay until his death in 1969 and would visit him at his home in the Blue Mountains.

Whilst Lindsay is perhaps better known for his bacchanalian etchings and watercolours, arguably it is his oil paintings where his true mastery as an artist shines. Truly great artwork from the past invites the future viewer to pause and reflect on their current awareness, and perhaps we need to be reminded not to be too anti-libertine, not to be too much of a wowser, and to embrace after all what is simply great art. In retrospect, Lindsay was an indomitable character and had a profound impact on Australian culture in the twentieth century in his fight against wowserism. Many of Lindsay's works reside in private and corporate collections, and Australian and international art galleries. There is also a dedicated museum and gallery housed in his former home at Faulconbridge, New South Wales run by the National Trust.

1. *Life Rarely Tells, An Australian Boyhood*, by Jack Lindsay, 1958, The Bodley Head
2. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 July 2009