

DONALD FRIEND:

The Duke of Bali

COLLECTOR'S DOSSIER SURVEYS THE MARKET PROFILE AND CRITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF AUSTRALIA'S MOST IMPORTANT ARTISTS. THIS ISSUE, JUDITH WHITE LOOKS AT THE LIFE AND WORKS OF THAT INIMITABLE PERFECTIONIST, DONALD FRIEND.

BIOGRAPHY

Donald Friend (1915-1989) was not only a famed decorative painter, but one of the finest draughtsmen in the history of Australian art. Born into a wealthy NSW pastoralist family, highly educated, a great reader and a lifelong diarist, like Patrick White he grew up hating the shallowness of Sydney society. At Cranbrook he dressed like Oscar Wilde and drank gin. The Duke, as he became known, flouted convention throughout his life, and was famously described by Robert Hughes in 1964 as like "a Regency rake born out of his time, some Mohock or Masher entering his middle age with a seat on the committee of the Hell-Fire Club".

His talent developed early, and the diaries he kept from the age of 13 (now in the National Library) show his determination to become an artist. At 17 he lived for a time with a North Queensland family of Torres Strait Islanders by the name of Sailor, finding acceptance and beginning a superb series of drawings. From then on his output was prodigious.

In 1934 he returned to Sydney to study under Dattilo-Rubbo, and in 1936 travelled to London as an art student at Westminster School. He was undoubtedly influenced by the English school of draughtsmanship, from Hogarth onwards, but also absorbed the influence of Africa on French art, particularly in Georges Braque.

From the late 1930s to the 1950s he produced, in addition to landscapes, many sensuous drawings of young male nudes, such as *Attilio* (1950) and *Studies of Omu* (1952), which remain among his finest work. "He admired handsome young men," says his friend and dealer Stuart Purves of Australian Galleries, "and was completely besotted with the idea of drawing them. He was extremely stylish in every way and there was nothing embarrassing or flippant about them."

Always attracted to the exotic, Friend went overseas repeatedly throughout his career.

The outbreak of war, which interrupted his travels, found him at Ikerre in Nigeria, where he had gone with a young lover and had become financial adviser to the local monarch. The effect on the



Donald Friend, *Bali Boys*, circa 1972. Ink, watercolour on paper, 67x47 cm. COLLECTION OF PHILIP BACON GALLERIES, BRISBANE

"Like all young men, I set out to be a genius but laughter, mercifully, intervened."

he hadn't answered the crack-of-dawn reveille, he characteristically replied, "Never rise before 10 dear boy." Lectures on the dangers of espionage, however, had some effect, as he managed one night to shoot the unfortunate man he was sharing a tent with, though the wound was not fatal. Happily the army psychiatrist at the time was the urbane Sir Cedric Swanton, who prescribed weekends off to go painting, which is how the artist came to spend time with Russell Drysdale at Albury.

After the war the two discovered the abandoned mining area of Hill End together. Drysdale learned from Friend's drawing techniques, but although in this period Friend painted *Sofala* (1947) and other works of note, it was Drysdale who was more at home with landscapes.

Driven by the feeling of "the insufficiency of life as I am leading it", the artist once more set off on his travels in search of inspira-

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monarch's fortunes is not recorded. He returned to Australia in 1940 and joined up in 1942. Military service was not his natural metier, but it led in a curious fashion to the strongest artistic relationship of his life, with Sir Russell Drysdale.

In later years Friend would regale companions with tales of his response to military discipline, as Kay Lanceley, wife of artist Colin Lanceley, recalls. On being asked why

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Donald Friend, *To The Islands*, 1985. Watercolour, 54x74 cm. COLLECTION OF PHILIP BACON GALLERIES, BRISBANE

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In 1980 failing health brought him back to Sydney, where he lived his last decade battling pain and bitter disappointment. He felt he had not attained the artistic fame he had so boldly sought in his youth. And though his lovers were many his affairs rarely endured, two exceptions being Attilio Guarracino, whom he met in 1949 and with whom he had a long, tempestuous and at times acrimonious relationship, and Al Irby, the companion of his later years.

Yet the decade of physical decline also saw some fine works, particularly in watercolour; after a stroke in 1987 he doggedly taught himself to paint right-handed. And he remained a great raconteur, frequently seeing fellow artists, particularly Brett Whiteley, whom he adored, and art lovers, notably James Fairfax.

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Throughout his life, as his diaries reveal, Friend carried the two-edged sword of acute perspicacity, which he applied remorselessly to himself. "He had a kind of delicious complexity of many layers," says Barry Pearce, curator of the 1990 posthumous retrospective. "He was sombre and melancholy, and also very funny. He could be bitchy and cutting, but also very generous." He could be wonderful company, or appallingly cantankerous, and towards the end relied increasingly on the unfailing support of his talented, understanding sister, the actor and broadcaster Gwen Friend, author of the fascinating 1994 memoir, *My Brother Donald*. Her book concludes with a line in which he summed himself up: "Like all young men, I set out to be a genius but laughter, mercifully, intervened."

He was however essentially a romantic, in search of an unfulfilled ideal. "Art," he wrote in his diary towards the end of his life, "is the difference between life and the desired of life. I live in that vacuum of the unrealised." His wit, flamboyance and notoriety hid a very serious, self-critical artist who never ceased to strive for perfection. In death, with the retrospective which showed the full sweep of his achievements, he received the acclaim which had eluded him for so long. His ashes were scattered over a pool in Bali, among the people he loved.

THE BEST WORKS

There is still a popular perception that Friend's best works are his ornate, decorative pieces. But critics and fellow artists alike seem to agree that he excelled above all at figure drawing. What Robert Hughes wrote in his 1961 monograph remains true: "His figure paintings are at the intersection of two ideas which are normally thought incompatible, even contradictory: the nude object of sensual desire, and the male as an image in the Renaissance category of the *uomo di virtu*... I can think of no other painter in the twentieth century who has done it with such force and – I use the word advisedly – nobility."

The poet **Harold Stewart** captured the completeness of the figure drawings when he wrote to Friend that he had realised that they were done, from start to finish, on the one sheet: "You show the whole technical development behind the presentation of an idea, its whole evolution from a blind groping with hesitations and mistakes to find illumination with mastery of an idea: these drawings are their own history."

But if his early mastery came in drawing rather than painting, in his last years he perfected watercolour to an exceptional degree, and in extraordinarily difficult circumstances. "Some of his last watercolours were quite powerful," says Barry Pearce. "He suppressed the decorative impulse."

WHERE TO FIND HIS WORKS

Although Friend produced many works for private commissions in Australia, at the time of his death a number of major works were overseas, chiefly in Britain and Sri Lanka. In the nine years since, some have been sold back into Australia. One which remains with John Keells Holdings in Colombo is the ornate mural, *City of Galle* (1961).

Private collectors of note in Australia include James Fairfax, for whom he painted the huge mural at Retford Park, Bowral. Many of the Balinese works, as well as the early figure drawings, are in private collections. Significant paintings remain in the Holmes à



Donald Friend, *Chariot Without a Rider*, 1963. Aluminium, 45x44x22 cm. COLLECTION OF PHILIP BACON GALLERIES, BRISBANE

t collection and the News Limited collection.

Many important works can be seen in public collections throughout Australia.

The National Gallery in Canberra has several, including the painting *The Earth Imagined by Martians* (1977), the sculpture *The Trojan Horse* (1964), a *Self Portrait* (1944) and the most significant work of the late 1940s, *The Epiphany of St John the Divine* (1949).

The private collection at the Art Gallery of New South Wales includes the drawings *Brisbane River of a Woman* (1945) and *Nude Study: Boy 2* and *Youth, Death and the Maiden* (circa 1947); the oil paintings *Sofala* (1947), *Colin* (1946), *Ex Voto* (1952) and *The Fortune Teller* (1956); and late watercolours including *Tamarillo Harvest* (1987).

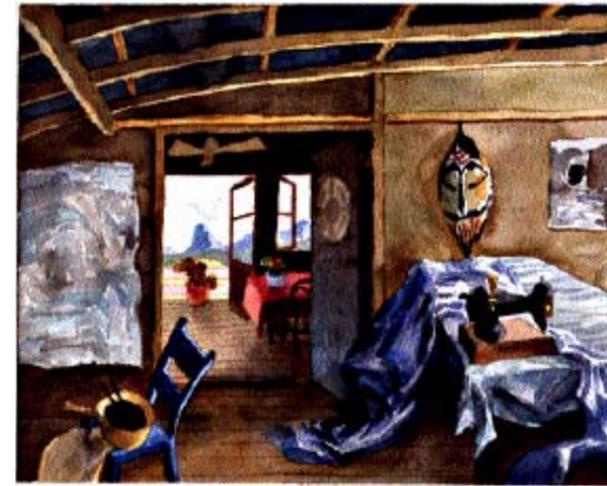
The Sydney Opera House Trust has the *Bennelong* series, bequeathed by **Dr Stuart Scougall** who commissioned it as a ten-panel series from Friend in 1964.

The National Gallery of Victoria, which Friend visited in 1984 and was hurt to find not a single work of his hung, has *Two Women* and *Boy with Fetish* (1946); *Hill End Landscape* (1951) is at the Tasmanian Art Gallery, while Brisbane City Hall has *Brisbane* (1944).

WHAT IS AVAILABLE, HOW TO START COLLECTING

The rush of sales which came in the few years after Friend's death has slowed noticeably, but the sheer volume of his output means that works do become available from time to time, either at auction or through private dealers.

The best guide for first-time collectors remains Barry Pearce's catalogue to the 1990 exhibition, *Donald Friend 1915-1989: Retrospective*. Now out of print, it's something of a collector's item itself, but is available in many public library reference sections. Also of interest, although relevant only to the earlier works, is Robert Hughes's 1964 monograph, *Donald Friend*, of which the artist thought highly despite, or perhaps because of, its rather harsh critical conclusions.



Donald Friend, *The House at Owl Creek (Lawrence Dan's Studio)*, 1983. Watercolour, 56x70 cm. COLLECTION OF PHILIP BACON GALLERIES, BRISBANE

Private galleries and dealers are always ready to give advice. The two who know Friend's work most intimately are unquestionably Philip Bacon in Brisbane and Stuart Purves in Sydney and Melbourne. In recent years **Denis Savill** has dealt successfully at the top end of the market.

The proliferation of Friend's drawings and smaller works means that affordable items are available to modest collectors. More than 300 works have changed hands for less than \$5000 at auction alone in recent years. Those new to the market are well advised to seek the guidance of experts, but can be confident that a Friend drawing which pleases the eye will prove to be an excellent investment.

PRICES AT AUCTION

Since his pre-eminence was in figure drawing, which does not attract the highest prices, Donald Friend has never been a record-breaker at auctions of paintings. His highest price, \$181,125 at Sotheby's Melbourne auction in November 1995, was in fact for *Ayam 2 Kesayangan 1: A Miscellanea*, an illustrated manuscript. It went to Sydney dealer Denis Savill.

The highest price paid for a Friend painting is \$79,500 for *Celebration* (1956), sold at Sotheby's in Melbourne in August 1995.



Donald Friend, *Houses at Hill End*, 1948. Watercolour, 28x38 cm. COLLECTION OF PHILIP BACON GALLERIES, BRISBANE

Earlier that year *Sofala* (1947) went for \$67,400 and is now the property of the AGNSW, and the following year at Christie's *Hill End* (1956) fetched \$36,800. In July 1997 Denis Savill paid \$66,500 for *The Fisher Boy* (1945).

Late watercolours have gone for as much as \$27,600 for *Studio with Still Life and Figures* (circa 1964) at Sotheby's in 1996, while *Breakfast on the Terrace* (1985) fetched \$24,200 at Joel's in 1992.

Drawings have fetched comparable prices, with two each sold for \$27,600 in 1996, *Boy with a Statue, Bali* (circa 1970) at Christie's and *Image in a Landscape, Bali* (circa 1970) at Sotheby's. At the other end of the market, a considerable number have been sold for less than \$1000.

There is nothing in market trends to suggest that prices for the artist's work are in for a renewed boom, but well-informed buyers can expect it to hold its value well. And those lucky enough to come across a good figure drawing will find they have an excellent investment and a source of enduring pleasure – an example of work by the finest student of the human figure Australia has produced.

"He was," says Stuart Purves, "one of the stepping stones, one of the blocks that helped this country build its own true culture." ■