

An Australian Hokusai

By Barbara Goode Matthews

Mrs. Matthews, a Sydney journalist, is an enthusiastic follower of the arts in Australia. She particularly admires the work of Ethleen Palmer, and here she does justice to the fine attainments of that artist in the sphere of the colour-print. Miss Palmer held an exhibition at the Macquarie Galleries, Sydney, during May.

One of the most noticeable features of the artistic life of Sydney during the past few years had been the number of young women who are providing themselves capable of combining commercial and fine art in their careers.

Of these is Ethleen Palmer, whose first step on the ladder of art was winning of a scholarship entitling her to three years' tuition at the East Sydney Technical College. When she completed her course, a city appointment as a commercial artist only spurred her on the further college work at night. But a few years of this intensive application proved too much for her health. A break-down, necessitating four years' complete rest, by a curious chance diverted her talent into the direction of the colour print.

Reading a work on lino-cuts, collected from the Municipal Library, Miss Palmer thought she would like to experiment with this branch of art which previously she had never even thought about. With home-made tools- a gouger made from an old umbrella rib, a frame, an ordinary pen-knife, a sharp pencil, tissue paper, a brush, paints, and Japanese vellum- plus brains, she cut a little blue wren from linoleum. She laughs at it now- "very badly cut...all out of register"-but it was enough to give her a taste for the art of the colour-print which has endured.

Since those far-away days, Miss Palmer has advanced, step by step, branching out and showing a versatility which has led from success to success, culminating last year with the winning of the lino-cut section in the 150th Anniversary Art competition. Then, a few months later, came an appointment as lecturer-demonstrator in a colour-printing and lino-cut at the Technical college, where, but a few years before, she had been an ambitious art student. In her case it did not take the wheel of fortune long to complete the circle.

Romantic as it all seems, this success had been brought by work, and yet more work. Even the drudgery of commercial art has taught responsibility, self-control, resourcefulness, and an appreciation of the layman's point of view. This has been good discipline, for the artistic temperament is essentially sensitive, receptive, dreamy, and often un-practical. Naturally, it is always at war with the materialism and commercialism of everyday life, but modern life has no time for parasitic dreamers. The up-to-date artist must be self-supporting, and in order to become so, must wage war with courage and intelligence. "The struggle is bound to take its toll," says Miss Palmer, "but I believe those who succeed in fine art do so in spite of commercial art-not because of it."

Having won through without having "to sell her soul for sixpence" and buy it back dearly after scaling the ladder, Miss Ethleen Palmer is now in the happy position of being able to dispense with commercial art.

With her work to be seen in most of the Art Galleries of Australia, and "Spindrift" (reproduced in this issue) recently acquired by the Adelaide Art Gallery (her fourth print in that collection), Miss Palmer may be said definitely to have arrived. So far, "Spindrift" is the most charming colour-print she has achieved. Combining beauty with strength and delicacy, it portrays the rhythmic, surging restlessness of the ocean and the evolutions of seabirds on the wing- a quintessence of the unity of nature. To some it recalls "The Wave" of Hokusai, the Japanese master of the colour-prints. But although China, and later Japan, made the colour-print what one might almost call a national art, such a comparison is superficial. True (and psychologists will be interested in this), Ethleen Palmer's childhood was spent among Chinese and Japanese colour-prints, collected by her mother, who lived for many years in the East. Miss Palmer seems to have absorbed into her subconscious the best of this culture. But, although influenced, she has added her own Western ideas of form, design, and colour arrangement, making an individual and original picture in which both cultures mingle with happy effect.

From the little blue wren, which captured her fancy for her first effort, Miss Palmer has developed her talent for depicting bird-life, and especially its "domestic" aspect, with humour and sympathetic understanding. "Egrets," the winner of the 150th Anniversary Art Competition, showing two of these curious, long-shanked birds perched on a branch overhanging a mangrove swamp, is a delicate study worthy of a place in the history of the art of the colour-print in Australia. Cockatoos, hornbills, and ducks- those "beautiful comical things"-are but a few that have been "caught" to the life with deer, frogs, pouter pigeons, and other fauna that creep, run, or fly.

Landscape, too, is a field that Ethleen Palmer has tilled to good advantage. "Autumn," a lovely effect expressing the season of the year with an originality and feeling rarely seen in the realism of the colour-print, is a prize-winner of a competition held last year by the Royal Society of Arts in Adelaide.

"Granite Peaks," a delightful study of Mount Kembla, Wollongong, which is in quite a different mood, with a colourful cherry tree in bloom, was chosen by the trustees of the National Art Gallery of New South Wales as the sole example they possess of this clever young artist's work.

Branching further afield, a leading London firm of art connoisseurs wrote some time ago to Miss Palmer asking her to send them some recent examples of her colour-prints. "Having seen a newspaper article with reproductions, the illustrations strike us as being particularly attractive, and we are inclined to believe an outlet for your work can be found here." As this firm never handles colour-prints, such a tribute from overseas is another happy augury for the future.

Although Australian by adoption, Ethleen Palmer was born in South Africa, and did not settle here until in her early 'teens. A delicate baby, she left Yeoville, near Johannesburg, when eight months old. She lived in France and in different parts of England until she was nine years of age. Then she returned to her home-land. She attended the Durban Ladies' College until she came to Australia. The school motto, "Nisi Dominus Frustra" ("Without God all is vain") and the life of Lorenzo de Medici, have been Ethleen Palmer's guiding stars. A fine reproduction of Lorenzo's self-

portrait has the place of honour in her studio, and his famous saying, “In life, beauty perishes, not in art,” is her favourite quotation.

One might add, “Every obstacle yields to effort,” as Miss Palmer spares no pains to achieve her object. One artist, who confesses that three blocks superimposed is the limit of his colour-printing effort, envies Ethleen Palmer’s extravagance in this direction, as she has used as many as ten different blocks to get the effect she wanted.

The medium fascinates her because she feels that twenty-five prints of one picture bring her into contact with many more lives than if she painted one picture at a time. Thus she influences and gives pleasure to a greater number of people. Those of us who enjoy her work will heartily agree.

Many who credit themselves with the “seeing eye” and are brace enough to stand by their convictions, envisage a time when Ethleen Palmer will be known as the Hokusai of Australia. Many predictions have been made with less ground!

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Kookaburra, Kangaroo & Koala (Triptych)

1940 | Colour linocuts