

CHAPTER 1

I recall in my youth a bright lovely morning in mid May. I was leaning over the coping of one of the bridges in Florence staring moodily at the muddy Arno and feeling very lonely. The year was 1926, and I was a nineteen year old art student.

I had left London expecting to travel with two fellow students, Arthur Murch and d'Auvergne Boxall. Arthur and I had been working under Percy Jowett at the Chelsea Polytechnique; d'Auvergne was in Diploma Painting at the Slade under Professor Tonks. They decided to go to Florence via Madrid, and as I could not afford to do that they would meet me in Florence.

My train journey from Paris seemed never to end. At length, and at some deadly hour in the morning, an irritated attendant almost threw me off the train. He kept shouting: "Ici Firenze, ici, ici". I was going to Florence and had never heard of Firenze.

It was the expatriate Melbourne painter George Coates who advised us to ignore the modern movements at our stage and return to our beginnings with the Italian Primitives. So I find myself cold and hungry at 4 a.m. on a bleak railway station called Firenze.

At length came daylight and the opening of the first coffee shops. Coffee has never tasted so marvellous as it did on that early morning so long ago. After walking for an unconscionably long time I found the river at last, and a fine pensione on the Lungarno Guicciardini. The *Signora* told me she did not cater for students, but I could have a little room on the top floor cheaply and she was sure I would be comfortable.

That indeed was an understatement: it was quite wonderful. For the first time in my life a maid brought me early morning coffee in bed. The pensione was to be my home in Florence for months. The weeks went by endlessly and with nary a sign of the other two.

Eventually I had to give Arthur and Boxy away. Their unaccountable non-arrival was most disappointing.

I spent my solitary existence in the galleries. In the evenings I read the autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini and often followed his footsteps by day. Cellini

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that when a man has reached the age of forty years it behoves him to set down the events of his life. I think it was some three years later that Arthur and I together with G.W. Lambert were discussing Cellini. Arthur declared that he would write an autobiography. "Really, Mr. Murch", said Lambert smiling. "It will be quite a pamphlet!"

Arthur has not written his autobiography, at least not yet. He does require and richly deserves a Boswell. I am taking Cellini's advice in my seventy-first year. It is very odd that the name of somebody from yesterday can elude one, while the events of half a century ago can focus so sharply. The loss of short memory is a sign of old age, so it is said, or maybe advancing senility, dear me I had better hurry.

During my lonely time in Florence, I found a bookshop in which there was a volume of Kipling's Verse in English, which I purchased most gratefully. I was still a stranger in a strange land. Kipling was a terrific morale builder in Mussolini's Italy. Florence seemed a medieval city and contemporary events did not appear to ripple its placid surface. I was living in the Renaissance occasionally surfacing with Kipling. Il Duce was empire building in 1926. The international movement of the young did not exist then. If there were tourists of the conventional type about, I was unaware of them. Never far from my mind were the other two. What the devil had happened to them?

So, I am taking Benvenuto's advice. It is a story about a painter and teacher. Events prior to art student days do not really belong.

Very briefly, I was born in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, or near it in the borough of Benwell. My father's side were Midlands English and my mother's Northumbrian and Scottish.

My father was an engineer and with my mother and myself emigrated to Australia when I was a baby. The ship came via Singapore and the Torres Straits and landed us in Brisbane. After a year or so they came to Sydney.

My parents seemed to have formed the idea that I was artistic, or had a talent for drawing. I wish I knew what they really did think.

At the age of fourteen I was attending Drummoyne Intermediate High School. I remember the first day in first year High. The teacher asked: "Who wants to do Latin and French?" Three or four raised their hands, "and who wants to do Business Principles and Shorthand?" A forest of hands replied. We were told all would do Business Principles and Shorthand. Four years later I was attending an Art School in Paris.

After returning home and some twenty years of age, I met my old Headmaster in Drummoyne. "Good morning, Sir, do you remember me?" "Ah", staring hard. "Young Harvey is it not? And what are you doing my boy?" "Art, Sir." "And what is that?"

Such was the Sydney climate of the day. The East Sydney Technical College had been converted from a gaol, and was open for business in 1921. I attended evening classes for Drawing during the third term of that year. My teacher was Henry Gibbons.

One evening we were informed that an important artist would visit the class, a sort of tour of inspection. He was Mr. Sydney Ure-Smith. Years later I was to know him well ^{but} I never got round to asking what the visit was about.

Henry Gibbons persuaded my parents to allow me to take full time training. There was no better place than Julian Ashton's Sydney Art School, he assured them. The following year I left Drummoyne Intermediate High School and became an Art Student.

Neither I, nor my parents, had the vaguest idea of what lay ahead. I was a knickerbockered fifteen year old who had crossed his Rubicon.

CHAPTER 2.

A ~~new~~ strange and wonderful world had allowed me to cross its threshold. Only four other males attended the day classes, when I joined. They were Ray and Philip Lindsay, (sons of Norman), Tom Hubble and Herbert Ironside. Phil, Ironside and I were all of an age and like me, wore knickerbockers. We were classmates with some twenty or so girls, ranging in age from seventeen until well in their twenties. They were all beautiful, charming and sophisticated. I was too shy and too big a dolt to dare to speak to them.

The girls asked me my name : "What does E stand for?" "Edmund". "Oh no, we can't have that, it will get shortened to Eddie or Teddy and that would be dreadful. We will use your surname as a Christian name." So Harvey or Harv I have been ever since, even to my grandchildren.

The school was situated almost on the roof of the Queen Victoria Markets on the George Street side. The ceiling of Julian's office was the inside of one of the four cupola quartering the great central dome. The school advanced under the skylights to the next set of small domes towards the Town Hall end. Continuing along from us was a similar area so clouded in mystery and seclusion, that none of us ever found our way in. This studio housed the Society of Women Painters.

Our school contained Julian's office with its spectacular ceiling, a washing and tea making room, a very long classroom containing the Antique and a Life room. Beyond that was a store room, and beside it like a half butt, was another store room belonging to the Women Painters, presumably.

The Sydney Art School was walled in charcoal impregnated hessian. The only source of light was from the skylights.

In the Antique room the casts were a lined along the

long axis and the students and their easels opposite. Standing all day drawing the Greek and Roman figures was a backbreaking job. Although the hours were from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. with an hour for lunch, I had been accustomed to sitting down. The life room contained a huge stand on casters called a throne. There was also a dressing room. I asked Phil what went on in there. Phil replied : "The nude, of course." "What ever is that?" "Women with their clothes off." I was quite staggered and thought my leg was being pulled. "Harvey", said my sophisticated friend, "you are hopeless."

The easiest approach to the school was from the central entrance to the Queen Vic., which was a lovely columned walk through from George Street to York Street. The floor area was covered in decorative tiling, and dead centre under the great dome like a plum^b bob was a little lift in a decorative glass cage. One emerged on the second floor, turned a column, into a confined darkness, and there was a steep and narrow stairway leading to the splendour of Julian's office under the cupola. The vast and beautiful central ground floor is now occupied by the retail trade. No trace of its former glory remains.

The school had no educational curriculum. Teaching was inspirational. Certainly proportion and movement were instilled into us, and beauty of line, but we did grow up like Topsy.

Monday and Tuesday were devoted to studying still life, and the rest of the week to the Antique. One or two plaster casts of skulls were the only concession to anatomy. Julian had a very long flexible cane he would use to bend around the figure to demonstrate line and movement. The cast would remain indifferent under this treatment, though the model was inclined to wriggle. Pencil was forbidden as a medium. We worked with charcoal on Michelet paper and sought the beautiful

and expressive line. If we made a bad start we had to rub it out with a chamois, and begin again. Oddly enough tone was emphasised when drawing still life. The charcoal was sharpened like a chisel. Curtains of crumbling tone were drawn down certically, edge to edge. The pressure would be varied to give lightness or darkness. We strove to hit it straight off. Going over it would only cause muddiness.

Julian had a seemingly endless collection of pots, bottles, ginger jars and the like, and a tatty collection of drapes, which we drew and painted ad nauseum.

One day during my spell in the Antique, I knocked over a tall stand upon which was the Venus de Milo. I was even more shattered than she. In order to impress me with the need to handle casts with care, Julian made me draw another cast of the Venus every day from ten to four for the remainder of term, which incidentally had just started. I can still draw that lady from memory, at any angle. One may think wryly of the obedience of my generation compared with that of today. Students were allowed to draw from the live model only when Julian considered they had a reasonable grip on the antique. This could take a fearsomely long time. Phil Lindsay, Ironside and I could not wait, we kept sneaking into the life room until Julian got tired of throwing us out.

My first model was Peggy with the light brown hair. A thin man called Petit posed far too often. Oh, how he bored us! Another old character used to sit. He looked like *Reubens* Silenus, he was so benign, ^{but} I remember the old so and so uttering horrible oaths when he sat inadvertently on a fully loaded palette.

Julian's teaching methods could be rough at times. He would seize a drawing board from the easle, stamp out and hold

it alongside the model or the cast as the case may be, and ask the unfortunate student if he saw it like that. "Then go down on your bended knees and pray to God for better eyesight", he would retort. None the less he was a very kindly person. He had a most distinguished presence and was always dressed in a light steel grey suit. His hair and moustache were white, his eyes an icy blue. Lambert's portrait of him is incredibly like. Julian had a tremendous capacity to inspire and attract loyalty. His students were part of his family and we all adored him. Praise from the master was praise indeed.

He was assisted by three women of whom I have affectionate memories. They were Ann Dangar, Grace Crowley (whom we called Smudge) , and Karna Birmingham. Karna was somewhat dour and seemed very young to be a teacher. Smudge would stand beside me and after a prolonged silent stare at my effort would say : "Harvey dear", pause, "I feel", pause, "no, no", long pause, "I think", another pause, "Harvey," it is very naughty of me not to finish the criticism." Smudge was a dear, and like Ann and Karna always helpful. We were begged, commanded, in fact, to realize the beauty of the object we were drawing. Our job as aspiring artists was to convey that beauty to others as expressively as we were able. Our drawing aesthetic seemed to be founded upon the late Victorian and Edwardian tradition, perhaps exemplified in the decorative Edwardian bookplate. The Old Masters through the Medici Print; Anatomy, Geometric Perspective, Design, Colour Theory and the like were unknown to us.

We had our heroes. Norman Lindsay was paramount. He shocked Society with his witty and daring nudes. Norman was a romantic recluse living in the Blue Mountains and battling against "Mother Grundy". Mum Grundy was such a real person to us. She exemplified the puritan traditions of our society.

We imagined we were a chosen few who lived in Norman's Hyperborea with beautiful nudes~~se~~ women, of course, and adventuring from time to time with pirates of the Spanish Main. I am sure that part of Norman's genius lay in being able to retain the enthusiasms and dreams of youth into old age.

Norman's eldest son, Jack, together with Hugh McCrae, Ken Slessor and others brought out a literary magazine which they called "Vision". It was illustrated by Norman and we were all so proud to be associated with it. Alas, it did not last long.

Julian's son, Howard, was the editor of the Evening Sun at the time, and ^{the old man was} somewhat bemused at these literary goings on. Ray, Phil and I met him one afternoon in Martin Place. "What's that book there?", he asked of Ray. "Rabelais, Mr. Ashton." "Ah, when you are my age you will find there are only three books worth reading, Raymond. They are Shakespeare, the Bible and Bunyan's Pilgrims Progress."

The yearly exhibition of the Society of Artists was a big event in our lives. All the Sydney members had been associated with the school. Even the great and exciting C.W. Lambert. At these times I found myself a fetcher and carrier of pictures for the judging committee.

One day Julian brought to the School a painting of a head by Hugh Ramsay. The portrait seemed to be what painting was all about. The Old Masters did not relate to our world, and the Impressionists were unknown. I never heard them discussed.

About this time Lyndon Dadswell joined the School. He was wearing short trousers. Lyndon did not stay with us for long. He left to study sculpture under Raynor Hoff, who was then very new in the town.

At Julian's, staff and students lunched together at a very long table with an enormous teapot in the middle. Julian

sat at the head flanked by his assistant teachers and senior girls. The males were at the bottom end. The old man would talk about painting from the viewpoint of his own day, not the Impressionists, but the Victorians. He loved to reminisce, knowing this Phil would say : "Tell us about Ned Kelly, Mr. Ashton." Most readily Julian would embark upon the story.

A newspaper^{had} sent him to Victoria to draw this "low fellow". Kelly refused to pose, so his arms were bound and his head held firmly in a lock while Julian busily sketched.

Sometimes when we could separate the Master from his adoring girl students, usually after four o'clock, we would ask him about^{his} painting^{of} Sir Henry Parkes. Stories of the Premier were much more rewarding. Julian would chuckle wickedly. The old man had a first floor studio in King St., stairs led directly from the pavement. One morning he was half an hour late for his appointment. He apologised for keeping the Premier waiting. It was, of course, the fault of the ferry master. "That's all right Ashton", said Parkes, "On every tram that went by, the conductor jerked his thumb at me and said 'There's the old bastard'".

On another occasion Julian remonstrated with him for trying to push some legislation that could be politically dangerous. "Aren't you being a reckless old cock?" "Eh, oh, I suppose so Ashton", replied Parkes. "Better than being a cockless old wreck."

About the time we listened to these stories I am almost sure Ned Kelly's mother died in Chippendale or thereabouts.

Julian had a bottomless well of stories. There was one about a group of artists, including himself, who were invited to a "do" at Government House. I think His Excellency was Lord Beauchamp. They were ushered in via the servant's entrance. Apparently artists were strictly "downstairs".

It is difficult to realize how isolated Australia was in those days, ^{before} The first world war shocked Australians out of it

Those left at home became often tragically aware of Egypt, Gallipoli, Flanders and exotic places other than the British Isles.

The Sydney Metropolitan area was largely gas lit. People stared upwards at the rare sight of an aeroplane. Very few people owned cars. Trams transported us all from here to there. The famous Bondi Bellview Hill line followed the tracks of the old bullock teams, so it was said. Bullocks could be trusted to pick the safe and easy way. A steam tram still ran to Kogarah from Sans Souci I think. If you were to ask a person in Drummoyne where Wahroonga ~~was~~ chances are he would not have the vaguest idea. On fine days I would alight from the tram at Harris Street and walk across Pyrmont Bridge. From there the great dome of the Queen Vic. dominated the Sydney skyline.

To-day one has to look hard to find it. Sussex St. was always choked with horse-drawn traffic, especially with the big waggons and their Clydesdales. The pungent but not unpleasant smell of horse dung assailed one's nostrils.

Every few weeks or so a tall barque would be lying at the wharf at Darling Harbour. I think the "Parmir" was the last of the Cape Horners to visit us. It must have been in 1945, because I took my infant son on board to inspect.

One afternoon in those early twenties there was a full eclipse of the sun taking place in mid afternoon. Julian was given permission to take the students to the walkway round the great dome of the Queen Vic Bld. to observe this historic event. I was more interested to see the grandstand view of the city thus presented.