

Intelligentsia: Louis Kahan's portraits of writers

This exhibition brings together Louis Kahan's remarkable portraits of writers, created for the journal *Meanjin*. They provide a rich microcosm of Australian intellectual life from 1955 to 1974, depicting many of the key thinkers of the day who opened up the modern world of ideas to local Australian culture.

Kahan's inclusive vision was ideally suited to interpreting this array of talent and intellect, including writers from the right and left of politics, early female authors, scholars of subjects obscure, refined and pioneering, edgy cultural commentators, international novelists and speculative poets. Through Kahan's uncanny ability to capture likeness, this exhibition recreates the intensity and verve that animated these minds.

Trained as a tailor in his birthplace Vienna, Kahan worked for the couturier Paul Poiret, and as a theatre set designer in Paris in the 1920s where he encountered first hand the work of Picasso, Matisse and the School of Paris. With the outbreak of war he joined the French Foreign Legion and, after demobilisation, began his life as an artist in North Africa. After travel in the United States, he moved to Perth in 1947 where he was reunited with his family, had his first solo exhibition and began to gain recognition from the art world. In 1950 he moved to Melbourne where his talent for portraiture was recognised by the *Melbourne Herald* art critic Alan McCulloch, who introduced him to Clem Christesen, editor of *Meanjin*. On a return trip to Perth in 1953 he met and married Lily.

Kahan's prodigious capacity for swift summation of the human face was honed in an unusual training ground: the hospitals for wounded soldiers in Oran, Algeria, where he donated his time and talent to the Red Cross, producing over 2000 portraits of soldiers which they sent back to their families.

The majority of Kahan's portraits were drawn from life, often in his own home studio. Occasionally, however, he was compelled to work from photographs or even from television, grasping the essentials of a face with minimum input. His contribution to Australian cultural life was recognised when he was made an Officer in the Order of Australia (AO) in 1993.

Guest curator: Dr Vivien Gaston

Meanjin

Kahan's portraits were commissioned for the provocative literary and cultural journal *Meanjin* by its founding editor Clem Christesen. It provided a ready network for writers and a platform for new writing, a resource for innovative ideas and a forum for debate at a time when the media in Australia was at a rudimentary stage. It exerted considerable power; at its twenty-first anniversary dinner Arthur Calwell, leader of the opposition Labor Party, gave a speech and prime minister Robert Menzies sent a telegram. Contributors to *Meanjin* represent a who's who of Australian writing. Since 1945 the journal has been supported by the University of Melbourne and in 2008 it became an imprint of Melbourne University Publishing.

Kahan's portraits and their prominent place in the journal, next to the subject's writing or a review of their work, are an unabashed tribute to their subjects and their intellectual and creative achievement. While subsequent critics, influenced by theories that diminish the importance of the author, might disparage this elevation of individual identity, in retrospect the effect of these portraits is to illustrate the personal engagement involved in keeping the journal alive.

The exhibition pays homage to this spirit of independence that has motivated and guided the journal. In the first foreword of *Meanjin*, Christmas 1940, Clem Christesen wrote:

... at a time of war and transition, we still strive to 'talk poetry' ...

Literature and art, poetry and drama do not spring into being at the word of command. Their life is a continuous process growing within itself, and its suppression is death ...

Few of the drawings exhibited here were inscribed with their date. These have been estimated in relation to personal recollections of the subjects or the artist's wife, Lily, or from the date of publication or the date of commission and delivery of the drawing, as recorded in correspondence with Clem Christesen. A small number of these drawings were commissioned but not published. Where possible the date and volume number of *Meanjin* is provided.

Louis Kahan, Clem Christesen and *Meanjin*

Kahan's portrait of his patron, Clem Christesen, head resting on his hand with cigarette, book and glasses, is both determined and contemplative, almost melancholy. There is a remarkable comparison with Van Gogh's portrait of his doctor Dr Gachet. By contrast, *Meanjin's* second editor, Jim Davidson, who took over in 1974, is portrayed as gently benevolent. This group of drawings also includes some of the wider field of experts who contributed to *Meanjin*: Asian studies expert CP Fitzgerald; politician, diplomat and academic Neal Blewett; agricultural chemist Geoffrey Leeper; and geographer, geologist and writer Marcel Aurousseau.

As editor of *Meanjin*, Clem Christesen was supported by his wife Nina who founded the Russian Department at the University of Melbourne. Kahan's portrait of Nina depicted next to Professor R Douglas (Pansy) Wright, is one of several group portraits drawn at *Meanjin's* twenty-first anniversary dinner in 1961 when the artist wove through the crowd recording the lively interactions of guests such as professor of English Ian R Maxwell, eminent art historian Dr Ursula Hoff, Labor leader Arthur Calwell and writer Frank Dalby Davison. In another, Christesen darts a glance at *Overland* editor Stephen Murray-Smith with literary historian HM Green in the background. Kahan relished the aesthetic possibilities of the occasion's collegiality, commenting: 'A chance group—so often its members complement minds while their bodies compose a study for the artist.'

This exhibition demonstrates the creative interaction of literature and the visual arts. Besides Kahan's drawings, which gave a distinctive graphic quality to the *Meanjin* volumes, sketches, prints and paintings were integral to its broader cultural purpose and included work by Aboriginal artists, and artists and designers such as Arthur Boyd, Roger Kemp and Douglas Annand.

Kahan's portraits had a crucial role in depicting the diversity of intellectuals embraced by the journal. Lively and seemingly spontaneous, his portraits of contributors often occupy a full page and are positioned next to the text, bringing the speaking voice and its ideas to life. With Kahan's inspired contributions over twenty-five years, *Meanjin* became, in Geoffrey Blainey's words, 'an illuminating mirror of Australian cultural life'.

Portraits of academics

The subjects of Kahan's portraits for *Meanjin* are amongst the most significant, vocal and controversial of Australian intellectuals and reflect the editor's commitment to diversity of opinion.

Manning Clark was the controversial author of the epic six-volume general *History of Australia* published between 1962 and 1987, criticised by conservatives for its declamatory rhetoric. In Kahan's memorable portrayal he is aloof and enigmatic. Clark addresses the viewer with sombre deliberation, the lines in his forehead converging on the furrow between the eyebrows, a sign of concentrated thought since ancient portraiture.

By contrast, the face of maverick historian Geoffrey Blainey, author of the influential *Tyranny of distance: how distance shaped Australia's history*, is open, engaged and curious. Modelled with incisive angular lines, the drawing demonstrates Kahan's incubation in the quasi-abstraction of post-cubist artistic circles. Blainey mused after sitting for Kahan: 'When I left I had a slight feeling that I had been X-rayed'.

Typically of the time, three of the academics are smoking. T Inglis Moore, writer, literary historian and indefatigable advocate for Australian literature, and Ian Maxwell, professor of English and expert in Old Norse, clutch their pipes as essential aids to thinking. The scholar of French literature AR Chisholm nervously gestures with a cigarette in hand, while a wild flurry of lines around his head evokes a frenetic intellectual force.

Despite his remarkable ability to capture the distinct individuality of his subjects, Kahan's portraits never verge on caricature. He always moderated his feel for expressive forms with observation of subtle detail. Commenting on the striking appearance of AA Phillips, critic and inventor of the phrase 'cultural cringe', Kahan wrote: 'A crowded literary party; here there is this remarkable profile, nose and chin trying to meet. My pen couldn't resist them'.

The exhibition also includes four of Kahan's painted portraits of academics, providing another dimension of his contribution to the cultural life of the University of Melbourne. His use of vigorous brushwork and rich colour are evident in depictions of Sir George W Paton, vice-chancellor 1951–68, Prof. Zelman Cowen, dean of the Faculty of Law 1951–66, Prof. Victor M Trikojus, head of the School of Biochemistry 1943–68, and Warwick Eunson, principal of Melbourne Teachers' College 1962–72.

Portraits of poets

Kahan's forte was to depict the creative mind at work. This is especially apparent in his portraits of the poets, established, mid-career and upcoming, who chose to publish in *Meanjin*. Instead of a static record, his pen and ink lines fly and coalesce around nodal points in the face, correlating with the workings of the active mind within; the poet's synthesis of free, disparate thoughts at high velocity.

AD Hope's long prophet-like face matches the oracular cadence of his poetry with its mythic themes and, for the 1950s, provocative sensuality. Described by Clive James as 'the leading poet of his day', he was also known as 'the antipodean Augustan' and was a scathing critic of unstructured modernism. With T Inglis Moore (see portraits of academics), he introduced the first degree course in Australian literature as professor of English at the Australian National University.

Kahan's depictions of the poets Kenneth Slessor, who John Tranter calls 'our first strong modern poet', and Douglas Stewart, literary editor of *The Bulletin* for twenty years, focus on the individual at work, cigarette casually hanging from mouth, engrossed in reading. The sketch of Judith Wright, one of Australia's most eminent female poets, is an incisive heroic profile recording the active persona underlying her poetry with its commitment to environmental and indigenous land rights issues and frank openness regarding relations between men and women.

Kahan's emphasis on the active life of his subjects is just as evident in his depiction of the legendary Dame Mary Gilmore who evinces vital determination, eyes fixed on a vision beyond, despite her aged stiffly folded hands. This empathetic drawing can be compared with the imperious theatricality of William Dobell's portrait of Gilmore in 1957 entered in the Archibald competition and with Kahan's own more reflective portrait of Gilmore painted in 1960.

After sitting for her portrait, the poet Fay Zwicky responded with an evocation of Kahan's method of working:

**it seemed an easy thing to do, to sit
and let the master work his miracle,
humming away over black pots and nibs,
the sunny room, the light, the harmless ease of it.**

Excerpt from *Portrait*, 1992

Portraits of writers

Among Kahan's subjects were luminaries of Australian literature, including Patrick White, Christina Stead, Miles Franklin and Alan Marshall. Avoiding simple idealisation, Kahan created images that reveal the psychology of his sitters as well as contributing to their mythic stature.

His frontal depiction of the novelist Patrick White floats like an icon on the page with a mesmerising stare and ruminating mouth, aptly illustrating Kahan's reponse to 'those unforgettable, unforgetting seer's eyes, looking through, and beyond ...' This sketch laid the basis for his depiction of the writer that won the Archibald Prize in 1962, a work that intensifies the emphasis on prophetic vision, a 'behind-the-scenes Voss' as Alan McCulloch put it, surrounding the head with a turbulent sky and desolate landscape.

Equally powerful is his semi-abstract depiction of Katharine Susannah Prichard, whose evocative novels of Australian country working life attracted national and international recognition. Active as a journalist, she helped found the Communist Party of Western Australia in the 1920s and remained committed in her political causes, campaigning for the peace movement and social justice. Kahan captures her steadfastness in a face of monumental structure, the eye socket a bony crevice, the hands a supportive plinth for the head.

Kahan's depictions anticipate recent analysis of the facial 'micro-expressions' that indicate personality. The face with its numerous working muscles is a complex arena of forces. Rather than expressing one emotion or attitude at a time, there can be several. His depiction of Kylie Tennant, whose novels portray life in the Depression, combines judiciously narrowed eyes, empathetic smile, and assertively clasped hands.

Kahan's particular skills in creating a convincing likeness out of scant information were especially useful for providing *Meanjin* with representations of international writers, whose work was published or reviewed in the journal. The depictions of James Joyce and Alexander Solzhenitsyn hold their own in sparkle and liveliness against those based on first-hand experience of their subjects.