



Lady Cruthers giving a talk on women's art in New York in about 1987, reading from Janine Burke's book *Australian women artists 1840-1940*.



Joy Hester, *Girl in a corner*, 1957, Chinese ink and watercolour, 63.5 x 50.8cm. Collection: Cruthers Collection of Women's Art at the University of Western Australia

Lady Sheila Cruthers (1925-2011)

JOHN CRUTHERS

Lady Sheila Cruthers (Mum) was the youngest of nine children born to Giovanni and Camilla Della Vedova. Her father died when she was five and Camilla moved the family to Perth, where she ran a boarding house. Mum attended school at St Joseph's Convent in Victoria Square as a boarder. When Mum was eight Camilla ran out of money, and Mum was shunted around the family and family friends in the country. She returned to do grade 7 at Perth Girl's School, where she was dux. But Camilla would not let her continue at school, insisting she learn shorthand and typing. She became a legal secretary in 1939, eventually working for Laurie Jackson, later Judge and Chief Justice Sir Lawrence Jackson, at Jackson McDonald.

During the war years Perth was flooded with American servicemen. Attractive and outgoing, Mum loved dancing and was engaged twice to US servicemen. But when she met Jim Cruthers late in 1945, she knew she'd found her life partner. Being a man, Dad took longer to realise they were made for each other, and they

did not marry until 1950. I was born in 1953 and they moved into their first home in Como shortly after the birth of Sue in 1957.

Mum was a natural homemaker. As Dad forged his career as a journalist and newspaper editor, Mum looked after us and everything else on the home front. After Dad started TVW Channel 7 in 1959, Mum began to travel overseas with him and entertained a steady stream of visiting politicians, sportsmen and television people. Over this period I remember a happy, loving and secure home environment, with fantastic holidays at my Auntie Nina's farm at Yarloop at Easter, Horrocks Beack in August, and Rottneest in summer.

In the early 1970s, inspired by my enthusiasm, Mum became interested in Australian art. In 1975 she bought her first paintings, self-portraits by Kate O'Connor and Elise Blumann. Little did she know that women's art was to become her life's passion.

In 1981 came a turning point. Dad left TVW and shortly after was knighted for his services to television and the community. Sheila became Lady Sheila. Within months they

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Shirley Purdie
Etching and drawing
silkscreen
Reproduced courtesy of Shirley Purdie

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Free entry
Open daily
10am–5pm
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Guided tours
Saturday from 2pm



This exhibition is supported by the National Collecting Institutions Touring and Outreach Program, an Australian Government program aiming to improve access to the national collections for all Australians.

Sponsored in Geelong by the William Angliss (Victoria) Charitable Fund.

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accepted a job with Rupert Murdoch in the US. One of the provisos mum had for accepting the posting was that she be allowed to bring some of her Australian art to New York. Rupert agreed, and so began the next stage of their life.

New York was really the highpoint of Mum's life. She was ready for all the challenges it threw at her – meeting new people, many of them high-fliers, fitting into a new culture and making a home in one of the world's biggest and toughest cities. Even shopping was a challenge – she needed to tip eight different people just to get the weekly groceries home.

Once she'd settled into her apartment in Trump Tower, she got to work promoting Australian art in the Big Apple. Her major project was Aust Art, a group of Australian women that conducted charity events and donated the funds to American museums for the purchase of Australian art. Later she loaned her collection for exhibition in two American art museums. Her support of art was also personal. She befriended many young artists visiting the US and helped where she could by commissioning and buying their art and promoting their work.

In 1989 Mum and Dad returned to Perth. They moved into a house in Bird Street, Mosman Park, which they renovated twice to accommodate their rapidly expanding art collection. Mum missed New York terribly, but there was lots of travel as Dad was still on News Corporation boards, and they also visited their many friends overseas.

She also threw herself into the local art scene, befriending artists and gallerists, commissioning art and serving on various art collection boards of management. In 1995 she agreed to display her women's art at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, as part of the *National Women's Art Exhibition*. Seeing all the works exhibited together was a revelation. We decided to collect only women's art from that point, and the Cruthers Collection of Women's Art was born.

After seeing the exhibition *Modern Australian Women 1925-1945* at the Art Gallery of South Australia, we decided our collection was strong enough to justify being kept together. A long period of negotiation began with the University of Western Australia, resulting in the gifting of the entire collection in 2007. At the university it would be made available to researchers, curators, art historians and students, and part of it would be on permanent display. She and Dad also set up a foundation to support the collection at UWA.

I remember the announcement of the gift, at the university's Laurence Wilson Art Gallery in March 2008, as being one of the

happiest events in Mum's life. She knew what she had achieved, and she was delighted. Unfortunately, by 2008 there were not many other happy events in her life. She and Dad had moved out of Bird Street in 2006, into a retirement apartment. Late in 2008 Mum had two bad falls and six weeks recovery in hospital. It was clear she needed a high level of care, and she and Dad moved into the Peter Arney Home just before Christmas in 2008.

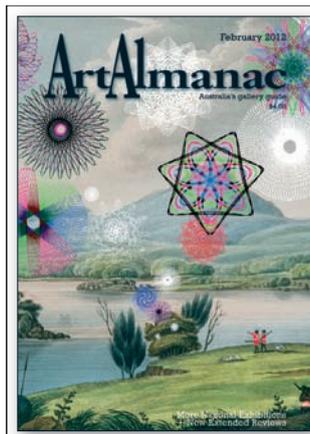
The three years at Peter Arney were tough for Mum. She never regained the ability to walk. Later she lost the ability to talk. Finally, she began to have trouble swallowing. But even when things were at their worst, she still had a smile for us or her carers, and used her index finger with the same decisiveness she had once used her voice. She faced her situation as she faced her passing, with courage and grace.

How do you sum up a life in a few words? When I was younger, I wondered what Mum would have achieved if she'd had the chance to go to high school and university like Sue and I. But that's not the point. Mum's Italian heritage and her family's struggles in the Depression shaped her much more effectively than formal education. And what she managed to achieve was truly remarkable – the example she set for Sue and I, her unquestioning and selfless support to Dad in his career, and the enthusiasm she directed to generations of women artists.

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The first major exhibition of the Cruthers Collection of Women's Art at The University of Western Australian will be held at the Laurence Wilson Art Gallery, Perth, 19 October to 14 December 2012. Accompanying the exhibition will be a symposium on women's art at UWA, 20-21 October.

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This article is an edited version of the eulogy delivered by John Cruthers at Karrakatta Cemetery, Perth, 9 January 2012. The first major exhibition of the *Cruthers Collection of Women's Art* at The University of Western Australian will be held at the Laurence Wilson Art Gallery, Perth, 19 October to 14 December 2012. Accompanying the exhibition will be a symposium on women's art at UWA, 20 to 21 October.

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John Cruthers is a consultant, curator and collector who has written widely on private collecting. He is curatorial advisor of the Cruthers Collection of Women's Art at The University of Western Australia.



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