



Sir James and Lady Cruthers with their collection of works by women artists.

Eclectic collection is a family passion

By **RON BANKS**

PAINTINGS and prints cover the walls and almost every other surface at Sir James and Lady Sheila Cruthers' home in suburban Perth.

The sheer eclecticism of the collection as it glows and shimmers on the walls is almost overwhelming in its intensity.

The art works flow up the stairwell and down to the garage, with those that cannot be contained on the walls put in storage, to be brought out if space permits.

There are probably few private homes in Perth that can match the energy and exuberance of the collection, which ranges from late 19th-century portraits to contemporary works by Australian and New York artists.

There are works by winners of the Moët & Chandon prize in the dining room jostling with portraits of well-known WA artists, a Nolan sharing space with younger, lesser-known artists and Aboriginal art in the stairwell.

Downstairs, a huge mural by a young Fremantle artist covers one wall of the garage, which has long since given up its function of housing the family car.

Sir James and Lady Cruthers

began the collection 20 years ago under the encouraging eye of their son John, then an English student at the University of WA who developed his own passion for art.

He took his parents, who had until then not shown more than average interest in art, on collecting tours of WA galleries.

Building the collection gradually became a family passion, with each member extending the others' taste in the ever-widening search for art.

It became even more international in the 1980s when Sir James, after retiring from Channel 7 where he had been both general manager of the station and chairman of the board, was invited by Rupert Murdoch to join him in New York as personal assistant.

Instead of a quiet retirement, Sir James found himself commuting weekly between New York and London in charge of the Murdoch empire's new Sky satellite television operations being set up in Europe.

The couple's New York apartment soon filled with paintings too; some brought with them from Perth, others bought from the young New York artists they befriended. Their home also became a haven for Australian artists passing through New York.

Back home again after seven years, Sir James and Lady Sheila have continued their passion for collecting.

For the first time, from tonight, the public will have the chance to see some of the Cruthers collection when more than 160 of their paintings by women artists go on show at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts under the title *In the Company of Women*.

The exhibition, curated by John Cruthers, is part of a nationwide celebration of women artists timed to coincide with the 20th anniversary of the first International Women's Day.

Over the next four weeks, hundreds of galleries around Australia will mount similar celebratory exhibitions concentrating on women artists.

The Cruthers collection, however, has never concentrated exclusively on women.

Lady Sheila says there was never any conscious decision to seek out women artists, but the collection grew in that direction.

The oldest painting in the Cruthers collection to go on show at PICA is an 1890 self-portrait by Christina Asquith-Baker, a member of Melbourne's Heidelberg school.

There are also self-portraits by well-known artists of the 30s and 40s such as Kathleen O'Connor,

Elise Blurmann, Grace Cossington-Smith, Joy Hester and Margaret Preston.

The Cruthers often found that they would buy a female self-portrait first, and become so attached to it they would buy other works by the artist to complement the portrait.

There are contemporary portraits too by WA artists such as Mary Moore and Angela Stewart, and eastern States artists Vicki Vavareos and Vivienne Shark-Le Witt — sharp, often fierce little self-images that reveal more about the artist's character than the more conservative portraits from earlier eras.

The range is further extended by such works as Canberra artist Rosalie Gascoigne's assemblages, former Moët & Chandon prize-winner Elizabeth Kruger's three-panel drawing room scene and feminist prints by Adelaide artist Ann Newmarch.

The Cruthers collection may be a personal statement but its scope confirms that women have always played an important — if sometimes neglected — role in the development of Western art, with the 70s women's movement increasing the momentum. ● *In the Company of Women* runs until March 12. Entry is free. PICA gallery hours are 11am to 6pm, Tuesday to Sunday.