

Remembering Lloyd Rees

by Edward Duyker

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the death of the beloved Australian artist Lloyd Rees. His remarkable 41-year teaching association with the Faculty of Architecture, at the University of Sydney, left an enduring legacy, not simply through the aesthetic and humanistic sensibilities of generations of architecture students that he nurtured, but through works of art that remain part of the University's permanent collection.

Early Life

Although he is so intimately associated with Sydney, Lloyd Frederic Rees was born in Brisbane on St Patrick's Day, 1895. He was drawn to architecture from an early age and in 1910 studied art, among other subjects, at Brisbane's Central Technical College. When his scholarship was not renewed, Rees found employment in an insurance office and then with the Union Bank of Australia. Nevertheless he continued to draw and earned extra money by creating a series of postcards featuring sketches of Brisbane's landmarks. These included many government buildings and St John's Cathedral, with its stone-vaulted ceiling, which he had seen built from its foundations. He also produced a set of postcards of Women's College at the University of Queensland and sketched newly-built St Brigid's Church, Red Hill – designed by Robin Dods and inspired by the Romanesque and Gothic elements of St Cecile's Cathedral, Albi. During the WW1, he helped raise money for wounded soldiers by organising concerts in Brisbane and providing program illustrations, often based on architectural subjects, such as Louvain Cathedral, Reims Cathedral, Heliopolis and Constantinople. His passion for architecture led him to imagine Brisbane as an ideal city with a riverside drive and other features, which he sketched.

In May 1917, Lloyd Rees settled in Sydney with his sister Amy, after gaining employment as a commercial artist with the firm of Smith & Julius on a salary of £4 per week. It was there he met fellow artist Roland Wakelin (1887-1971), who would become his dearest friend and who would also later teach at the University of Sydney. Initially Rees was set to work on the account of Beard Watson, a company which sold interior furnishings and carpets, but that account was lost shortly after he arrived. So Sydney Ure Smith (1887-1949), co-founder of Smith & Julius, set the talented young artist to work sketching Sydney for advertisements published in their new magazine *Art in Australia*. Smith & Julius also commissioned the book *Sydney University Drawings by Lloyd Rees* published in 1922. In the same year, Rees proposed to the sculptor Daphne Mayo (1895-1982), whom he had first met as a student in Brisbane; they spent time together during his visit to Europe in 1923-24, but Daphne broke off their engagement in 1925. Arriving back in Sydney, Rees did not return to work with Smith & Julius, however, he did continue to do part-time commercial art for Farmers Department Store.

The following year he married Dulcie Metcalfe, a teacher at Parramatta High School. Tragically, she died of septicaemia in October 1927, shortly after giving birth to a still-born child. A sensitive man, Rees was already prone to depression; the loss of his wife and baby affected him so deeply that he had a nervous breakdown and for a time was unable to work. In 1931, however, he married Dulcie's teaching colleague and closest friend, Marjory Pollard. Marjory had been profoundly supportive of Rees during his illness. Her income as a teacher also helped him survive as an artist and she became the mother of his only son Alan. They were married for 57 years.

Lloyd Rees' formal association with the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Sydney did not begin until 1946, although he already knew Leslie Wilkinson (1882-1973), foundation Professor of Architecture and William Hardy Wilson (1881-1955), author of *Old Colonial Architecture of New South Wales and Tasmania*. The relationship with the University would prove to be a life-changing experience. With the end of WW2, there was a great influx of CRTS (Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme) students – mainly ex-servicemen who began university after being discharged from the military – and the Faculty of Architecture required an additional tutor for its burgeoning art classes. Leslie Wilkinson had long admired Rees's architectural drawings and so too did Norman Carter (1875-1963), head of the faculty's Art Department. Carter, a conservative Anglican, was politically and philosophically at odds with Rees, a life-long socialist and agnostic. Carter's artistic work was also strongly realist in style, but the two were firm friends. Lloyd himself would later write: "I have always honoured Norman Carter for his bigness and broad-mindedness in this matter." It was Carter who employed Rees as a part-time tutor.

When he joined the faculty, the Art Department was located in a long attic studio on the top floor of the then unfinished west tower of the main quadrangle. Rees remembered Prof Wilkinson as a "tall, majestic figure" who would ascend the stairs and "blow in like a southerly buster, scattering complacency and twisted thinking like the wind among the leaves." Rees always regretted the faculty's move across City Road into Darlington and the break with what he called the "heart of the university". However, he never regretted his contact with young minds which he found a constant challenge and he particularly

Max Dupain
Lloyd Rees in the studio 1979. Silver gelatine photograph
Gift of Diana Dupain
1996. The University of Sydney Art Collection.
UA1997.27

appreciated the democratic ethos of students who would meet him on “an equal level” impossible during his own deferential Victorian upbringing. Some of his distinguished students, including Rick Leplastrier and Joan Domicelj (née Phillips), would become enduring friends. Another, art critic and historian Robert Hughes, who began architecture at the University of Sydney in 1957, wrote in his memoir *Things I didn't Know*, that Rees’s “tolerance was wide and loving and I feel I owe him part of my life.” He went on to record a conversation about a bridge on a ravine at Pitigliano in Italy. Hughes recalled that “every fibre” in him yearned to see it, that years later he did and that perhaps his “expatriation from Australia truly began, with Lloyd, on that imagined bridge”.

Rees’s university appointment was also personally life-changing; it gave him financial security and the time to paint. In his autobiography, *Peaks & Valleys*, he summarised the personal significance of the relationship as follows:

It was not only that it enabled me to give up commercial art as my regular source of income but it meant that my intuitive love of architecture, which led to quite an amount of knowledge of it, found a field of experience that I could not have attained in any other institution in Sydney. The conditions for teaching art and the carrying on of one’s own work at the same time were in my opinion, almost ideal ... Even with the influx of post-war students, I never taught more than three days a week and thus had time for my own painting. The three vacations, especially the long one at the end of the year, made it possible for me to approach painting in the same spirit in which I had approached my pencil drawings in the late twenties and early thirties – “the work was everything and the sale thereof was of no importance”. Whatever my present standard may be, the foundations began with this University appointment.

Rees weathered many changes to the academic staff and curriculum of the Faculty of Architecture. While some saw his lectures in art and aesthetics as anachronistic to architectural “science”, he enjoyed fierce loyalty from his students. During the heightened activism of the early 1970s, rumoured threats to his position were met with rumours and rumblings of a threatened student strike. Rees stayed on. Even when he landed ostensibly unpopular hours on the timetable, he continued to lecture with “standing room only” for the entire course. A few months after Rees’s death, Ian Sinclair reminisced in Federal Parliament: “He was a person of rare personal distinction and one whom those of us from other faculties used occasionally to sneak in and listen to, simply because of his reputation.” (House of Reps., Hansard 28.2.1989). These lectures and their magnetic quality still have legendary status on campus to this day. Rees left his mark on campus in other ways. Many will be familiar with the two figures, one male and one female, on each side of the entrance to the Great Hall. It was Rees who commissioned and paid Tom Bass (born 1916) to sculpt them for the niches that architect Edmund Blackett had left empty. They were unveiled with great fanfare in 1984.



The French Connection

From the age of eight or nine Lloyd Rees had memorised the map of Paris and its principal boulevards and monuments. In Brisbane, in January 1913, he had also purchased a book by Samuel Bensusan (1872-1958) containing photographs of the French capital which inspired him to sketch Notre Dame, L'Opéra and other major buildings from its pages. His mother, Angèle Burguez (1865-1945), was Mauritian-born of French and Cornish descent and his father Edward Owen Rees (1856-1932) was of Welsh descent. But for Lloyd, French culture and his sense of a personal French heritage (which he sometimes imagined back to the artists of the Lascaux Caves 17,000 years before!) profoundly influenced his development as an artist. In November 1984 he told me that his father had pushed the "Welsh side", but "all things French" affected him and "Mauritius, as such, was the link" to his French heritage. Despite his anti-militarism and his strong democratic beliefs, from childhood he had a fascination with the life of Napoleon. He would first see France in 1923, executing many architectural and landscape sketches. Alas, his first Paris sketchbook was lost on a London bus. Unable to return until 1953, his "rediscovery of Paris", according to Hendrik Kolenberg, author of *Lloyd Rees in Europe*, "was ... doubly significant to him. He again dwelt lovingly on the city's distinctive features, its architecture, streets and parks, and captured the splendour and vivacity of Paris". In March 1953 Rees also made his first visit to Chartres. He returned in 1959 and 1966; and in 1973 spent five days doing pen and watercolour sketches inside the cathedral, later developed with oil, pastel and pen in Australia. A number of these works, part of the University of Sydney's collection, formed the basis for a remarkable exhibition in the University Art Gallery between 25 August and 4 November 2007. According to Senior Curator Louise Tegart:

In many ways Rees was a painter steeped in the Romantic tradition, he pursued a singular vision depicting the spiritual in the landscape. He didn't adopt Modernism as many of his contemporaries did, and as a result, his focus over a lifetime made him at odds with other artists who pursued new fashions ... The Cathedral works are hallucinatory images tinged with nostalgia where light is used as symbolism; of the human spirit and the mystery of nature.

Later Life

Aside from France, Rees visited the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, Greece and Malta – inevitably distilling his experiences on paper in meticulous descriptive statements of light and shade. (Since 1995, his son Alan and daughter-in-law Jancis Rees have donated 19 of his remarkable sketchbooks, containing some 700 drawings, to the Art Gallery of New South Wales.) During his lifetime he gained great critical respect for his work. In November 1969, Brett Whiteley described him as the "Cezanne of the emerging new Romanticism". In the same year, James Gleeson declared, in his *Masterpieces of Australian Painting*, that Rees had "painted some of the most eloquent and stylish landscapes ever produced in this country." And

historian Manning Clark wrote that Lloyd Rees had "won for himself a niche in the pantheon of Australian immortals." Aside from his work as an artist and teacher, Rees was the author two autobiographical volumes; he was also a Member of the National Advisory Committee for UNESCO and President of the Society of Artists. In 1962 he was elected Dean of the Faculty of Architecture – an extraordinary honour for "a part-time lecturer in art without a definite appointment", as one faculty member later put it. In a letter to Daphne Mayo, Rees recorded the circumstances and the manner in which he organised his time:

My week is rather happily regulated with the University taking all Tuesday, Wednesday and half Thursday thus leaving four clear days for my painting & which I try to keep clear. A complication has been my election as Dean of the Faculty of Architecture, whilst Professor Ashworth is in Europe, but with rather amazing good fortune nearly all my duties have come within the Tuesday-Thursday period.

Rees served his term with distinction, thoroughness and courtesy. In 1970, the Fifth Year Report from the architecture students, themselves, is perhaps the best testimony of the affection he had earned:

Mr Rees is a born teacher above the sentimentality that surrounds any description of him as a person. He has had the respect of every student that has passed through his hands simply because he can empathise with students, knows and loves his students, has a personal view, yet will judge any work of art on its merit (eg there is probably no one in the school better able to judge the art content of the present hard edge painting and sculpture yet his personal attitude to art is antithetical to hard-edge) ...

In the same year Rees very proudly received an Honorary Doctor of Letters from the University of Sydney. In 1984 the University of Tasmania followed suit. On both occasions the graduating students spontaneously rose and applauded him – something which frequently occurred at the end of his classes too. Although a very modest man, he loved to be addressed as "Dr Rees". But this was very much a reflection of the personal importance the award had for him. Rees won many prestigious art prizes (including the Wynne Prize for landscape twice) and was made a Companion of St Michael and St George in 1978 and a Companion of the General Division of the Order of Australia in 1985. In November 1988 he was included in the Australian Bicentennial Authority's list of the "Two Hundred People who made Australia Great."

I will never forget my very first meeting with Lloyd Rees. Although I had rung him in advance, he had forgotten our appointment and seemed annoyed at the interruption to his work. But in seconds his demeanor changed. I was accompanied by my brother Francis and my Mauritian-born mother Maryse (the daughter of his second cousin). When my mother introduced herself in the same lilting accent as his own mother, he melted. Our planned brief visit turned into an extraordinary unplanned half-day of tea, scones and seemingly endless reminiscence and

philosophical discussion. In the next four years we exchanged letters, met at book launchings, exhibitions, at his Italianate villa-home of half a century in Northwood and at the University (where my wife Susan was one of his students in his second last year of teaching). At his home, our sons (then toddlers) sometimes tried his patience by exploring between canvases leaning against the walls and de-tuning his wireless from the sacred frequency of ABC Radio National, but his good humour rarely flagged. At a time when he struggled to care for his increasingly frail wife, Marjory, and his failing eyes surveyed the world through a milky haze, he continued to produce amazingly ethereal testaments to light and beauty – “painting to a vision” as he sometimes put it. He was a wonderful raconteur who could easily summon up personal reminiscences of Federation, the death of Queen Victoria and the first ANZACS – including his brother Vyvyan who was later killed in action in France – and the Brisbane General Strike of 1912. He remained a passionate advocate for the protection of Sydney’s built and natural heritage, and actively campaigned to embellish Martin Place with its “waterfall” fountain. (Completed in December 1976, it bears a plaque with the following inscription: *The vision and dedication of the artist, Dr Lloyd Rees and Mrs Rees made this waterfall possible. They made the initial donation, guaranteed the fund and with the help of many others raised the money by public subscription.*) And he was not afraid to speak his mind: in support of Jørn Utzon during his dispute with the Askin Government, in opposition to the construction of Sydney’s monorail, and as a strong critic of the design for the new Parliament House in Canberra. Six months before his death, during the ALP National Conference in Hobart, he also spoke at a Wilderness Society rally of about 5000 people.

Lloyd Rees gave his last lectures at the University of Sydney in 1986 under extraordinary circumstances. In August 1986 the health of his wife worsened seriously, so he moved to Hobart with her to live with their son Alan and daughter-in-law Jancis. Nevertheless, Rees did not abandon his students. As Alan Rees recalls:

Dad rearranged his schedule so that instead of giving one lecture a week on Wednesday he gave two lectures every second Wednesday. We’d go up to Sydney on Tuesday afternoon; he’d give one lecture from 10 to 11, and another from 12 to 1; the university provided a car to take us to Mascot, and we’d get the 2 o’clock plane to Hobart. Not bad for a 91-year-old. The final student assessments were based on projects which were read to him by Jan and our daughter-in-law Natalie.

In March 1988 Lloyd Rees was awarded the Sydney University Union Medal for services to art and to the University. He died in Hobart early on 2 December 1988, seven months after his beloved Marjory. Memorial services were held in Hobart and at St John’s Cathedral, Brisbane. And a ceremony of thanksgiving for his life was held in the Great Hall of the University of Sydney later in the same month. **SAM**

Dr Edward Duyker OAM FAHA is an Honorary Senior Lecturer in the Department of French Studies. He is very grateful to Alan and Jan Rees for their generous assistance in the preparation of this article.



Max Dupain
Lloyd Rees in the studio 1979. Silver gelatine photograph
 Gift of Diana Dupain 1996. The University of Sydney Art Collection
 UA1997.28