



# Masterpieces through discerning eyes

A living treasure takes a meaningful tour of some of the world's great collections.

Review by Cathy Peake

**A** former director of the National Gallery of Australia and a highly regarded figure in the art world, Betty Churcher hardly needs an introduction. Nonetheless, her brief and anecdotal introduction to *Notebooks* provides many biographical facts and insights of which the general reader may be unaware.

As a child in Brisbane, Churcher claims her feelings of inadequacy were mitigated by her ability to draw. Drawing was her way of "creating order in a confusing world". When Churcher was seven or eight years old, her parents took her to the Queensland Art Gallery, where she discovered that standing "before the presence of a large painting was a magical experience". She continues: "I'm sure that my enthusiasm for special exhibitions when I was an art gallery director had a lot to do with that first encounter with art."

She won a scholarship to travel to London to study art and emerged from the Royal College of Art married to the artist Roy Churcher – then a student at Slade – with a first-class pass, the drawing prize and the travelling scholarship.

Some time later, the Churchers returned to Australia and a different life altogether. Churcher had four sons in quick succession and, with no regrets, she stopped painting, doubting whether she had the intellectual energy and commitment to

take the long and solitary road from brilliant student to artist.

She started tertiary teaching at 40 and soon undertook a master's degree at the Courtauld Institute at the University of London, her thesis being that "Alfred Barr's exhibition policy at the Museum of Modern Art had influenced the emerging school of abstract expressionist painters in New York". In her mid-50s, with no experience of working in art museums, she was successfully headhunted for the directorship of the Art Gallery of Western Australia.

Like a secular Sister Wendy, Betty Churcher also wrote and presented the popular ABC TV series *Take Five* and *Hidden Treasures*. Her television appearances were those of someone at home with herself and passionate about the works she was exploring and it is no surprise *Notebooks* shares this serenity and thoughtful vigour. Composed as a succession of vignettes, her chief emphasis is on the emotive values of particular works and the visual evidence of decisions and adjustments the artist has made to that end.

Churcher is also at pains to demythologise the subjects of her chosen pictures and the circumstances in which they were painted.

But there is a poignant backstory to the evolution of *Notebooks*. Churcher had lost sight in her right eye due to melanoma and was at risk of losing sight in her left one from macular degeneration. Sensing the

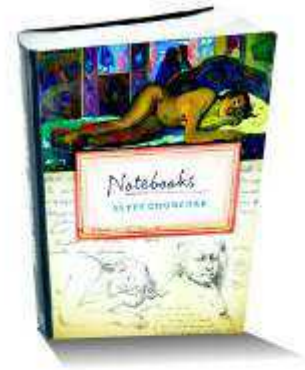
world of painting that had sustained her for so long might draw to a close, she decided to revisit her favourite works and commit them to memory through her own sketches.

Unable to work from reproductions, she embarked on a tour to some of the great collections of Europe and the Metropolitan in New York and the generously illustrated *Notebooks* records that journey, both with pencilled notes and drawings (and some older works in biro) sitting side by side with colour plates of the originals.

Her affection for these works is infectious. She makes us pause, she wants to encourage "inquisitive looking" as opposed to a "broad scan" of pictures for their subject matter. Her insistence on details such as the man's hat in the rowing boat in Gustave Courbet's *Young Ladies on the Banks of the Seine*, 1856-57, means the reader is led again and again to the colour plates as she prompts us to enter the world depicted and engage more deeply with its narrative.

Her interest in how the great collections of Europe and the US were put together is evident, as is the influence these works have exerted.

Vermeer, Cezanne, Rembrandt, Goya, Manet, Velazquez, Courbet, Jeffrey Smart, Francis Bacon and Arthur Boyd are just some of the artists discussed in this generous and eminently readable book.



Art

**NOTEBOOKS**

Betty Churcher

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