



When art is out of sight, into mind

Patricia Anderson

Notebooks

By Betty Churcher
 The Miegunyah Press,
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MANY of us, if we remember our school days at all, recall who could draw well. This skill, often appearing early, rarely diminishes and can be enlarged at every turn by the attention and admiration of teachers and fellow students. Betty Churcher had it.

In *Notebooks* the former director of the National Gallery of Australia has assembled some of the best-loved — and less known — art works from around the globe in a highly personal way. She has sketched details of them to heighten her pleasure, to discover elements that may have eluded her on previous examination, to gain a psychological insight into both painter and sitter, and most importantly, to fix them forever in her memory. Churcher is slowly losing her sight.

She quotes the 19th-century writer and critic Gustave Geffroy, who suggested that “drawing is the sign of the gift of seeing”. But what did Churcher’s fine-tuned drawing abilities mean to her? “Drawing was my way of creating order in a confusing world — I could escape and retreat into a place of my own creation . . . It was my safe harbour, my sanctuary.” And she looks at her drawing skills dispassionately, “just as some are born with perfect musical pitch I thought that [the ability to draw] held for all children”. When a friend suggested they couldn’t draw, Churcher looked for other “signs of

blindness” as well.

A fetching memoir of this kind must bring with it not only the satisfaction of tidying up one’s life on paper, but the adding of another piece to the historical and cultural jigsaw puzzle that is Australia’s art world. Within that world Churcher’s contributions have been substantial, and all the more engaging for her wisdom and the lack of ruthless ambition that deforms so much of the contemporary art scene.

In fact, her life and career seem to have glided from one serendipitous moment to the next — apart from being born in 1931, when the Great Depression bit hardest. A legacy from her great-grandmother in 1936 paid for her education, and in recalling this matron’s grand old Queensland bungalow with its wide verandas, Churcher mentions almost as an aside “an impressive array of Aboriginal artefacts dating from the last four decades of the 19th century” arranged like medieval weaponry in some old castle.

With an “irascible Scot” for a father, who considered a lass’s creativity should be confined to marriage and motherhood, she was saved by a charismatic teacher in senior school, who firmly planted the idea of travel abroad.

She was in front of an art class in Queensland when a phone call gave her one of the most delightful moments of her life.

WHEN A FRIEND SUGGESTED THEY COULDN’T DRAW, CHURCHER LOOKED FOR OTHER ‘SIGNS OF BLINDNESS’ AS WELL



She had won the overseas scholarship awarded by the Royal Queensland Art Society. Her prize was for a most untypical still-life: a Rembrandt-inspired painting of a kerosene stove in shadow with a cauliflower atop.

Churcher arrived in London at 21. It was 1952. She realised almost immediately that the proper place to study was the Royal College of Art. Soon afterwards, she met Roy Churcher, her husband of 46 years, who was initially unimpressed when she arrived at his digs and ate too enthusiastically of the splendid fare. It was still postwar severity ration time, and a flatmate's mother had produced a lavish assortment of treats. Her appetite was clearly no long-term impediment and they married in 1955. Four sons followed between 1959 and 1966.

Years later, her success at the Royal College was used to rally dismayed students at the Phillip Institute of Technology in Victoria, where she lectured. "I (who was no longer painting) had been awarded a First Class pass, and Leo Kossoff (now an eminent British painter) got a Third Class pass." This gave them some insights into the unreliability of awards and "they generally left my office dry-eyed".

Later, Churcher's years as director of the National Gallery of Australia coincided with some of the most impressive exhibitions mounted in this country. It also provided the press with an endless round of anecdotes from detractors who would later become fierce supporters.

Notebooks is a rewarding memoir: a careful calibration of beautifully reproduced art works such as Rembrandt's *Woman Bathing in a Stream*, and Edouard Manet's *Music in the Tuileries Gardens*, and Churcher's pencil sketches of details from such works, accompanied by brief notes on objects, colours and certain combinations of line and form which contribute to the unfolding magic of the paintings.

While Churcher modestly calls the book an *aide memoire*, few are equipped to provide such distilled observations of works from museums as loved as the Prado and the slightly lesser-known treasures such as the Doria Pamphili Palace in Rome.

Patricia Anderson is editor of *Australian Art Review*.



Former director of the National Gallery of Australia, Betty Churcher

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