

There Was Only One School Like it in the World

1932 – 1953

Gladys Good

‘I have been asked by the editor to recall old memories and to write something about the Girls Central Art School which flourished from 1932 to 1953.⁶³

For many years prior to 1931, there had been a system of annual studentships awarded in the School of Art, by which boys and girls with marked art ability who had reached secondary school standard could attend the school as full-time art students, but Dr Fenner, the Superintendent of Technical Education, felt that there was need for more control of these younger students and also he felt that, as regard to boys, they should have a more technical basis to their art. So, the Girls Central Art School came into being and the boys were drafted off to technical schools.

It was Dr Charles Fenner who was directly responsible for the formation of the school and, during his life time, both as Superintendent of Technical Education and as Director of Education, he was always tremendously interested in the school, particularly the fact that it was unique: there was only one like it in the world.

The Girls Central Art School was formed in 1932 and it existed for 22 years. Then in 1953 Mr John Walker,⁶⁴ then Superintendent of Technical Education, decided that 12 to 13 years of age was too young for such definite specialisation and that the girls should attend an ordinary technical school until they were 15, and so he closed the school in December 1953.

At the beginning, the idea was to give the girls a full-time art training, plus one or two general subjects. So there were classes in English, which included dramatic work, botany, singing, sports and later on social studies and of course history of art, giving a bowing acquaintance with art through the ages and a knowledge of a wider world than Australia. Through it all, the aim was to create a school spirit and to give the girls a balanced art education.

The course was for four years and at first there was a nominal charge of 30/- per term but, after a few years, the school came into line with the technical schools and tuition was free and each girl received an annual grant of £3 for books which, in this case, went towards art materials.

The curriculum was a fixed course for the first two years, but in the third and fourth years the girls could choose their subjects to fit their chosen courses; fine arts, applied art or commercial art, and in the third year and fourth years the girls attended the ordinary Art School classes.

The school was under the direction of the Technical Branch of the Education Department and came under the Vocational Guidance system, whereby the students were helped and advised regarding their ultimate jobs.

The Girls Central Art School was always part of the senior school. The teaching staff was the same and the GCAS girls sat for the School of Art examinations. I have an interesting note dated, I think, 1944 '191 GCAS girls have completed two or more years as students and have gained 3,178 School of Art certificates, of which 801 were credits.'

In thinking back over the years, vivid memories of our ups and downs flash through my mind. The war years – digging up air-raid trenches in the corner block of North Terrace and Pulteney Street, opposite Scots Church on Saturday afternoons. I possess a lovely picture of Travis Webber and others with Joyce Oliver in the foreground, staggering up, carrying a huge block of concrete. Then when we were turned out of the Exhibition Building by the Air Force to Twin Street and the basement classrooms – The Great Trek – coolie-gangs of GCAS girls, long crocodiles of girls, each carrying two easels, or a folding table (no transport available) and me, standing, holding up the Rundle Street traffic while they crossed over to Twin Street (no traffic lights in those days).

And then our second move to the G&R Wills Building on North Terrace, with the metal workers from the Engineering School banging away all day.

But after the war ended and we regained our dear old Exhibition Building, we had better rooms as the Agricultural Building was moved elsewhere and the GCAS had the western wing to itself and enjoyed the larger rooms and the lovely grounds all to ourselves – until the powers that be went and pushed the Motor Vehicles Department into the main hall, splitting the school in halves, so that we were always having to dodge motor vehicles.

The Girls Central Art School functioned for 22 years with an average enrolment of 60 to 70 girls and, although I could not possibly list all the girls who carried on with art, there are some who do stand out – Ruth Tuck, Jacqueline Hick, Shirley Adams, Delna Spencer, Betty Skottowe, Shirley Keene, Madge Searcy, Mary Hackett, Carlene Evans, Joan Hoare, Joyce Oliver, Dorothy Harvey, Lorraine Ellis, Vanessa Lambe, Helen Haseldine, Lorna Schlank, Laurel Lane and many others.

Many became art teachers, others took up commercial art and, of course, many 'just paint'. Other occupations claimed some of the girls; nursing, business courses and marriage, but in most cases, when I run into old students I ask, 'Do you do any art these days?'

The answer always is, 'Goodness yes! I still paint.'

‘I do pottery.’

‘I’m teaching again now the children are older.’

‘I’m doing interior decorating.’

‘I’m doing free-lance work in between house-keeping.’

And so we pass on – but for a brief moment the Girls Central Art School has woken up from its deep last sleep.’

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