



Surrounded by unfinished works, Francis Plymber sketches his favorite model, Eva. Many critics consider his one of Australia's greatest artists.

Fitting end for a great artist born after his time

By WALTER SULLIVAN

FRANCIS LYMBURNER died last Tuesday night while dining with a lady in a restaurant at Whale Beach.

It was an untimely but fitting death for a man whom I believe to have been one of our greatest artists.

He was my friend, and I mourn for him, and I write these words in affectionate memory.

I first met Francis in the late 1940s when he came into my dressing room at Bryant's Playhouse, a little theatre in Phillip St, and began sketching me while I did my makeup.

He loved the theatre — he was part-actor in his everyday life — and some of his finest work was created backstage.

Drawings and paintings of actors, dancers, musicians and circus performers flowed from his pen in those days and some of them remain as his most lasting memorial.

In 1969 Laurie Thomas visited a little gallery in Mosman — now the prestigious Mosman Gallery — to look at an exhibition of Lymburners.

Regency buck

He had not met Francis — he never did — and I was tremendously impressed when he spoke to me after silent contemplation for a couple of hours.

"These paintings," said Thomas, "look as though they were painted by a regency buck — a chap with lace at his wrists and buckled shoes and a cloak flung back from his shoulder."

"He should have painted them with a brush held like a rapier while a thoroughbred stamped about in the stables below."

It was an uncannily perceptive description of the creator of those paintings, for it was an exact description of the image Francis always had of himself.

He floundered about in the 20th century as though wondering where all the horses had gone, and the gay blades, and the ladies in décolleté gowns

and dukes throwing purses to the grateful peasantry.

He always insisted that one of his ancestors, a certain Captain de Lissa, had ridden with the cavalry at Alcala — or possibly Waterloo. Francis was never quite sure which.

He used to cherish the memory of his father, a surveyor in central Queensland, galloping through the bush with an axe and a theodolite in his saddle bags.

It fitted, even if on a reduced

scale, into the family cavalry tradition.

Francis' life was a wild graph of ups and downs, though the downs outnumbered the ups.

He was hopelessly impractical, as artists are supposed to be: about money — and, indeed, about everything else.

They were the party invitations which Francis had forgotten to send.

I ran into him in Martin Place in 1951 when he had just heard he'd won the Mosman Art Prize.

Hospitality

He rushed up to me, gave me the grand news, and bore me off to lunch at The Australia.

The Mosman prize was then worth about £100 and I dare say it had all gone in celebratory hospitality in a week.

The years he spent in London must have been a bitter disappointment to him, though he never let on, even to his closest friends. He had too much pride for that.

He received some ecstatic reviews there, but sold very little.

Indeed, he never sold steadily, so he never had a steady income.

But he had an unquenchable spirit and I never once saw him downcast.

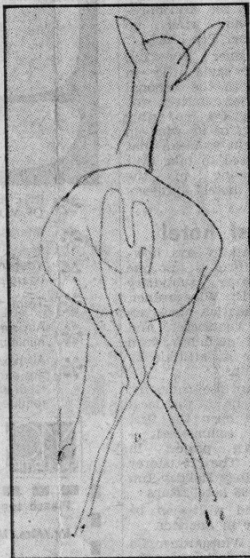
Once, two or three years ago, when he was living in a huge studio in an old building in Park Street, the electricity had been cut off and there was not a scrap of food in the place.

Even the tiny refrigerator had been repossessed.

I was appalled by this turn of fortune, but Francis was undismayed.

"Run across to the pub like a good fellow," he said, "and buy a bottle of wine."

"I'm expecting to sell a picture this week and there's to be an exhibition next month.



Deer, one of the Lymburner works recorded in the Encyclopaedia of Australian art.



Francis Lymburner . . . "I'm going to be rich you know."

"I'm going to be rich, you know. I'd like to be rich. It's the way I was meant to live."

I suggested that we might have a meal instead and I offered to shout, but he would not hear of it.

"Just buy a bottle of wine, Commander, and we'll drink to old comrades."

I had never been a commander and I couldn't imagine what old comrades he had in mind, but I bought the wine and Francis made me read Wilde's *Salome* to him.

Child-like love

He sat there listening intently, with tears in his eyes, and told me what a great actor I was.

Then he desired me to take him for a ride in a taxi — he had a child-like love of taxis — and as we were driving up Pitt Street he asked: "Do you like the Palace Theatre?"

I said I liked it best of all the theatres I'd played in.

"Very well," Francis said

seriously. "I'll buy it for you." At the time he couldn't have bought a programme at the Palace, but great times were just round the corner and Francis was going to be rich.

He never quite made it, though it was a damn close run thing.

It was only a week or so ago that the Commonwealth Art Collection in Canberra bought a lot of his work.

He left the convalescent home where he was living to celebrate his good fortune and died within an hour.

It is a consolation to his friends that he died as he would have liked to live.

He was dining in an exclusive restaurant with an attractive woman, a glass of good wine before him, and through the nearby window a magnificent view of the starlit Pacific.

If only there could have been a carriage waiting outside with a postillion and perwigged outriders and four matched greys stamping on the cobblestones!