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& ART AUSTRALIA



Tapestries through Time

**Surviving at Auction
Art: One Woman's War**

A Woman's Forgotten War



One of Australia's forgotten artists was a woman called Iso Rae. Living in France during World War I, she gives a unique insight into life in the military camps through her paintings and drawings. Though her work is little-known, it is interesting, charming and deserves more attention.

Iso Rae's Australian work is very scarce and there is not much information about her early life. She is mainly noted for her beautiful pastels depicting the camps at Etaples. She had been living in France with her family for nearly 30 years when war broke out.

This talented artist started her art studies in Melbourne where she was born in 1860. Iso Rae was the youngest of five children, the daughter of a self-educated, public-spirited Scotsman, Thomas Rae who came to Australia in 1846 and married Janet Love from Geelong in 1853. They lived in Fitzroy where he was a partner in a soap and

By Bridget McDonnell

candle manufacturing business. He dabbled in local and state politics.

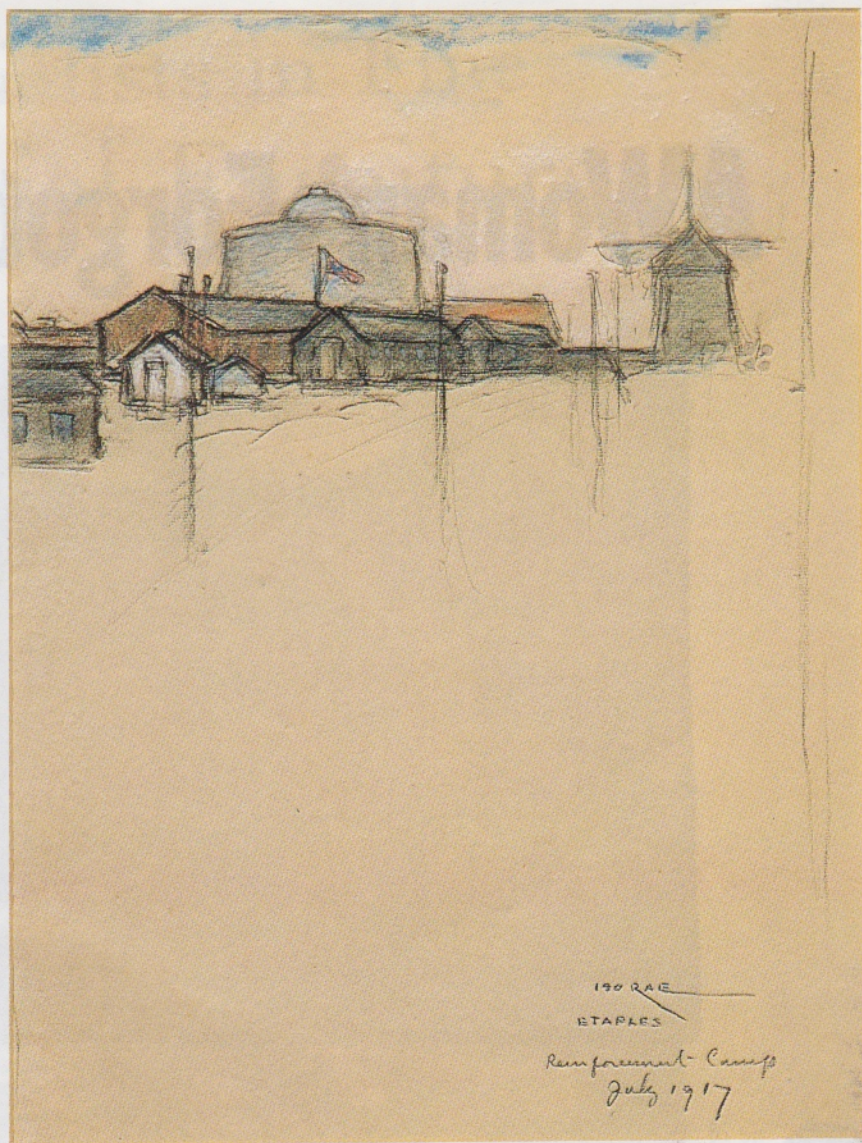
Her father died when Iso was two, and it is difficult to find further documentation on the family until Iso started exhibiting with the Victorian Academy of Arts in 1881. By this time the family was living in Toorak. Iso had been attending the National Gallery School since 1877. Fellow students included Tom Roberts, Ina Gregory, Tudor St George Tucker, Rupert Bunny, John Longstaff, Josephine Muntz (Adams), May Vale and Frederick McCubbin.

Initially she studied under Oswald Rose Campbell in the School of Design, but joined George Folingsby when he took over from Eugene Von Geurard as head of the National Gallery and Master of the School of Painting in 1882.

Folingsby had studied art in Paris

and Munich for many years, and was a respected and successful figure painter. He was an enthusiastic teacher who organised life drawing classes of which Iso and her sister Alison were founding members. Folingsby believed "nothing can be done in painting or sculpture without good drawing. The acquisition of good drawing can only be attained by long practice in drawing from, and thorough knowledge of the human body." This sound training held her in good stead throughout her career.

Folingsby also established student exhibitions and arranged for prizes to be given as encouragement. In the first students' exhibition in 1883, the trustees reported "The jury desire to make special mention of the excellent work of Mrs Pirani, Miss Chapman, Miss Emerson, Miss Vale, Miss Rae and Mr Bunny, and to express their regret that a limited number of prizes at their disposal precludes them from forwarding a more substantial





recognition of the merits of the works exhibited by those ladies and gentlemen." Iso Rae was also given a prize of £5 pounds in 1884 for the best head or still life and a third prize of £10 in 1887 for figure subjects.

Although Iso was exhibiting here regularly from 1881 until her departure in 1887, her Australian paintings are rare and it is necessary to rely on the descriptions given by contemporary newspapers to get an idea of her work.

The Argus carried reports on her work included in the students' exhibition of 1887. *Pastime* shows a young girl playing the piano, and *Work* portrays a house wife or servant making herself useful in the kitchen. Similar themes recur through her later subjects. Her more ambitious painting *Persuasion*, which was unfinished due to a severe attack of typhoid fever, "represents a Chinese hawkler displaying his wares and employing the limited resources of his pigeon English to prevail upon two girls standing at the kitchen door to become the purchasers of some glittering piece." Iso Rae's *Port Melbourne* is a rare example of her drawing from this time.

It is a strong, bold watercolor highlighted with pastel of ships moored on the Yarra. It shows the influence of Frederick McCubbin who was then a drawing master at the Gallery School.

For reasons unknown the family left Australia in August 1887 and settled in Etaples, France. Iso maintained contact with Australia by entering the occasional painting in the Victorian Artists' Society exhibitions. She had a painting of "a peasant girl carrying a bucket of water to the home" in an exhibition at Mrs Theo Anderson's studio in Collins Street. She also submitted a work in the New Zealand and South Seas Exhibition in Dunedin 1889-90 titled *Marchand de Volaille*.

Grace Joel, a fellow-Australian artist working overseas, gave us the first insight into Iso Rae when she wrote in 1906: "She saw a great deal of (Rupert) Bunny while he painted his most recent picture in Etaples, where she resides with her people. Of an extremely sensitive and retiring disposition, she paints outdoor figure subjects with rare charm and poetry, combined with harmonious color and vigorous effects."

In London, she entered various exhibitions from 1890 to 1907. She also exhibited a work at the Institute in Glasgow, her father's birthplace.

Grace Joel also wrote: "Her work has often been hung at the Salon and sold there and in England her work has been praised in the highest terms in leading newspapers. Of late through illness of her people, she has been unable to do any painting."

Previous page: Hospital Tents, Etaples, pastel, private collection.

Opposite page, top left: Portuguese, Etaples, pastel, Bridget McDonnell Gallery.

Top right: Reinforcement Camp Etaples, pastel, private collection.

Below: Isolation Hospital, 'Tipperary Road' Le Faux Road, Etaples, pastel, private collection.

This page: A Farewell, 7th Canadian Etaples, pastel on tinted paper, private collection.



Above: Street Cleaning, Sanitary Corps, Chinese and Negro, pencil and pastel, Bridget McDonnell Gallery.
Top right: Port Melbourne, pastel, Bridget McDonnell Gallery.
Lower right: Roasted Chestnuts, pastel, Bridget McDonnell Gallery.

By 1915 she was working at the military camps at Etaples. Iso was employed in the YMCA camp. Her sister Alison worked in the military hospital. Iso probably employed her drawing skills as light relief from the depressing reality of her work as a member of the Voluntary Aid Detachment. Her drawings of this time depict many aspects of the military camp as seen through the eyes of a sensitive woman in her 50s.

The subjects included slight portraits and figure studies such as *British Wounded* and *New Zealander* which are now in the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. Her painting *Portuguese* is a beautifully understated drawing showing the arrogant stance of an officer.

Other works depict the day-to-day activities of the camp. In *Hospital Tents, Hut — Our Lady Help of Christians* there are wounded soldiers, soldiers motorcycling down the lane and others going to pray while a

kilted Scotsman guards the hospital tents. *Roasted Chestnuts* is a village scene with soldiers buying and eating roasted chestnuts from a streetside stand outside a locksmith's shop.

Over the past few years a number of these WW I pastels by Iso Rae have surfaced. These include: *Reinforcement Camp*; *Isolation Hospital, Tipperary Road*; *Horse Transport*; *A Farewell, 7th Canadian*; *Tents No. 1*, *Canadian Hospital*, *Fire Buckets* and *Wounded German Prisoners' Camp*.

The beautiful colors and sensitive style of her drawings never fail to delight and win her an ever-growing number of admirers. Iso Rae is an almost-forgotten artist who is entitled to more recognition. Her unusual paintings of military life give us an idea of the realities of WW I.

Bridget McDonnell owns a gallery in Melbourne. She is particularly interested in Australian artists who worked overseas.
Photography by Mark Smith.