

The Lo Schiavo Murals

MANKIND – A TRIBUTE TO SHAKESPEARE – A TRIBUTE TO DICKENS

The Refectory in the Holme Building contains three murals by Vergil Lo Schiavo. The first painted was “A Tribute to Shakespeare” in the Eastern Gallery overlooking the Refectory. Donated by the artist in 1944 it was awarded the Sulman Prize for 1945. In 1951 “A Tribute to Dickens” was commissioned for the Western Gallery. It was completed in June 1952. The third mural “Mankind” was donated by the artist in 1971.

Lo Schiavo took the luxury of doing what he really wanted and what he was best at: painting. He took qualifications in Rome and Florence. In fact he is the only Australian to get a Royal Academy degree from either Rome or Florence.

After painting murals for banks and public buildings, he felt that he should do more – Sydney University Union gave him permission to do two murals – Dickens and Shakespeare – high above the Refectory. (The artist’s daughter appears as Little Nell in the Dickens mural)

Lo Schiavo wanted to put his thoughts and experiences into one major effort. Its subject matter would be so wide that a University would be the ideal site. A large wall was needed and Sydney University Union had such a wall. So it was that the Union supplied the wall, paint and scaffolding while Lo Schiavo provided the concept and talent.

In August 1970, Lo Schiavo began his paintathon which was to result in the largest mural in the Southern Hemisphere. Perched high on scaffolding erected in the Refectory, he worked through the noise and vibration of a hundred lunch hours. About to finish an eye or paint a cross on the horizon, the 61 year old artist at times felt that maybe it wasn’t worth it.

There were critics. His painting was even called obscene in an edition of the Union Recorder. He therefore went on strike until the author of the article apologised after considering possible legal action against him.

Lo Schiavo was permitted to paint only in Union hours and it was not until the final weeks that he was offered a key to enable him to paint in his own time.

It was feared midway through that the artist might not finish his work; he had suffered three coronaries and once “died” for a couple of minutes. Black began to close in on him and he claims that he was then able to realise that his body was dead and that those around him saw this – but he did not want to die then. Light fought back.

Light is the beginning and the end of Mankind. Near the centre of the painting the silhouettes lead off to a blinding white flash which might be either the beginning of Mankind or the explosion of a nuclear bomb.

There is a church, empty now and a cross nearby which might be a scarecrow, or the priest from the church, or Christ. All of this happens under the wing of a crashed jet, past which a bird is flying – man trying to conquer the air, the triumph and tragedy of technological success. Not far from this is the up ended birdman who will never fly but will always try.

There is another reference to flight in the bare-chested man holding a propeller above his head. For him this represents flight but really he is fixed to the ground.

A Sydney Morning Herald journalist described the dominant colours as the yellow of Union pie crust and the red of tomato sauce. Unlike Mankind, Lo Schiavo saw the Twentieth Century as marked by vulgar colours, noise and relentless activities.

Mankind accelerates as the eye scans the century. From the pathos reflected in quiet colours on the left the pace increases, the work heats up and the colours draw fire and noise on the right.

There are quiet times in the painting. There is, for example, a mother and children scene where the little girl is again the artist’s

daughter, Alanna. Protruding into this scene is the head of a donkey. “Any moron can be a father” said Lo Schiavo “but one should remember that a donkey bore Jesus Christ from Bethlehem and into Jerusalem. The donkey is the most sure-footed of animals.” Another consideration is the character in “A Midsummer Night’s Dream”.

There is a group of soldiers to the right of the central figure, the student. On the left of the group is the body of a Goliardo from the Italian Army in the arms of a Bersagliero (the 10th Legion of Caesar). The word Goliardo means the one who kills Goliath. It also means fresher. These students were completely wiped out but, when the crack Bersagliero arrived they found a message scrawled in blood by the last Goliardo:

“Better to live one day as a lion, then a thousand years as a lamb”

The artist was tempted to include names like Verdun and Mons but declined because the comment in this scene is universal.

The paratrooper in the foreground is a killer and he stands close to a man who believes that all killing is wrong – the Hindu. Beside but totally isolated from him is the Mohammedan who lives in eternal disagreement.

Solitude is a thing shared by all religions represented – the Catholic Franciscan gazes skywards next to a saffron-robed Buddhist who looks down towards Nirvana. The same aim by different means prevents unity. They are unable to see themselves in perspective and are really limited in their control over destiny.

So are the children playing with toy soldiers, ships and cars. One of them will die in Auschwitz although he could not conceive this possibility as a child. The gangrenous hand groping from the rock behind the children – the forearm numbered – is the child a mere two decades later.



What is secure and established one year is unearthed as a relic centuries later. Just as the workmen unearthed the Roman eagle on an excavation site, they will surely unearth our own Commonwealth Bank of Australia plaques in the next millennium. They may even unearth Lo Schiavo's painting.

This is in the BHP section of the painting with all the fire and noise of a steelworks. Asbestos-muted figures carry cylinders which might be filled with explosives or oxygen. There is an oxygen cylinder in the artist's bedroom.

Another worker is operating a jackhammer amid pipes and hose – his feet are entwined. So too for over on the left are the feet of another working in the roots of plants and trees Man and the earth are inseverable.

The clown on the extreme right is a self portrait of Lo Schiavo. The artists wife, Elcie Wyse, feels his expression says "this is what life is all about" or he may be saying "Don't take it all too seriously, it is life"

There is a Chinese inscription on the left of the mural which asks:

"What's man's life like anywhere he goes?

Just like a flying goose alighting on snow or mud.

In the mud perhaps it leaves a foot print,

But if it flies away who knows where?"

Lo Schiavo died in September 1971, three months after the completion of his masterpiece.

Mankind

A GUIDE TO THE MURAL

- | | |
|--|---|
| 01. Temples to gods and daemons (Indonesia) | 13. Gaucho Panaz and Don Quixote, or the dualism in man |
| 02. Conflict of jungle (nature) and artifact (man) | 14. Pill-box, Verdun, 1918 |
| 03. Translation of Chinese poem | 15. Contrasts: Musulman and Hindu. |
| 04. New temples of oil (Ploesti) | Macrocosm (earth from outer space) and |
| 05. Drills (in all sectors man must dig deep in order to fly) | Microcosm (splitting of particle by the French) |
| 06. Peoples uprooted by famine, wars, sickness, racialism, migrations etc. | 16. The experimenters (Trial & Error) |
| 07. Youth, maturity and decay | 17. Belsen, 1940-1945 |
| 08. Open-mine cuts | 18. Metropolis |
| 09. Buddhist and Franciscan | 19. Atomic plant in Carnegie Institute, USA |
| 10. The scarecrow and The Cross | 20. Art-forms, Poseidon & Picasso |
| 11. The primitive and the astronaut, a paradox of contemporary man | 21. Blast furnaces (Newcastle, NSW) |
| 12. Mors tua, via mea. | 22. Observatory on Mt. Palomar, USA 3 sectors |
| | 23. Shells and/or oxygen cylinders |

A TRIBUTE TO SHAKESPEARE



- | | |
|---------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Macduff | 5. Dogs of War |
| 2. Macbeth | 6. French Soldiers |
| 3. English Soldiers | 7. Julius Ceaser |
| 4. Henry V | 8. Venus |



- | | |
|----------------|-------------------|
| 1. King Lear | 7. Prospero |
| 2. Shakespeare | 8. King Richard |
| 3. Antonio | 9. Bottom |
| 4. Hamlet | 10. Shylock |
| 5. Puck | 11. Juliet |
| 6. Portia | 12. Romeo |
| | 13. Falstaff Maid |



- | | |
|---------------------------|--------------|
| 1. Malvolio | 6. Chips |
| 2. Merry wives of Windsor | 7. Rosalind |
| 3. Caliban | 8. Celia |
| 4. Jesters | 9. Petruchio |
| 5. Katherine (the Shrew) | |

A TRIBUTE TO DICKENS



- | | |
|-------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Magwitch | 8. Pip |
| 2. Carton | 9. Estella |
| 3. Major Bagstock | 10. Captain Cuttle |
| 4. Mrs Rudge | 11. Hon. Mrs. Skewson |
| 5. Barnaby Rudge | 12. Mr. Dombey |
| 6. Pip | 13. Edith |
| 7. Miss Haversham | 14. Page Boy |



- | | |
|-----------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Bill Sykes | 9. Aunt Betsy |
| 2. Ghost | 10. David Copperfield |
| 3. Scrooge | 11. Dickens |
| 4. Fagin | 12. Mr Podsnap |
| 5. Mr Pecksniff | 13. Mr Richard |
| 6. Boys | 14. Carston |
| 7. Mr Micawber | 15. Oliver |
| 8. Mrs Gamp | 16. Jo |



- | | |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Mr Pickwick and the fat boy Club | 8. The Marchioness |
| 2. Sam Weller | 9. Nicholas Nickelby |
| 3. Old Curiosity Shop | 10. Smike |
| 4. Nell | 11. Master Squeers |
| 5. Mr Quilp | 12. Swiveller |
| 6. Mrs Squeers | 13. Mr Squeers |
| 7. Miss Squeers | |