

AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

A series that profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time



Rosalie Gascoigne
1917-1999
Artist

This program is an episode of **Australian Biography** Series 7 produced under the National Interest Program of Film Australia. This well-established series profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time. Many have had a major impact on the nation's cultural, political and social life. All are remarkable and inspiring people who have reached a stage in their lives where they can look back and reflect. Through revealing in-depth interviews, they share their stories—of beginnings and challenges, landmarks and turning points. In so doing, they provide us with an invaluable archival record and a unique perspective on the roads we, as a country, have travelled.

Australian Biography: Rosalie Gascoigne

Director/Producer Robin Hughes **Executive Producer** Sharon Connolly

Duration 26 minutes **Year** 1999

Study Guide prepared by Darren Smith © NFSA

Also in Series 7: Jim Cairns, Priscilla Kincaid-Smith, Charles Perkins,
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SYNOPSIS

Rosalie Gascoigne's haunting visual depictions of the Australian landscape have rapidly propelled her into the spotlight of international fame. Yet until she was well into her fifties she was completely unknown as an artist. This program traces the experiences that shaped this complex and fascinating woman, from her difficult childhood in New Zealand to the heady acclaim that greeted her work when it finally came to the attention of those capable of recognising its special quality.

It was at the Mt Stromlo Observatory near Canberra that Rosalie first developed her intense love of the Australian landscape. She came to live there as a young bride with her husband, the astronomer Ben Gascoigne. The space and freedom she saw in the country around her provided not only a great contrast to the restrictions of her life in Auckland but also an escape from the tedious domesticity of life as a 1950s housewife in a very isolated environment. Her interest in making art from the materials she found around her grew out of a deep desire to surround herself with beauty. Later and almost by chance, she was 'discovered' and was able to develop her work to the point where it is now greatly sought after by international art connoisseurs.

When this **Australian Biography** was filmed, Rosalie was 82 and at the height of her career; her articulate account of how a misfit finally found her niche is both entertaining and moving. This program provides a rare insight into the mind of one of Australia's finest artists.

CURRICULUM LINKS

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at middle to senior secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include Visual Arts, Modern History, Studies of Society and Environment, Civics and Citizenship, Gender Studies, English and Personal Development.

AUTONOMY

Personal autonomy was a valuable asset to Rosalie Gascoigne throughout her life. She describes her time in Auckland in the 1950s, and later at Mt Stromlo, as one of restriction by pressures to conform and fulfil others' standards. 'You served the establishment really and it was expected of you,' says Rosalie. In a social environment of limitation, however, she discovered personal freedom, and discovered it in the landscape.

Her artwork captures this discovery and her very personal connection to the world. Art is commonly seen as a profound expression of personal autonomy or freedom, whether it is being created or viewed. It can compel its creators and audiences to be bold about their own visions of what is and can be. We can see this 'boldness' in Rosalie who says, quoting Pablo Picasso, 'You've got to start with what belongs to you, and that belonged to me because I knew about that. Nobody was going to tell me.' There is a sense in which she found a space where she could be autonomous, free and have 'absolute jurisdiction'. While other spaces in her life involved compromise, conformity or 'hiding things', the opinions of others had no place in relation to her work.

The idea of personal autonomy and freedom is not just relevant in art, but in all dimensions of life. An obvious example is politics, where personal autonomy has been central to theories about a healthy body politic. These ideas stretch back to ancient days, where

we find this expressed in aphorisms such as Socrates' 'know thyself'. A democratic citizen is one who is their own personal sovereign – free to speak and believe for themselves.

Discussion questions

- Identify references by Rosalie to her experience of autonomy and restriction in the interview.
- How did Rosalie react to insinuations of slackness or not being up to standard?
- In what other dimensions of life is personal autonomy important? How?
- Think of some ways personal autonomy or freedom is commonly thought of or represented in our culture.
- How do you think we can acquire or maintain autonomy/freedom? What environmental (social, political, economic and cultural) conditions are necessary?
- Can you think of ways that art is important in terms of social and political autonomy?

GENDER IN THE 1950S

Rosalie discusses her experience as a woman in Auckland during the 1950s, and later at Mt Stromlo. She tells of her difficulty in measuring up to social expectations of women as housewives at the time. Her inability, and to some extent reluctance, to fulfil these standards and fit the picture of a housewife, while a source of shame, gave her the freedom to question and live outside those values.

The 1950s is often associated with the stereotype domestic housewife, herself an appliance among appliances, who played an important role in the stereotypical 1950s family. This family was the idyll of 1950s private life, the Australian/American dream and the picture of success in society's view at the time.

To some extent, these ideals were the product of historical developments. During the Second World War, many women were recruited into industries on the home front to satisfy the high demand for labour. Opportunities for work traditionally closed to women were now opened up. While many of these jobs were handed back to returning servicemen, the number of women in the workforce in the immediate post-war period was rising. The necessities of war created a situation that challenged accepted ideas about the role of women. A similar situation occurred in World War One, resulting in increased social, political and economic rights for women.

In the face of this challenge, the traditional view of woman as homemaker was bolstered in popular culture. Newspaper and magazine articles encouraged women to return to the home. Books such as **Modern Women: The Lost Sex** (Marynia Farnham and Ferdinand Lundberg, 1947) claimed that social problems such as alcoholism and teenage hooliganism were the result of women following careers rather than focusing on homemaking.

Another development in the 1950s was the growing popularity of television. In Western cultures, messages about the role of women were carried through TV sitcoms, such as **Father Knows Best** (1954-63), and advertising. The image of an apron-wearing woman using the latest home product in her kitchen is a well-recognised icon from the 1950s.

These ideas and images have since been popularised and parodied in film and other media. **The Stepford Wives**, originally released in

1975 and with a more comedic remake in 2004, is a film about a small suburb where the women happily go about their housework to please their husbands. Two new residents, and housewives, discover the awful truth that the men of Stepford are replacing their wives with domestic robots. **Pleasantville** (1998), tells of two teenagers in the 1990s who are sucked into a 1950s TV sitcom and transform that world with values from a world 40 years on.

Despite, and possibly because of, such entrenched social standards, the 1950s also saw these values vigorously challenged. It is here that we find the seeds of 1960s counter-culture. People such as Betty Friedan publicly challenged the traditional views of women, organising and vocalising a feminist protest that would grow into future decades. There were also groups such as the beat poets (eg. Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg) who rejected and criticised 1950s conservatism and spoke of freedom. Then there is that other icon of the 1950s, the rebel or social misfit, immortalised by James Dean.

Discussion questions

- Working from the interview, what do you think were some of the standards or expectations placed on Rosalie?
- How might exclusion from these standards have made her feel?
- What do you think was required of women in the 1950s? What was the role expected of men?
- Source some images of popular art (whether print or film) that depict the housewife and family of the 1950s. What other popular images come from that time?
- How are women represented now? What images are used and what do they convey?

VISUAL ARTS

Practice

The interview explores how Rosalie creates her artwork, looking at some guiding principles and 'know-how'. We get a sense of her acting as the mediator between the world and her artwork.

Rosalie had no formal art training, but was schooled in the Japanese tradition of ikebana, a practice that influenced her later work. Ikebana is the art of association of ideas and impressions of nature expressed through flowers. For example, the elegance of a branch conveying the change in seasons. The practice, beginning over 500 years ago, conventionally uses a set of symbols or signs that represent particular ideas. Bamboo symbolises integrity since it does not bend: a single flower represents nature. There are several styles of ikebana. Rikka, originating in the 16th century, involves arranging several basic parts in a single vase to express the beauty of a natural landscape.

Art practice not only involves applying conventional rules or techniques, but developing a relationship with the world. In art, the world is the source of intangible ideas and concepts, as well as tangible materials to make things – the relationship between world and artwork is both conceptual and practical. As such, artistic practice is shaped and informed by conditions such as available technologies and the general environment in which the artist works.

Rosalie applies her understanding of arrangement from ikebana techniques, using elements natural to her environment to create representations of ideas. In her case, a sheet of wrought iron was just as natural to her environment as a pine tree. Described as a found-objects artist, her practice involved going out into that environment and rummaging out objects as potential art material.

Rosalie is a great example of how variations in art are made possible through the relationship between artist, world and artwork.

Discussion questions

- Discuss the process Rosalie uses to develop her works.
- What does Rosalie mean by the story of the egg on the stick? What insights does this provide about her practice?
- List some of the materials used based on pieces featured in the interview.
- What other forms of artistic practice are there?
- How might the environment influence choice of practice?

ARTIST AND AUDIENCE

Rosalie is often recognised as having become an artist in her 50s, though elsewhere she explains that she has always been an artist. While she was creating arrangements at school, in that context artists were mostly associated with people who drew or painted. Rosalie says she has always been 'that sort of animal'.

In this sense, Rosalie has a subjective or personal understanding of herself as artist. From this perspective or frame, the artist is understood as a talented agent whose intentions are driven by emotions and shaped by the free play of imagination. The words of English poet, William Wordsworth, are obviously central to her understanding of her role as artist: 'Emotion recollected in tranquility'. What is important for her is not 'how it looks' but 'how you feel about it'. In some ways, these are signposts for how an audience can/should stand in relation to her work.

Of course, artists are motivated by all sorts of intentions and can understand their roles differently. Artists can be thought of simply as people involved in a craft. From this perspective, the artist is someone who applies tools, techniques and conventional symbols to represent or communicate an idea. The emphasis here is how the work looks.

Artists can also be seen as social agents, influenced by and contributing to social, political and economic conditions. Their artwork is intended to have some social impact or value.

Another concept of the artist is as challenger of the dominant view of what is and is not of value in art. This is often achieved through the use of parody, irony and satire. Andy Warhol is a well-known example of this idea of artist.

While the intentions of artists are important, they are not the only significance of artworks. As they have artists, artworks also have audiences. Further, these audiences are ongoing, many and changeable, and can radically alter the intentions behind the work and its value through their interpretation. Consider, for example, the different reactions to street art and gallery art, and questions of value that arise here. Audiences can determine how an artwork is significant and whether or not it is art.

Discussion questions

- What do you think is meant by 'emotion recollected in tranquility'? How is this concept reflected in Rosalie Gascoigne's featured works?
- How do Rosalie's comments influence your relationship to her work?
- What other intentions motivate artists?
- Think of examples of artists who reflect other perspectives. How could we expect their work to 'look'?

- How does the audience influence the artwork? Is its role active or passive?
- Discuss the way value is brought to art by audience in examples of street and gallery art.

ART INDUSTRY

The art industry is an important and powerful force in the world of visual art. It includes galleries, art schools, critics, buyers and sellers, grant organisations, artists and a coterie of patrons. Rosalie reflects on her entry into the art industry, coming into it very 'raw'.

Aside from supporting the production of art, one of the main roles of the industry is to bring audiences to the artwork. Typically this is done through museum and gallery exhibitions, but also through print and digital media.

Art critics also play a vital role in the industry. They explain, compare, evaluate and judge artworks and persuade others' opinions.

Discussion questions

- What are some functions of the art industry? How is it valuable to the artist?
- Discuss Rosalie's experience of the art industry. What other ideas or experiences have you heard about the industry?
- How was Rosalie 'found' by the industry?
- What role/s did the industry play in her development as an artist?
- In what ways does the industry influence the direction of art?

Activities

1. Practical/Artwork. The interview raises some abstract themes, ideas and emotions, some of which are listed below. Using found objects from your environment, create a work to represent these from a personal or social perspective.

- freedom/autonomy
- loneliness
- space
- gender
- renewal

2. Research an Australian artist and write a précis looking at:

- how they produced works;
- how they understood themselves as artists; and
- common visual motifs or thematic elements across their work.

3. Gallery visit. Visit a gallery or art exhibition and write a report on the artwork displayed, unifying themes of the exhibition, and how the space was set up.

4. Essay. 'The explanation of an artwork is often sought in the person who produced it as if it were always, in the end, the voice of a single person, the author/artist, 'confiding' in us.' How else do we find meaning in artworks? Discuss in relation to Rosalie Gascoigne's work.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES

The study guide was prepared with reference to the NSW Board of Studies Visual Arts Syllabus K-10 and Stage 6 (HSC). The latter includes units of work that feature Rosalie Gascoigne.

Rosalie Gascoigne

ABC Online—Gascoigne

<http://abc.net.au/arts/headspace/tv/express/gascoigne/default.htm>

Deborah Edwards, **Rosalie Gascoigne: Material as Landscape**. Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney, 1997

Online sample of work— Art Gallery of NSW
<https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/artists/gascoigne-rosalie/?tab=works>

Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery—Exhibitions: Rosalie Gascoigne, 2004
www.roslynoxley9.com.au/artists/?aid=15&eid=298

The 1950s

■ Films

The Stepford Wives, director Bryan Forbes, 1978;
director Frank Oz, 2004

Pleasantville, director Gary Ross, 1998 (This film is also useful for a discussion on the social function of art.)

East of Eden, director Elia Kazan, 1955 and **Rebel Without a Cause**, Nicholas Ray, 1955 (Both feature James Dean.)

■ Websites

Rebels—Painters and Poets of the 1950s
www.npg.si.edu/exh/rebels

The Fifties Web
www.fiftiesweb.com/fifties.htm

Visual Arts

Australia Council for the Arts—
<http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/>

The Council's youth program is at
<http://australiacouncil.gov.au/strategies-and-frameworks/2016-youth-arts-summit/>

National Art Gallery of Australia
www.nga.gov.au

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