

AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

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



Betty Churcher

1931-2015

Art Educator & Gallery Director

This program is an episode of **Australian Biography** Series 9 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: Betty Churcher

Director/Producer Rod Freedman

Executive Producer Mark Hamlyn

Duration 26 minutes **Year** 2003

Study guide prepared by Kate Raynor © NFSA

Also in Series 9: Marjorie Jackson-Nelson, Thomas Keneally, Bill Mollison, Bernard Smith, Charles 'Bud' Tingwell, Joan Winch

A FILM AUSTRALIA NATIONAL INTEREST PROGRAM

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SYNOPSIS

Art has always been Betty Churcher's private and public passion. As an educator and a gallery director, her vision was to make people see art as accessible and relevant. As Director of the National Gallery of Australia from 1990 to 1997, she oversaw both its widening public appeal and its rise as an institution of cultural significance, locally and internationally.

The first female director of the gallery, Betty Churcher has been a role model for women for many years. She became the first woman director of a state art gallery when appointed to the West Australian Gallery in 1987. In 1982, she was the first female head of a tertiary institution as Dean of the School of Art and Design at Melbourne's Phillip Institute of Technology, where she had been lecturing.

Yet as a child Betty felt that 'just about everything I wanted to do, I couldn't because I was a girl'. Born in Brisbane in 1931, she grew up in a household where her mother and grandmother focused their attention on her brother.

Despite her father's view that education 'spoiled a girl', Betty won a scholarship and studied painting at London's Royal College of Art in the early 1950s, where she met and married fellow painter Roy Churcher. Back home, they set up a studio and art school together but Betty gave up painting after her first child.

She returned to work—initially as a teacher—when her fourth and youngest son started school. In 1974, after completing a Master of Arts in London, she published **Understanding Art**, which won The Times 'information book of the year' award. A career in academia followed along with senior roles on the Australia Council.

In this **Australian Biography** interview, Betty talks candidly of art, family and career and the determination that has driven her to achieve.

CURRICULUM LINKS

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at middle to senior secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include Art, Curatorial Studies, English, SOSE/HSIE, Education, Women's Studies and Personal Development.

ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION POINTS

The Film: Story of a Life

- Did you know anything about Betty Churcher prior to watching this program? If so, has watching the program changed your opinion of her in any way?
- Why might the filmmakers have thought Betty Churcher a worthy subject to be included in this series of **Australian Biography**?
- The programs in the **Australian Biography** series take the format of in-depth interviews with their subjects. Imagine that you are a producer on the series and that you could have access to three people from Betty's life—family, friends, colleagues, critics. Compile a list of four questions for each of these people, using this additional interview material to further develop the portrait of Betty given in this program. How would you decide who might offer a valuable perspective on her life and achievements? Consider what new details you might gather when formulating your questions. Write a production statement outlining what you hope to achieve.

Betty Churcher: 'The overriding thing in my life is to get the best out of every situation'.

- Choose six adjectives to describe Betty.
- Do you think Betty would be satisfied with the way the program represents her?
- What do you think are her strengths and weaknesses?
- List three qualities you like about Betty.
- Make a list of questions you would ask Betty if you had the opportunity to interview her.
- Betty says achievement and success have been important to her. What do you think has motivated her?
- Betty describes her father as a 'dour Scot', but 'I loved him very, very dearly. I looked on him as my support'. Write a paragraph describing someone in your family who offers you support, detailing what form that support takes.
- Betty says that her mother did everything around the house, while her father 'just sat and received his cups of tea and his slices of toast'. Is the division of domestic labour more equitable in your household? Who does what?
- Betty met Roy Churcher, a fellow artist, in London and they were married in 1955. As she says looking back now: 'I just felt he was someone that I would like to spend my life with. And that's how it turned out'. What qualities might have attracted Roy to Betty? What do you think makes a successful marriage?
- When the couple returned to Brisbane—on what was meant to be a temporary visit—Roy created something of a sensation. Why did policemen stop them on the street? What does this anecdote reveal about Queensland at the time?
- Betty enjoyed teaching. What are the qualities of a good teacher?
- Betty left her family for a year to teach at the Phillip Institute in Victoria. She says that in retrospect, leaving her family was a mistake. Why does she think this?
- Betty describes herself as 'a bit of a cat that walked by itself'. What does she mean?
- When asked what she most wants to get out of the next phase of her life, Betty answers: 'A little bit more peace, time to myself'. What is the next phase of your life? What do you imagine you will be doing five years from now? Write a scenario for your future, full of optimism and hope.

Betty: The First Woman To...

- The interview begins with Betty reflecting on the forces that have driven her career: 'I suppose it's ambition, but my determination to do things has been grounded in the fact that I was told very early and very firmly that I couldn't'. Who told her this and why?
- Betty talks at length about the intensity with which her mother and grandmother focused on her brother, Ian. She was aware from an early age that there were double standards as far as the hopes and aspirations of boys and girls were concerned: 'I felt I'd been born the wrong sex. What terrible bad luck to be born a girl!' Despite her obvious academic potential, Betty's father wanted her to leave school after Year 10, because he believed that further education 'spoils a girl'. What do you think he meant by this? Have you ever felt that opportunities were denied you because of your sex or for any other reason?

- Betty felt that her mother ranked the people in her life in order of their importance to her: parents, husband, son, daughter. As Betty says, no one was happy with their ranking. Everybody wants to feel important to those they love. What effect do you think Betty's mother might have had on Betty's sense of self-worth as a child?
- Betty speaks very highly of the headmistress, Miss Craig, at the secondary college she attended, Somerville House. What did she admire about Miss Craig? Imagine you are Miss Craig. Write a reference for the young Betty to the Royal College of Art in London.
- What is Betty's opinion of co-education? Do you think there are disadvantages for girls in mixed-sex schools? Devise three arguments for and against single-sex schools.
- Betty talks of the feminine ideals of her youth and her failure to fit the preferred mould: 'I was quite wrong for the age. I was very tall, very thin and very angular and the thing to be then was petite and bosomy with an hourglass figure. I was always taller than any of the boys'. What are the feminine and masculine ideals today? List six qualities women and men aspire to for themselves and each other.
- Essay topic: Betty was lucky to be 'wrong for the age'. Discuss.
- Roy fell in love with Brisbane and they did not return to London. They established an art school and studio, but Betty abandoned her own painting after she became pregnant. Does she regret this?
- Betty describes trying to paint while one of her young children—'this dribbling, screaming face'—pressed against the window, demanding she put down her brush and attend to him. She says she tried doggedly to keep painting and ignore the frantic little face, but eventually she abandoned the picture. What does this story suggest about the difficulties of balancing the demands of motherhood with other activities? Could Betty have been a good mother and continued to pursue her art while her four boys were young? Do fathers of young children face similar dilemmas? If Betty was a young artist and mother now, do you think she would still face difficulties reconciling her work and family commitments? What has changed for women in the intervening decades?
- Betty says, 'I always think: Am I adequate?' She describes this as the 'Who, me?' syndrome, the female scourge of her generation. Do you agree with her assertion that this is no longer a problem for young women today?
- When Betty was appointed to the National Gallery of Australia, one newspaper ran with the headline: 'Fifty-Eight Year Old Mother of Four Gets Top Job'. As she dryly comments, James Mollison's appointment to the NGV was not announced: 'Fifty-Eight Year Old Father of None Gets Top Job'. Look for examples of gender bias in your daily newspaper. Can you identify any instances of double standards?

Art For Art's Sake: 'When I open a can of sardines, I expect everyone to stand up and applaud!'

- Betty says she was obsessed with art at an early age and that it was clear this was her forté. Describe something you feel passionate about. How did this come to be important to you?
- Betty was thrilled to win the scholarship to the Royal Academy of Art in London: 'It was the best thing that I've ever had. Nothing has ever touched it... It was just as if all my dreams had come to fruition... I thought, I'm outta here. I'm going to have a whole new life'. Imagine you are Betty at the age of 20. Write a diary entry

explaining how you feel about the prospect of international travel and study. Try to capture a sense of her excitement at the boundless opportunities opening up to her, and her feeling of liberation from the small town mores of Brisbane in the early 1950s.

- One of Betty's teachers in London, Ruskin Spear, said that her trouble was she tried too hard. What do you think he meant by that criticism?
- Were there any women on staff at the Royal College of Art while Betty studied there? Are there any women on staff now?
- Betty was the Director of the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) from 1990 to 1997. What skills would you need to succeed in such a position?
 - Who is currently on the board of the Australia Council? (<http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/>)
- Betty established her reputation at the Gallery by organising major exhibitions such as 'Rubens and the Italian Renaissance', 'Turner' and 'Rembrandt To Renoir'. As she puts it, 'I was determined that Australians would get to see the very best'. Why do you think these blockbuster shows might take two or three years to coordinate?
- Make a list of some of the activities a director of a major gallery might be expected to perform in an average week.
- During her time at the NGA, Betty was criticised for not collecting enough contemporary Australian work. How does she respond to that criticism?
- Betty sees the key role of a national gallery as serving an encyclopaedic function. What does she mean by this and what difficulty is inherent in this process?
- Betty says that with being a mother, a teacher and a gallery director, one thing leads into another, and all of her varied experiences have informed her style of leadership: 'Sometimes, when I was dealing with a really difficult situation at the gallery, I'd think, "Well, thank goodness I've had four sons and had to deal with all of their different personalities and their conflicts and their problems".' Describe a skill you have in one field that has application in another area. Make a list of the skills acquired as a mother that might be useful in areas such as education and administration.
- How does Betty describe Robert Holmes A'Court?
- Betty discusses her role as the public face of the National Gallery, with a necessarily high media profile, and says, 'It all costs'. What does she mean?
- Is art important to you? Choose a work of art that has some significance for you and present an account of it to the class.
- Write a review of a work of art held at the NGA. For information about events, exhibitions and collections, go to www.nga.gov.au.
- Imagine you are the current director of the NGA and you can curate any exhibition you wish. Write a program for your dream exhibition. Include images and explain your choices.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Books

Betty Churcher. **Molvig: The Lost Antipodean**. Penguin, Melbourne, 1984

Betty Churcher. **Understanding Art**. Rigby, Adelaide, 1974

Susan Mitchell. **Public Lives, Private Passions: Nine Women Talk About Their Lives and Partnerships with Influential Men**. Simon and Schuster, Sydney, 1994

Television Series

Jennifer Cummins (producer), **Proud Possessors**, 12 parts, ABC, 1999-2000

Each episode is the story of a single masterpiece from Europe, Asia or America held in the collection of a state gallery in Australia.

John Lewis (director), **Eye To Eye With Betty Churcher**, 20 parts, Omar Khayam Films & ABC, 1999

John Lewis and John Hughes (directors), **Betty Churcher's Take 5**, 13 parts, ABC, 1997-1999

Websites

ABC Asia Pacific–English Bites: Gallery Birthday

<http://abcasiapacific.com/englishbites/stories/s746495.htm>

This article discusses some of the problems and challenges faced by the three directors of the NGA.

National Pioneer Women's Hall of Fame

www.pioneerwomen.com.au

This site makes reference to Betty in the 'Gentle Arts' section; it also has a great deal of information about women who have made outstanding contributions in a range of fields.



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