

QAG

Lloyd Rees

Life and Light

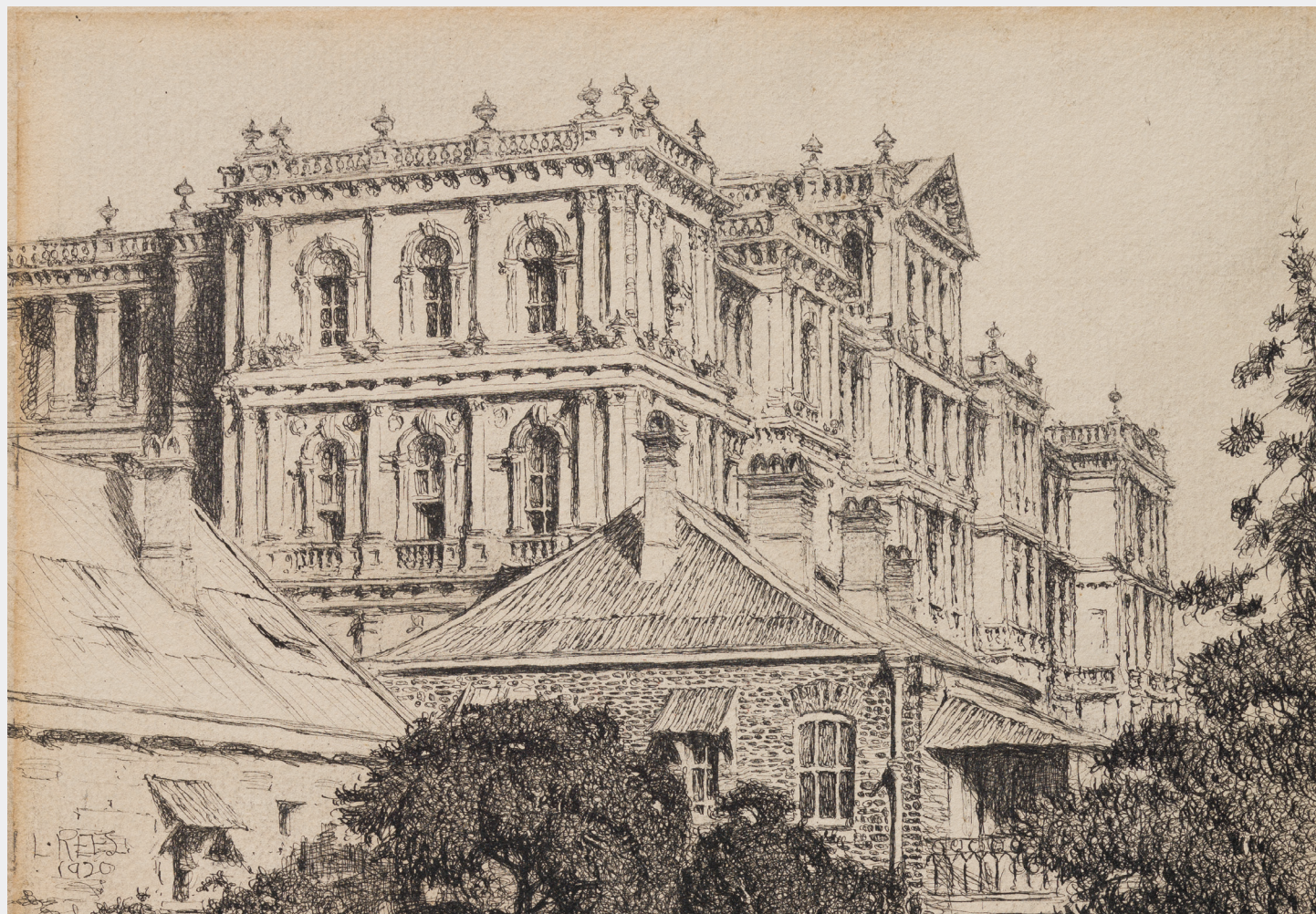


GOMA

LLOYD REES: LIGHT AND LIFE

This exhibition of works by the renowned Brisbane-born Artist Lloyd Rees (1895–1988), drawn from the Gallery's Collection, celebrates the important connection Rees had with Queensland, especially during his early artistic development. 'Lloyd Rees: Life and Light' includes a group of drawings that the artist made as a young man in Brisbane in the first decades of the twentieth century. These have been selected from works that have been generously gifted to the Gallery by Alan and Jan Rees, the son and daughter-in-law of the artist. Also on display is Rees's considerable skill as a painter — a skill founded on his early drawing practice.

The seventh of Owen and Angèle Rees's eight children, Lloyd Rees was born on the 17 March 1895 in the family home at Yeronga in Brisbane. He was a sensitive yet active and inquiring child who drew avidly. In 1910, Rees was awarded a scholarship to the Central Technical College, Brisbane, and there he had his first experience of formal art education. Unfortunately, his grades in subjects other than art were inadequate to support the conditions of his scholarship, and he started looking for paid work at the end of his first year of study. Architecture was his preferred choice and he approached prominent Brisbane architect Robin Dods, but his poor mathematics and physics precluded him from employment. However, this connection later resulted in drawing commissions.



In 1911, aged 16, Rees worked as a clerk with an insurance office and then at the Union Bank of Australia. Sent on errands around the city, he later recalled that it 'was my joy and my release, because I walked in a Brisbane of my own creation'.¹ Fired by his imagination, Rees drew a Brisbane inspired by Parisian-style opera houses and villas. He was also a keen observer of the building of St John's Cathedral, which ignited a lifelong love of church architecture, seeing cathedrals as 'symbolical of human aspiration'.² The soaring arched interior spaces of St John's shows his skill in rendering architectural forms and space. In his 1985 autobiography *Peaks and Valleys*, Rees comments on St John's:

Each time I entered it, I felt an exultation,
for it is an enclosed space of such grandeur
as to appear far larger inside than out.³

The following year saw Rees diagnosed with a kidney condition that left him bedridden for some weeks.⁴ Given little chance of recovery, the dread of his own mortality resulted in bouts of deep depression that would recur throughout his life at times of personal stress. Returning for a time to art classes at the Technical College, he sought solace outdoors, exploring and drawing Brisbane. Around this time, Rees met Daphne Mayo, a fellow student at the Technical College, who would go on to be Queensland's most prominent sculptor. He and Mayo took her family's boat, the *Navahoe*, on drawing trips along the Brisbane River. Rees talks of this time of convalescence in *Peaks and Valleys*:

Looking neither backwards nor forwards with
any degree of intensity, I immersed myself in
my work, my family and my friends.⁵

Rees was well enough in 1913 to accept a job as junior artist at the Queensland Government Printing Office, where he produced three sets of postcards of Brisbane buildings and landmarks from preliminary sketches, later worked up in pen and ink for illustration. These are accomplished drawings for such a young artist, and are powerful renderings of a particular time and place.

In 1916, Rees began to receive a number of commissions for portfolios of pen drawings — of St Brigid's Church, Red Hill,⁶ which was designed by Robin Dods; and of private homes belonging to the O'Shea, L'Estrange and Cowlshaw families. Again, in a series of preliminary sketches we can see his keen eye for detail — a spray of garden foliage, an imposing tree, the shadowed wall of a building — and all are extremely accurate renditions of the subjects. Rees achieved masterly effects in the humble medium of pencil, with a few deft lines and shading.

Rees's acute observations of the natural world are matched by a series of early insightful portraits. A group of self-portraits relates to his brief stay in Sydney in December 1916, visiting the city for the first time on his way home from a holiday in Melbourne. He stayed for a week in Sydney's Grand Central Hotel and one night experienced a panic attack, undertaking a series of pencil self-portraits to calm his nerves:

The dying sensation to which I was subject
descended on me with overwhelming effect . . .
a sobering thought struck me — I extracted from
my luggage a sketch book and pencil and,
sitting in front of the dressing table mirror,
I spent the entire night drawing myself, over and
over again . . . The strained expression tells the
whole experience.⁷

In May 1917, Sydney Ure Smith asked Rees to join the Smith & Julius Studio in Sydney as a commercial artist for £4 a week. This was the beginning of a new period in his life and art. Drawing would remain at the heart of his practice through the next decade, as he acquired a reputation as a brilliant illustrator. The 1930s saw him perfect his draughtsmanship with superb pencil drawings of Sydney Harbour views — these are among his most admired works.

In 1923–24, Lloyd Rees travelled to London to be near Daphne Mayo, who was studying sculpture there and to whom he had become engaged. A marriage did not eventuate but his time in Europe was productive and had a lasting effect on his art.



Rees's practice was steeped in European heritage: a driving force in much of his drawing and painting became the translation of that heritage into the Australian environment and culture.

In 1953, after almost 30 years, Rees again travelled to Europe. His time spent in France and Italy confirmed his affinity with these places. On this trip, Rees used a number of sketchbooks to record what he saw, fuelling his imagination and providing inspiration that, on his return to Australia, would culminate in a number of important paintings. The result was that the landforms of Europe and Australia often appear interchangeably on his canvases, while his Tuscan landscapes and works made on the South Coast of New South Wales bear the imprint of each other. In *Lloyd Rees* (1972), author Renée Free observed that 'Europe and Australia became co-existent in the artist's mind'.

In later years, Rees turned to painting, extending his skill in drawing to create landscapes that capture the structure of the land, its topography carved from the paint on the canvas. He would continue to draw and paint throughout his long life, with his later works becoming almost abstract as his eyesight deteriorated. In the last two decades of Rees's life, light and

the sun became his main subjects, in which colours were translucent and the solidity of earth and rock was replaced by the fluidity of water and sky. This final phase of his practice is exemplified in the pale, elemental and transcendental *The sunlit tower* 1986.

Lloyd Rees's art captures his affinity with the natural world and the human presence in that world. Drawing was fundamental to his artistic process and remained so throughout his life. His drawing practice had its beginnings in Rees's early years in Brisbane, with its subtropical light, where the bush encroached into the city's suburban landscape. Perhaps this is best expressed by the artist himself, in a letter to the then director of the Queensland Art Gallery, James Weineke, in 1970:

Whatever I may have achieved in life had its origins in those early Brisbane days where I first felt the magic of recreating on paper, however haltingly, my vision of the world around me bathed in the warmth of Queensland sunshine.⁸

Michael Hawker

Assistant Curator, Australian Art to 1975
Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art

Lloyd Rees / *Urn and base of fountain (Cowlishaw's) (detail)* c.1914–15 / Pencil / Gift of Alan and Jan Rees through the Queensland Art Gallery Foundation 1998 / Collection: Queensland Art Gallery / © Lloyd Rees c. 1914–15. Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney, 2012

Left:
Lloyd Rees / *Treasury Buildings (detail)* 1920 / Pen, ink and pencil on wove handmade paper / Purchased 1922 / Collection: Queensland Art Gallery / © Queensland Art Gallery

SPONSOR MESSAGE

At Xstrata Coal we are delighted to partner with the Gallery to present 'Lloyd Rees: Life and Light' as part of the Xstrata Coal Queensland Artists' Gallery program.

Since 2009, we have supported the Gallery in collecting, presenting and profiling artistic work of particular relevance to Queensland. We are committed to ensuring the Talking Queensland Art Tour program can continue to travel to venues in regional Queensland.

'Lloyd Rees: Life and Light' is a touring exhibition drawn from the recent Brisbane exhibition and honours the important connection that Brisbane-born Lloyd Rees had with Queensland. The exhibition explores the range of one of Australia's most recognised and awarded landscape painters, and showcases the artistic achievements of his long career.

We are proud to be providing opportunities for Queenslanders to engage with the art of our State. Through our annual Community Social Involvement program we are working with the communities that support our operations throughout Queensland.

I hope you enjoy 'Lloyd Rees: Life and Light'.

Reinhold Schmidt

Chief Operating Officer, Queensland

Xstrata Coal



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ENDNOTES

- 1 Alan and Jan Rees, *Lloyd Rees: A Source Book*, Beagle Press, Brisbane, 1995, p.13.
- 2 Alan and Jan Rees, p.14.
- 3 Elizabeth Butel (ed.), *Peaks and Valleys: An Autobiography*, Collins, Sydney, 1985, p.96.
- 4 Rees was diagnosed with nephritis, an inflammation of one or both kidneys that is potentially fatal.
- 5 Butel, p.77.
- 6 Commissioned by Monsignor King, the parish priest of the area, in Butel, *Peaks and Valleys*, p.95.
- 7 Lisa Loader, Alan and Jancis Rees and Susan Smith, *Lloyd Rees: Coming Home*, Rockhampton Art Gallery, Rockhampton, 1999, p.19.
- 8 Letter dated 31 May 1970, Queensland Art Gallery Research Library Artist File.

Cover image:
Lloyd Rees / *The coast near Kiama* (detail) 1952–55 / Oil on canvas / Purchased 1955 / Collection: Queensland Art Gallery / © Queensland Art Gallery



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