ERIC THAKE (1904–1982)

Early in his career Eric Thake developed a disciplined approach to art production that was based on simplicity, precision and design. The commercial art training he received from the age of fourteen at a Melbourne engraving firm established an appreciation for clear, bold design and instilled in him a high level of technical proficiency. Thake continued to work as a graphic designer for over thirty years.

The teachings of George Bell in 1925–28 further developed Eric Thake’s interest in formal design. Bell, then Melbourne’s leading protagonist of modern art, encouraged Thake to work from drawings instead of directly from nature. This resulted in simplified compositions and a personal rather than descriptive response to the world. Significantly, Bell directed Thake to look at the bold underlying shapes of objects, uncomplicated by the effects of light and shadow. The use of the silhouette, asymmetrical design and clean, precise lines in the linocuts in this display are characteristic of Thake’s work.

Eric Thake’s approach to art making was a deeply personal one based on his interpretation of visual facts and the witty connections he saw between objects. He delighted in observing the quirks of nature and efficiently translated these into ironic imagery. This selection of Christmas cards encompasses the themes Thake loved most: natural history and animals, the outback, Australiana and the museum. Amusing self-explanatory titles further display the artist’s clever wit and irreverent humour.
From 1941 Eric Thake produced a linocut design each year as a Christmas card to send to family and friends. Failing eyesight in 1975 ended what had become the most renowned production of seasonal correspondence in Australian art. The University of Melbourne holds a complete set of Thake’s Christmas cards. The initial holdings, largely acquired as donations from the card recipients, were significantly augmented by the artist. An additional gift from Thake’s daughters in 1997 completed the collection.

Though Eric Thake produced a large number of paintings, drawings, engravings and photographs, this selection of linocuts spanning thirty-five years displays the consistency of his interest in the medium. Thake clearly enjoyed the domestic scale and modest production values of the print medium. The capacity of the linocut to deliver sharp and clean images suited his interest to convey visual disjunctions with precision.

In 1929 Eric Thake produced what he considered his first modern linocut, *Returned empty*, inspired by the random pattern of a stack of empty kegs. He described the work as ‘my first step along the road to design’. This early work displays many of the attributes present in the bold designs of the Christmas cards. Thake exhibited his first linocuts in 1929 with fellow Melbourne printmakers Eveline Syme, Ethel Spowers and Dorritt Black in an exhibition that positioned him as a chief practitioner. Thake’s design-based aesthetic was regarded as unique and modern, and it was delivered with a particularly Australian flavour.

Eric Thake’s Christmas cards quickly became collectors’ items. A book commemorating the cards was published in 1978, three years after Thake produced his last linocut design.