Hugh Ramsay: the Wicking Collection

The Wicking Collection

John Wicking, a grazier and former chairman of manufacturing company Nicholas Kiwi Ltd, died in Melbourne in June 2002, aged eighty-four. He left behind a collection of Australian art by some of the best artists of this country. Among the collection was an intimate selection of twenty-five works by Hugh Ramsay (1877–1906), one of Australia’s most talented tonalist painters of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. John Wicking’s late wife, Janet Wicking, was Hugh Ramsay’s niece, and this group of works remained in the artist’s family over the generations. This is the first time many have been publicly displayed.

Hugh Ramsay’s outstanding talent in painting and drawing marked him for success at a young age. His tragic death at the age of twenty-seven meant that he did not become well known to the wider public, but he gained something of a legendary status among Australian artists of his generation and those that have followed. Ramsay’s works remain of interest to artists today for their confident and unconventional compositions, supported by the artist’s mastery in balancing tonal areas and highlights. Best known for his portraiture, Ramsay displayed a remarkable facility for depicting the character of the sitter and the ‘living’ quality of the flesh.

Fellow artist John Longstaff wrote in 1906 in a condolence letter to one of Ramsay’s brothers: ‘Australia, I think, does not yet realise what she has lost in him, but she will in time … the work he has done will speak for itself and as time goes on it will be appreciated for its big qualities.’ (Patricia Fullerton, Hugh Ramsay: his life and work.)

It was John Wicking’s family’s desire that the collection be publicly displayed prior to its dispersal to various venues in Victoria, Tasmania and Canberra. The four works gifted to the National Gallery of Victoria were not available for inclusion in this display.
Hugh Ramsay: the Wicking Collection

Hugh Ramsay

Born in Glasgow in 1877, Hugh Ramsay arrived in Melbourne with his family in 1878. He studied at the National Gallery School, Melbourne, from 1894 under Frederick McCubbin and Bernard Hall. Like so many of his Australian contemporaries, Ramsay sought the excitement and opportunities offered in the art centres of Paris and London. He left Melbourne in 1900 at the age of twenty-three.

Ramsay arrived in Paris in 1901 and the Old and New Salons, the arbiters of artistic style, almost immediately acknowledged his outstanding talent. Ramsay also gained the important commission to paint the portrait of Dame Nellie Melba—an endorsement that had the potential to launch him into a financially viable career as a portrait painter.

Sadly, after contracting tuberculosis, Hugh Ramsay was instructed to return to the more temperate climate of Melbourne. This came at a time when Ramsay truly felt he was on the threshold of a promising career. He wrote to his cousin: ‘Just when I have absolute success within my grasp, just when I see the probabilities of my being a successful painter, that it should all be snatched from my grasp … I’ll know better to overwork and starve now.’ (Patricia Fullerton, Hugh Ramsay: his life and work.) Ramsay returned to Melbourne in 1902 but his health did not improve. It seems his total dedication to his art practice was at the expense of his health, and he died in 1906 at just twenty-seven years of age.

Hugh Ramsay’s exceptional facility and feeling for portrait and figure painting confirmed his place as one of Australia’s most skilled painters of the period. The recent gift of six works from the Wicking Estate brings the University of Melbourne’s holdings to a total of twenty-two works. Most of these have been acquired since 1947 through generous donation by the artist’s family.