The academy: Portraits of a Parkville community

Portraiture’s memorial function has traditionally been exercised to celebrate the powerful, to sustain their hallowed status in public memory ... Portraits extend the lives of their subjects, enabling ancestors to live on in image if not in legacy. They also serve as relics, protective talismans to assist the living. Leah Ollman, 2002

Portraits in various media are displayed in around thirty locations across faculties, schools and departments on the University of Melbourne’s Parkville campus, as well as in University House, the Raymond Priestley Building and the Council Chamber, which between them accommodate numerous commemorative paintings, and portraits in bronze. This exhibition includes sixteen of a total of more than 100 ‘official’ portraits held in the University of Melbourne Art Collection.

These official portraits are usually commissioned in one of three ways: by the subject’s family, by members of his or her profession, or by the faculty, school or department with which they are associated. The subjects in this exhibition are academics, teachers, benefactors or students, including one of the first female graduates of the university, Laura Mary Fox.

The stories behind these portraits are human in their scale. The commissioning in 1929 of Paul Montford’s memorial bronze relief of Sir Walter Baldwin Spencer, displayed on the adjacent wall, was a heartfelt gesture by the professor of biology’s colleagues and past students, who believed that ‘under the particular circumstances of the passing of our first chief, there seemed nothing else we could do as a last tribute to his memory’. The display of this work of art was intended to ‘keep his name always before the students’.

The paintings and busts in The academy have been selected on the premise that a great portrait is less about achieving a likeness and more about the artistry involved. The exhibition presents a cross-section of styles, exploring developments within portraiture from the late nineteenth to late twentieth centuries, while also challenging our understanding of the genre.