Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE5676

Moore, May

(1881 - 1931)

Born	18810104, Wainui New Zealand
Died	19310610, Sydney New South Wales Australia
Occupation	Photographer

Summary

May Moore was a successful photographer who worked initially in New Zealand and then in Sydney. She specialised in portraits of prominent people and artists, including society/celebrity portraits, with some wedding and children's portraits. Moore is known to have introduced bromide paper and mounting boards to New Zealand.

Details

May Moore was born on 4 January 1881 in Wainui, New Zealand, one of seven children (the eldest daughter and Mina the second eldest). Their father, Robert Walter Moore, was an English immigrant who worked at timber cutting and farming, and their mother was Sarah Jane, née Hellyer. Her parents were not wealthy but were able to save enough money to purchase a small property in the small rural town of Wainui twenty miles north of Auckland where they brought up a family. Prior to this they had lived in various forestry camps.

May's hobby as a child was drawing and in 1900 she was admitted into the Elam School of Art and Design in Auckland, where she studied painting. Following graduation she was able to support herself financially through her sketches. In 1907 she participated in the New Zealand International Exhibition held in Christchurch, setting up a stall and selling her pencil sketches for 2/6 as well as pen and ink portrait sketches for 5/-. May moved to Wellington in 1908 and rented a space in a photographic studio where she painted portraits of prominent people, such as Sir Joseph Ward and his family, using oil paint.

Her sister Mina, who was a teacher, travelled to Australia and on her return to New Zealand gave up teaching to pursue her new found interest of photography. At this time the Alexander Orr studio next door to May's was placed on sale and the two sisters purchased it for £170, which was quite a large sum of money at the time. Prior to Orr closing his studio, May was able to learn camera handling skills from the existing staff and Mina the printing process, all of this in the space of six weeks.

The Moore sisters were keen theatre-goers and were exposed to the impact of theatrical lighting and dramatic poses; this was to feature in the iconic style they developed. At the time, their clientele included many actors and in fact their earliest work was photographing the entire cast of an American theatre company.

They were pioneers in the use of bromide papers and mounting boards in New Zealand and became very popular for their work, establishing a reputation for producing quality portraiture. Their characteristic style saw photographs taken close up, often head and shoulder shots, strong side lighting of half of the face, set against a dark background, a technique that allowed the sitter's face to stand out, but which also created a sense of intrigue itself further intensified with the use of sepia tones. Jack Cato noted in his book *The Story of the Camera in Australia* that when they were starting out, they had to make do with the 'meagre light from an ordinary room …' However, he also wrote that this made their work so distinctive, that there was no need for either of them to sign their portraits (which they both did) because they were so obviously and exclusively their own. All their photographs used this low key approach, with a strong light on one side of the face and shadow on the other. 'It was the light Rembrandt used for his paintings and was particularly suitable for men' (Cato 136)

During 1909-1910 May became unwell and took time off work. She travelled to Sydney for a holiday, and while there she got in touch with her creative friends and began her photography work again. She was encouraged by Alfred Hill to move her studio to Australia and Arthur Hill, the amateur art photographer, helped her find a studio and gain commissions. May rented a studio in the Bulletin building where she photographed cartoonists such as L. Hopkins 'Hop' and Low. She decided to stay on in Sydney and set up a permanent studio, which may have been at 139 King Street, furnishing the reception area with

Persian rugs and employing a number of staff.

In 1911 Mina visited May and they worked together until Mina moved to Melbourne where she set up her own studio. In 1914, with the outbreak of World War 1, both May and Mina were kept busy photographing hundreds of young soldiers before they set off for the battlefields in North Africa and Europe. The majority of their sitters however were people associated with the Arts, artists, actors, musicians, cartoonists and fashion designers. They would take the time to familiarise themselves with their sitters, so that they could capture their personalities. .On the 13 July 1915 May married Harry Wilkes, a dentist who closed his own practice to manage her studio as it was doing very well. The couple shared a love of literature and the Arts.

May was described as a tall, striking and confident woman who dressed in loose Bohemian clothing. She retired in the late 1920s due to ill health but continued her creative endeavours through her miniature landscape painting which she did on commission.

Up until 1928 her photographs were published in a number of magazines including *The Home*, *Triad*, *Theatre* and *The Lone Hand*. In fact, her portrait of the actress Lily Brayton as Cleopatra appeared on the cover of the Christmas issue of *The Lone Hand*. May reflecting on her career was to say 'When I commenced work … some of the cut and dried photographers held up their hands in horror. It was necessary, they said, to stick to the beaten track, stodgy backgrounds and stiff accessorised. I had my own ideas, and determined, sink or swim to put them into practice.' (Ebury)

She died on the 10 June 1931 as a result of a spinal disease associated with the cancer that she had been suffering. Six months following her death a tribute exhibition of her work was held at the Lyceum Club, Sydney.

Collections
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW, Australia
Art Gallery of South Australia, Australia
Castlemaine Art Gallery and Historical Museum
La Trobe Collection, State Library of Victoria, Melbourne, Vic., Australia
Macleay Photograph Collection, Macleay Museum Collection, NSW, Australia
National Gallery of Victoria. The Shaw Research Library, Vic., Australia
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Australia

Events

1907 - 1907
May Moore exhibited at the New Zealand International Exhibition

1907 - 1907
May Moore exhibited her painted miniatures on ivory at the NSW Society of Women Painters

2000 - 2000
May Moore featured in National Portrait Gallery exhibition *Mirror with a Memory: Portraiture in Australia*

1996 - 1996
May Moore featured in National Portrait Gallery travelling exhibition *The Reflecting Eye: Portraits of Australian Visual Artists*.

1981 - 1981
May Moore featured in the George Paton Gallery exhibtion *Australian Women Photographers 1840-1950*

Published resources

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Beyond the Picket Fence: Australian Women's Art in the National Library's Collection, Carr, Sylvia and National Library of Australia, 1995,
http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/36337/20030703-0000/www.nla.gov.au/exhibitions/fence/picket.html

Photograph
Portrait of an Actress, Moore, May and Moore, Mina, 2000

Edited Book
Heritage : the national women's art book, 500 works by 500 Australian women artists from colonial times to 1955, Kerr, Joan, 1995

Exhibition Catalogue
Australian Women Photographers 1840-1950, 1981

Mirror with a memory: photographic portraiture in Australia, Batchen, Geoffrey and Ennis, Helen, 2000

Book
The Story of the Camera in Australia, Cato, Jack, 1979

Australians Behind the Camera: Directory of Early Australian Photographers 1841 to 1945, Barrie, Sandy, c1992

'I was only a maid': The life of a remarkable woman: May Moore: Reminiscences of May Moore as related to members of her family and to her friends., Burkett, M. E., 2003?

The reflecting eye: portraits of Australian visual artists, Ennis, Helen, National Library of Australia and National Portrait Gallery (Australia), 1996,
http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/125722/20110309-0156/www.nla.gov.au/pub/ebooks/pdf/the+reflecting+eye.pdf

Australian Women Photographers 1840 - 1960, Hall, Barbara and Mather, Jenni, 1986

Thesis
Making Pictures: Australian Pictorial Photography as Art 1897-1957, Ebury, Francis, 2001

Resource Section
Annie May and Mina Moore,
https://www.daao.org.au/bio/group/references/annie-may-and-mina-moore-1/

Moore, Annie May (1881-1931), Hall, Barbara, 2006,
http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A100546b.htm

Magazine article
Versatile May Moore- Photographs, Miniatures, and Domesticity, Hutton, Bruce R., 1925

A First For Women Photographers in Australia: Quick Thinking and Ladders Got the Top Shots, Bowen, Jill, 1981,
http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article55457051

Newspaper Article
May Moore, 1921,
http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article125391061

Book Section
May Moore and Mina Moore, Newton, Gael,, 1995

Archival resources

National Gallery of Australia, Research Library Archive
[May Moore : Australian and New Zealand Art Files].

National Library of Australia, Ephemera Collection
[Moore, May : photography related ephemera material collected by the National Library of Australia]

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