The Australian
Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE5972

Agar, Bernice

(1885 - 1976)

Born	18850101, Bowen Queensland Australia
Died	19761026, Edgecliff New South Wales Australia
Occupation	Photographer

Summary

Bernice Agar was a highly successful portrait photographer based in Sydney, whose work featured prominent Australian society figures. Agar was also an early fashion photographer. Widely published, her glamourous works were characterised by a strong preference for artificial light and crisp outlines. Her technique favoured strong frontal lighting. Few of her society portraits survive today.

Details

Bernice Agar was a highly successful portrait photographer of Australia's society figures and an early fashion photographer.

Agar was born in Bowen, Queensland, in 1885, to William and Isobel Agar. She was the youngest daughter of the family. She trained at the Bain Photographic Studios in Toowoomba Queensland where she worked until 1918 as chief photographer. By 1917 she had made a name for herself, with people reportedly coming 'from all over Australia to be photographed by her.' The *Darling Downs Gazette* described her as being 'just a slip of a girl. She is a born artist, [whose work is] fascinating, not only is it artistic but she gets an absolute photograph. Her posing is uncommon and original' (1917).

In 1918, Agar moved to Sydney where she opened her own studio, the Bernice Agar Studio, situated in Denison House, George Street. She specialized in stylish portraits of leading artists and society women, such as Thea Proctor, and the opera singer Clara Butt. In line with methods adopted by women photographers in the UK she would invite society figures to pose for her, providing them with free prints and selling the images to magazines, a practice also adopted by the Australian portrait photographers May and Mina Moore.

Agar's work was very popular during the 1920s and the success she enjoyed enabled her to employ a number of assistants including her sister Alice, who worked as a retoucher. Much of her work was published in the magazine *Society*, as well as Sydney Ure Smith's *The Home* magazine (1914-1926), and it was 'characterized by a strong preference for artificial light and crisp, clear outlines' (Australian Gallery Directors Council 10). The 1920s in Australia was a time when magazines such as *The Home* started to publish the names of its fashion photographers, a new development that undoubtedly contributed to Agar's success (Maynard 96-97).

Agar's technique involved the use of strong frontal lighting and compositions where the face, and the shapes and lines of the accessories and clothing, were highlighted, resulting in photographs which Barbara Hall describes as being 'softly etched with shadows.' For Hall, 'the result was often a portrait that showed women as arrogant, smouldering, penetrating, cool, sylph-like, formidable or discerning' (Hall 62), while other commentators have said they 'exude glamour and style'(National Library of Australia, *Beyond the Picket Fence*). Agar herself was known to be a very private, fashion conscious woman who dressed beautifully. Her niece recalls that Agar herself was as glamorous as any of her photographs – an observation that is confirmed by her self-portrait.

In 1933 Agar, in a quiet ceremony, married James W. Hardie, a Sydney accountant. The society papers reported that she wore 'a frock of parchment satin covered with a velvet coat of the same shade with a lovely collar of sable, into which she had tucked a spray of orchids. Her small brown velvet hat matched her furs, and the "tout ensemble" was very charming indeed.' It was at this point in her life that she gave up her studio and work. The couple did not have any children.

Only 16 tinted head studies of her family prior to her magazine work exist today. In addition to these, there are a small number of surviving photoprints of the society women and fashion photographs that were reproduced in magazines.

Jack Cato, in *The Story of the Camera in Australia*, wrote that Bernice Agar 'for over a decade held first place for her beautiful portraits of society women. When she married and retired, the leading camera men of this country breathed a sigh of relief' (Cato 136).

Bernice Agar died in Edgecliff, Sydney in 1976.

Collections

Caroline Simpson Library & Research Collection, Historic Houses Trust

Ferguson Collection, National Library of Australia

National Gallery Australia – holds the Portrait of Bernice Agar

National Library of Australia holds the only known surviving 'society portrait' taken by Agar; it is the photograph of the opera singer Clara Butt

Events

1918 - 1929
Active as a professional studio photographer

1917 - 1917
Bernice Agar exhibited her work at the Bain Photographic Studio

1981 - 1981
Bernice Agar featured in the exhibition *Australian Women Photographers 1840-1950*

1995 - 1995
Bernice Agar featured in the exhibition *Beyond the Picket Fence*

1996 - 1996
Bernice Agar featured in the exhibition *The Reflecting Eye: Portraits of Australian Visual Artists*

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

Magazine article
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
Bernice Agar is Responsible for These Charming Studies of Children, 1926,
http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/128126615

Bain Studio Exhibit, 1917,
http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/187520524

November Brides, 1923,
http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/120547235

Exhibition Catalogue
Australian Women Photographers 1840-1950, 1981

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

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

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

Book Section
Bernice Agar, 1995

Resource Section
Bernice Agar, 1995,
https://www.daao.org.au/bio/bernice-agar/

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