

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE5973

Mills, Alice

(1870 - 1929)

Born 18700101, Ballarat Victoria Australia

Died 19291231, Melbourne Victoria Australia

Occupation Photographer

Summary

Alice Mills was a top-ranking commercial photographer working in Melbourne at the turn of the twentieth century. Her studio was considered one of the best in Australia for portraiture, which took an unusual and painterly approach to tinting, capturing the sitter's colour scheme in watercolour before applying it as a tint. Her photographs were mainly gelatin silver prints.

Details

Alice Mills (also known as Alice Humphrey) was a highly successful professional photographer whose work was frequently published in magazines. She also took hundreds of portraits of young WW1 soldiers. She was born in 1870 in Ballarat, Victoria, and was one of four daughters in a lower middle class family. While she was still a child, the family moved to Wellington, New Zealand and then back to Victoria, moving firstly to Geelong and then on to Armadale in Melbourne.

Mills was trained at Emily Florence Kate O'Shanessy's photographic studio in Melbourne. She next moved to Henry Johnstone's photographic studio, also in Melbourne, where she was employed as a colourist. In 1899 she married one of her colleagues, Tom Humphrey, who was a well-known painter. He had studied at the National Gallery Art School with Arthur Streeton and Fred McCubbin and his paintings can be found in the National Gallery of Victoria's collection. The couple had no children. In 1900 Mills and Humphreys established their own photographic studio, which they called Tom Humphrey and Co., in the Centreway Arcade in Collins Street, Melbourne. Mills took over the studio from 1907 after her husband decided to concentrate on painting. She renamed it the Alice Mills Studio. It remained operative until 1927.

She was considered to be one of the top-ranking commercial photographers of the time, and was recognised as a leader in her profession. Her studio was considered one of the best studios in Australia for portraiture. The portraits she created were 'particularly notable for their unusual and painterly approach to tinting' (Australian Gallery Directors Council 21). Her portraits ranged in size from miniature to life-size, and were largely symmetrical in composition and evenly lit. The process she employed involved taking each photograph and then capturing the sitter's exact colour scheme in watercolour before applying it as a tint to the photograph *Table Talk 8*

Mills' photographs were published in quality magazines such as *Table Talk*, *Punch* and in *The Weekly Times*. One of her photographs, *Mrs Robert Brough*, was reproduced in *Camera House Beacon* in 1907, facing the title page. This is significant, since the journal included very few photographs.

Mills photographs were exhibited as part of the 1907 *First Australian Exhibition of Women's Work*. She was associated with many artists, intellectuals and musicians of the early 1900s, these included the Tom Humphreys Studio, photographers Annie May and Mina Moore, photographer and painter Henry James Johnstone, graphic designer, printmaker and painter Muriel Mary Sutherland Binney, painter May Vale, photographer, printmaker, sculptor, cartoonist/illustrator, draughtsman and painter Tom Roberts, photographer Elizabeth Nash Boothby, photographer Ruth Hollick, draughtsman, printmaker and painter Arthur Streeton, designer/curator Emily Florence Kate O'Shanessy, designer/curator Pegg Clarke, designer/curator Mary Grant Bruce, and designer/curator Una Bourne. Alice Mills retired aged fifty-two and died seven years later in 1929, having sold her studio to the female photographer Franie Young.

Technical

Her works were mainly gelatin silver prints. She may also have worked with the platinum printing method judging by the soft grey appearance of many of her photographs.

Collections

Art Gallery of New South Wales

Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne

Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales

Museum Victoria

National Gallery of Australia

National Library of Australia

National Portrait Gallery

State Library of Victoria

University of Melbourne Library

Events

1907 - 1907

Alice Mills featured in *First Australian Exhibition of Women's Work, 1907*

1995 - 1995

Alice Mills featured in the *National Women's Art Exhibition Gallery of New South Wales*

1981 - 1981

Alice Mills featured in the exhibition *Australian Women Photographers 1840-1950* at the George Paton Gallery

1995 - 1995

Alice Mills featured in the exhibition *Beyond the Picket Fence: Australian Women's Art in the National Library Collections.*

1900 - 1927

Alice Mills worked professionally

Published resources

Exhibition Catalogue

Australian Women Photographers 1840-1950, 1981

Resource

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>

Thesis

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

Book Section

Alice Mills, Hall, Barbara, 1995

Book

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

Shades of Light: Photography and Australia 1839-1988, Newton, Gael, 1988

Newspaper Article

Miss Alice Mills' Exhibition, 1906,

<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article146637511>

Painting

Half Moon Bay, Humphrey, Tom,

<http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/15138/20010830-0000/www.bayside.vic.gov.au/artstrail/artstrail-2.htm>

Author Details

Anne Maxwell (with Morfia Grondas and Lucy Van)

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