The Australian
Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE5975

Baylis, Ester

(1898 - 1990)

Born	18980524, Largs South Australia Australia
Died	19900114, Naracoorte South Australia Adelaide
Occupation	Photographer

Summary

Ester Baylis was a prize-winning Pictorialist photographer and an active member of the Adelaide Camera Club. Baylis' focus was primarily architectural photography, having previously trained in architecture. Baylis initially used a Box Brownie camera, and with prize money purchased a Thornton Pickard enlarger and an Adams Minex camera. Baylis was the first woman photographer to be included in an Australian public collection.

Details

Esther Baylis was a prize-winning Pictorialist photographer who belonged to the Adelaide Camera Club. She was born in Largs Bay, South Australia. Her family moved to Unley Park, South Australia when she was two years old, and she lived there until 1925 when she moved to England. Baylis was given a Box Brownie camera at the age of 12, the age at which she also started developing and printing her own photographs. She was a student at the Hermitage Girl's Boarding School in Geelong, Victoria which was a Private Grammar School owned and run by the Church of England. She left school at the age of seventeen, wanting to pursue a career in architecture but had to wait until she turned 18, so she returned to Adelaide where for a year she studied watercolour painting with Gwen Barringer.

Baylis began her training in architecture at the South Australian School of Mines and Industries from 1917 to about 1921. This was a four-year course that included university subjects – she went to physics and maths lectures and architectural history lectures. However, with only two subjects to go, she decided not to complete her studies even though she had been named by the Woods, Bagot, Jory and Laybourne Smith Architects with whom she was an articled pupil, as 'the most successful student in the Architecture department' (Australian Gallery Directors Council 19). Esther was to recollect that, 'I had the distinct feeling that women were not welcome in the architectural society. One prominent architect said I would never be admitted' (Australian Gallery Directors Council 19).

Her instincts turned out to be correct since she worked for Woods Bagot Jory and Laybourne Smith for four and a half years, completing her articles but without any prospect of the necessary registration to pursue a career as an architect. A draft of a letter written to her father by Laybourne Smith wrote of his concern that,

[Miss Legoe] must be prepared to meet the various grades of people employed in the Building Trades and face any slight disabilities attendant on inspection of works such as mounting scaffolds.

Disillusioned, Baylis turned her attention to photography and set up a darkroom and studio in the cellar of the family home. She was generally self-taught, apart from attending a number classes run by a member of the South Australian Photographic Society, of which she was a member.

She entered her photographs in Kodak competitions and in competitions organised by the *Australian Photography Review*, winning prizes for her work. The prize money was used to purchase a Thornton Pickard enlarger, an Adams Minex camera and a voyage by ship to England, which she embarked on in 1922. In London she was offered a position with a photography studio but declined it as she was more interested in travel and in photographing gardens and architecture.

In 1923 she returned to Australia and became a member of the Adelaide Camera Club, exhibiting her work at their annual exhibitions. Buildings were the main focus of her photographic work; she loved capturing the shadows and lines of the architectural forms she was photographing. As with the other members of the Adelaide Camera Club her photographs were in the Pictorialist style. Baylis said of photography that 'the important thing is the know-how to "compose" a picture and one must see the picture at a glance in one's mind for it to succeed' (Hall 74).

In 1925 she exhibited 24 of her photographs in the *Exhibition of Pictures and Craftwork* at the Society of Art, Adelaide. Fourteen of these were then included in the *First Exhibition of Pictorial Photography* organised by the Adelaide Photographic Society. Her photographs won her medals at the *South Australian Chamber of Manufacturers All Australian Exhibition* in 1925 and three of these photographs, *Figure Study* 1924, *Louis XIV Chapel*, *Versailles*and *Pastures*, were purchased by the Art Gallery of South Australia. This saw her being the first woman photographer to be included in an Australian public collection. Baylis had travelled to England with her sister in 1925 and it was on this trip that she became engaged to Denis Baylis (the ship's purser). They married a year later in England. The following two years saw her husband continuing in his purser's position, while she gave birth to their first child and continued with her photography. The family was also able to travel around England and Europe.

The Baylis family decided to return to Australia, settling in the south-eastern town of Binnum in South Australia, taking up farming and remaining there for the next twenty years. Ester had two children and continued her creative pursuits, attending painting classes in Adelaide, and this rather than photography became her main focus. The family moved to Balmoral, Victoria where Ester joined 'The Gropers,' a women's art group whose motto was 'groping for knowledge,' which met at the Hamilton Art Gallery each month. She began working with oils and had five exhibitions after her children had grown up. From Balmoral she moved to Clifton Springs, Victoria where she continued painting, well into her eighties.

Ester Baylis died in 1990, at the age of ninety-two.

Technical

Box Brownie camera, a Thornton Pickard enlarger and an Adams Minex camera.

Collections

National Gallery of Australia

The Art Gallery of South Australia

Events

2007 - 2008
Ester Baylis featured in A Century in Focus: South Australian Photography, 1840s-1940s.

1981 - 1981
Ester Baylis featured in the exhibition Australian Women Photographers 1840-1950

1925 - 1925
Ester Baylis featured in the Exhibition of Pictures and Craftwork at the Society of Art.

1925 - 1925
Ester Baylis featured in the First Exhibition of Pictorial Photography, Adelaide Photographic Society.

1923 - 1923
Ester Baylis was featured in the Adelaide Camera Club Annual exhibition.

1925 - 1925
Ester Baylis won medals at the South Australian Chamber of Manufacturers All Australian Exhibition.

Published resources

Exhibition Catalogue
Australian Women Photographers 1840-1950, 1981

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

A century in focus: South Australian photography, 1840s-1940s, Robinson, Julie, 2007

CD Rom
Dictionary of South Australian Photography, 1845-1915 [electronic resource], Noye, Robert J., 2007

Archival resources

State Library of Victoria
[Florado Art Exhibition: Australian Gallery File]

[Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (Portland, Vic.) : Australian Gallery File]

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