The Australian
Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE5993

Birmingham, Constance

(1909 - 1989)

Born	19090101, Perth Western Australia Australia
Died	19890916, Perth Western Australia Australia
Occupation	Photographer

Summary

Born into a wealthy, artistically inclined Western Australian family, Constance Birmingham studied painting before training as a photographer In London, with some of the leading photographers there at the time. Birmingham became a respected professional photographer specialising in portraiture, specialising in the photography of mothers and children. She died at the age of 80 in Perth.

Details

Constance Birmingham was born into a wealthy family in Perth, Western Australia. Her mother had an interest in painting, which influenced Constance's pursuit of painting at school. Constance received her first camera, a Box Brownie, before she started school and set up an improvised darkroom. Photography became a hobby for her, one which she shared with other girls at her school.

In 1936 Birmingham travelled to London and worked as a nurse for six months. She also journeyed throughout England and Scotland. Birmingham eventually enrolled in London's Regent Street Polytechnic, where she studied photography for a period of 12 months; she also attended seminars run by Kodak.

Birmingham gained an apprenticeship with one of London's leading photographers, Katherine Iddon, and worked at her Baker Street studio. She said of her time with Iddon: 'I was in the top batch from the Polytechnic and the only apprentice she had at the time. It was a great honour and a tremendous experience' (Hall 71).

During her time at the studio she gained experience in theatre work and the photography of mothers and children: 'We let the children play quietly, with music in the background, or would maybe tell them stories, then we would photograph them more or less unawares. I learnt it never paid to give orders to children – or anyone else for that matter' (Hall 71). In 1936 Birmingham returned to Perth, bringing back with her the latest in photographic trends from her three years abroad. She established her own studio at St Georges Terrace in the Colonial Mutual Building, and prior to its opening organised a solo exhibition of her portraiture to showcase her work.

In an interview reported by the*Townsville Daily Bulletin* in 1937 she noted that, 'London photographers were going in extensively for character work … and were trying to get away from the old-fashioned idea of retouching character from the face… Many women still prefer to look like smooth faced strangers in their photographs instead of letting the picture show their character.'

Birmingham's studio was very successful and her portraits, largely of women and children, were described as possessing 'Rembrandt tones' *(West Australian* 1937). Much of her work was published in the 'prestigious *Turners* magazine' (Hall 71), *The Sunday Times*, and the *Daily Mail*, as well as*The West Australian* newspaper, for which she also wrote a number of social interest articles.

While in London she took part in a photographic exhibition and received an honourable mention for one of her photographs of a yawning lion cub. She also participated in the *Exhibition of Modern Photography*, which was organised by the Professional Photographers Association, Perth in 1937, and held a solo exhibition within her studio.

Birmingham retired in 1940 and sold her camera to Mattie Hodgson. Barbara Hall suggests that Constance was greatly affected by 'the suicide of an acquaintance, who had jumped from the building her studio was in.' Birmingham began working as a nurse to support the war effort in 1940.

She continued her photography as a leisure activity and began making home movies in the 1950s, a practice she continued through to her late sixties.

Birmingham did not marry but continued her work as a nurse, specialising in the care of children until her retirement in 1971, at the age of 62.

Technical

Birmingham began using a Box Brownie camera and then moved on to a folding Kodak camera in 1926.

Events

1937 - 1938
Constance Birmingham exhibited her work at a London photographic exhibition, gaining an honourable mention for a *Study of a Yawning Lion Cub.*

1937 - 1937
Constance Birmingham's work featured in the *Exhibition of Modern Photography* orgnaised by the Professional Photographers Association of Western Australia

1937 - 1937
Solo exhibition of her portraiture

Published resources

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

Photograph
Mrs A. J. Baird, Birmingham, Constance,
http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article83197165

Newspaper Article
Exhibition of Portraiture,
http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article41280870

Hepzibah's Gossip,
http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/85595195

Nurse becomes photographer: Miss Birmingham,
http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article41264231

Social Sphere: Gossip,
http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article62791366

The Camera's Art: Exhibition of Modern Photography, 1937,
http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article41432102

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