

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE6037

Watkins, Susan Jennifer

(1912 - 2006)

Born 19120101, Perth Western Australia Australia

Died 20061231

Occupation Photographer

Summary

Susan Jennifer Watkins was a prominent Western Australian photographer. Watkins is said to be the first Western Australian woman to work on photography autonomously. She was highly regarded for her stylish portraiture.

Details

Susan Jennifer Watkins was born in Perth, 1912, and attended the St. Mary's Church of England Girl's School. During 1930, at the age of 18, she travelled to England to join her family, who had moved there following her father's retirement after working at the Royal Perth Mint. Whilst in England she had aspirations of becoming a doctor but was unable to follow this career path due to financial constraints. Instead, Watkins studied journalism and secretarial studies at the Constance Hoster Secretarial College.

Watkins's exposure to photography initially came from her brother, who was a keen amateur photographer, and later during her time working as a secretary for two directors of an American photographic company. Watkins was inspired by the work of the famous photographer Dorothy Wildings, who was known for her photographs of the Royal family.

Watkins managed to secure a placement at the Dorothy Wilding studio, one of only four other students. During her time at the studio she was taught mounting, finishing, retouching, darkroom techniques and operating work. Watkins was given the use of one of the studios for two hours each day to practice her skills; this work would then be critiqued by Wilding. Following her five years of training at the studio, Watkins stayed on for a further year, working both as an operator and an assistant. During this time she assisted Wilding in her portrait of Bernard Shaw.

In 1934 Watkins returned to Perth and set up her own a studio in St. George's Terrace with the financial support of her family and a friend. She painted her studio white and had a standardised fee schedule for each sitting. This was very unusual for the times. On average, Watkins would complete three sittings per day, and aimed to capture a 'true likeness' of her sitters. She stated that '[o]ne must feel instinctively what is vital and significant, and, by judicious selection of viewpoint, deliberate placing, [and] skilful manipulation of light, make the eye of the camera one's submissive agent and interpreter' (Hall 112).

Watkins artistic principles are evidenced in her photographs *Mr E.W. Grigg*, 1935, and *Man in profile*, which are marked by the strong contrasts she created with the use of deep shadows, dark backgrounds, and a spotlight effect on key features of the face. On the other hand, her portrait of *Miss Patricia Bird*, 1949, used an overall softness and lightness that brought out her character. Bird was positioned sitting with her hands cupping her face, drawing the viewer in.

Watkins initially operated her studio on her own, but as she became more successful was able to employ and train other women to work with her. Included among those she trained include the professional photographers Jill Crossley and Mattie Hodgson. Hodgson stepped in to run Watkins's studio in 1939 for six months due to Watkins's exhaustion, which had been caused by the high volume of studio work.

Watkins's clientele was largely made up of well-known Western Australians, as well as some international celebrities. As she gained recognition for her high standards, she was invited to join the Professional Photographers Association in 1937, and became a member of the Royal Photographic Society of London. This membership lasted until 1981, although she did not participate in any of their exhibitions. Instead, Watkins periodically organised her own exhibitions, which she mounted within her studio. These received coverage in the local press. Her photographs were published in *The West Australian*, *The Daily News* and *The Sunday Times*.

In 1946 Watkins married Gerald Hughes and by 1949 the couple decided to run the photographic studio together. This enabled Watkins to spend more time with their children. By 1958 the couple were able to move the studio to their house, at which point Watkins took over the business again until her retirement in 1978.

Susan Watkins died in 2006.

Technical

Susan Watkins worked with orthochromatic (hypochromatic) film.

Collections

John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library, Curtin University

State Library of Western Australia

Events

1935 - 1978

Susan Watkins held a number of solo exhibitions in her studio.

1937 - 1937

Susan Watkins' work featured in the *Exhibition of Modern Photography*, organised by the Professional Photographers Association of Western Australia

Published resources

Newspaper Article

Art of the Camera Seen in Fine Studio Exhibition,
<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article85174590>

Personalities Among Women,
<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article85730204>

No Photographs When Susan Watkins Weds,
<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article78822561>

Book

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

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

Archival resources

State Library of Western Australia

[\[Interview with Susan Watkins, photographer\]](#) [\[sound recording\]](#)

Author Details

Anne Maxwell (with Morfia Grondas and Lucy Van)

Created 6 December 2016

Last modified 4 July 2017