



*When HT commissioned a story on local artist, Joy Roggenkamp, writer Dale Jacobsen was delighted to find out more about her distant relative.*

*Joy's daughter Bronwyn said most people only leave a wardrobe of clothes when they die. When her mum passed away, Dale found the artist left her family a 'joyous' legacy.*

## For the Love of

# Joy



by Dale Jacobsen

**T**HIS IS A LOVE STORY. In 1945, Ross McCowan, a law student, met Joy Roggenkamp, a journalism student, at University of Queensland. He had recently returned from active service in Borneo, she was a painter. They were to spend the next 54 years together.

I have known about Joy the artist all my life – she and I share a great-grandmother. It was only after a chance meeting with her daughter, Bronwyn McCowan, that I got to know something of this remarkable woman.

"She was totally driven to paint," explains Ross, who describes his late wife as compulsive. "During her early years, with paint being in short supply and prohibitively expensive, she used water colours. That was all she could afford."

But instead of painting still life as most women did, Joy was drawn to the outdoors. She loved landscapes and seascapes. She loved nature.

For the rest of her life she explored different techniques unusual in the watercolour world. "A turning point for her was studying with Jon Molvig around 1958," explains Ross.

"She was using a delicate sable brush that I had bought for her. It cost me £5 (\$500 in today's money). Molvig snapped the brush in two and handed her a two-inch brush, saying: 'use this, and throw the paint about.' It was the making of her."

Ross left uni to enter a real estate business, ultimately becoming a very successful developer. By then, the couple had three children (Pat, Bronwyn and Paul) and Joy found the space and financial backing to devote herself to her art.

Her friends read like a who's who of the art world and included: Margaret Olley, Jon Molvig, John Rigby, Albert Tucker... She had a special friendship with Kathleen McCarthur. The two women spent many hours wandering the wallum on the Sunshine Coast, sketching and painting.

Joy's list of art awards is truly impressive, but the one she held dear was Sydney's Wynne Watercolour Prize which she won in 1962. Through it all, Ross unselfishly assisted and promoted his wife.



*Opposite page: Sixteen-year-old Joy Roggenkamp*

*Above: Bronwyn and Ross McCowan, in the gallery Ross built for his wife, Joy*

*Far left: The young McCowan family*

*Left: Joy Roggenkamp and Ross McCowan*

*Below: Plaque marks the place where Joy's ashes are buried by the door to the gallery*



"Guess who did all the framing? Guess who transported paintings all over Australia?" laughs Ross. "And guess who got the cheques?" Even after all these years, his eyes still smile with pride when he talks about her.

Molvig painted Joy's portrait in 1963 for the Archibald Prize. It made the list of finalists, but contrary to public opinion, did not win. That painting now hangs in the UQ Art Museum, returning Joy to the campus where she studied years before. Molvig was to win the Archibald in 1966 with his portrait of Charles Blackman.

In 1983, with the children gone, Ross and Joy decided it was time for a change. In some ways it was a very difficult time, but Joy painted on regardless. They moved to Maleny where Ross built a studio beside their new home. It remains stacked with an unbelievable number of paintings.

Two other awards hold pride of place in the McCowan home. In 1997 Joy received the Medal of the Order of Australia for services to the arts and a long career of art judging, both at a very high level, and the Annual Handicapped Children's Competition, which she judged for over 20 years.

Beside this medal sits the Kellion Medal awarded to people who have survived diabetes for 50 years. Joy had lived with diabetes since the age of 12. "She was a role model for people with diabetes," says Ross. "She dealt with it in her own quiet way, injecting, then getting on with life."

The illness finally took Joy in 1999, devastating Ross.

Bronwyn returned to Maleny to be near her father. "There is no denying I have inherited some of Joy's talent for painting," laughs Bronwyn, "but I am not as driven as she was. I love painting and sketching, attending classes and workshops, but I have never had an exhibition. Maybe I will, one day."

As so often happens, Joy's paintings are becoming sought after since her passing. Ross was contacted by many galleries including QUT (who now own around 40), UQ (with 20) and Queensland Art Gallery.

In 2001, artist Elizabeth Duguid approached Ross, suggesting an exhibition at the Caloundra Regional Gallery as a memorial to Joy. Ross says: "all of Joy's paintings were in heaps, mostly unframed. Liz got me motivated to get them sorted. Sir Zelman Cowan, a long-time family friend, opened the exhibition. It was a brilliant success!"

With so many people interested in Joy's paintings, Ross thought it would be nice to have at least some them on permanent display. "It wasn't terribly practical having such works of art stored away in drawers. I wanted to design a proper gallery with full gallery fittings."

The result is a beautiful space next to his home in Maleny. The gallery is separated into three spaces, each themed. I sat in one of the deep leather lounges, lost in the world that so obsessed Joy Roggenkamp.

By the door is a plaque dedicated to Joy, wife and mother. Her ashes lie beneath one of Ross's prize camellia bushes.