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The Art of Olga Horak OAM (1926–2024): A Retrospective

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Abstract

This article presents a retrospective reassessment of the art of Olga Horak (1926–2024), whose significant body of paintings and sculptures, created between the 1960s and early 1990s, remained largely unknown until the final months of her life in 2024. Prior to being recognised in Australia as a prominent Holocaust survivor and educator, Horak pursued her private passion for art, developing her skills through formal training in Sydney under painter John Ogburn and sculptor Lyndon Dadswell. Situating her work within the broader context of post-war Australian art, this study examines the influences that shaped her visual language and considers the relationship between artistic practice, memory, and testimony. It also addresses Horak's belated recognition as an artist whose oeuvre merits inclusion within modern Australian art.[1]

Key words

Olga Horak; post-war Australian art; artistic independence; Holocaust memory; émigré artist

Introduction

After surviving Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, a death march, and the murder of her parents and sister, eighteen-year-old Olga Rosenberger was liberated in April 1945. She returned to Bratislava, Czechoslovakia, married fellow survivor Jan (John) Horak (1919–2008) in 1947, and emigrated to Sydney in 1949. Soon, the couple established both a lively family and a hectic business life. A decade

1. Grateful acknowledgment is made to the reviewers and the editors of *Musings* for their valuable comments and constructive critique.

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later, while operating a successful garment-manufacturing enterprise, Horak resumed an artistic path that first began in her youth but was violently interrupted by war.[2]

In 1960, now a mother of two, and a proprietor of a successful blouse design and manufacturing business Hibodress.[3] Horak enrolled in evening art classes and set up a small basement studio in her Dover Heights home. Painting and sculpture became a renewed artistic passion that she developed over more than two decades. Working independently, and without seeking public judgment or exhibition, Horak produced a substantial body of work characterised by bold colours and intuitive handling of form set in thoughtful and disciplined compositions.

Horak began formal study at the John Ogburn Studio in The Rocks,[4] where she received rigorous training in drawing, composition, and colour. John Ogburn (1925–2010) emphasised disciplined observation, technical skill, and close study of the old masters, while encouraging students to integrate formal principles with personal experience.[5] Working primarily in oils, Horak learnt to structure compositions either from the centre outward or diagonally across the canvas, generating dynamic spatial balance and chromatic intensity. One of her early work, *William Street at Night*, would soon demonstrate Horak's developing ability to observe and transform the subject in front of her. An evening cityscape morphed into a luminous, rhythmically charged scene.[6] Her increasing confidence in handling colour and form was based on her solid technical foundation and a particular sensitivity to tone.

Ogburn himself occupied a distinctive position in the Sydney art world. Neither fully aligned with dominant modernist movements nor isolated from them, he championed a studio-centred model of artistic development grounded in perceptual discipline and intellectual autonomy. His emphasis on craft, structure, and personal visual inquiry provided an environment in which a mature student such as Horak could pursue artistic growth without pressure to conform to prevailing artistic fashions or professional expectations. His studio thus became a formative setting for Horak's emerging artistic independence.[7]

2. Details on Horak's life and early training sourced from published memoirs Olga Horak, *Auschwitz to Australia* (East Roseville: Kangaroo Press, 2000), esp. 93–111, and a series of interviews with Olga Horak, conducted by the author, December 2023–August 2024.
3. A reviewer brought to my attention that the Hibodress premises in Woolloomooloo, once vacated by the Horaks in 1970, became one of Australia's first avant-garde artist-run initiatives called Inhibodress. https://visualarts.net.au/news-opinion/2015/q-mike-parr/
4. One of the earliest art teaching studios in Sydney was established by the Hungarian émigré artist Desiderius Orban (1884–1986) at No. 2 Henrietta Lane, Circular Quay. John Ogburn (1925–2010) studied there from 1948, later assisting with teaching before founding his own art school in The Rocks in the early 1960s. See John Ogburn, "Desiderius Orban," *Art and Australia* 3, no. 1 (June 1965): 22.
5. Mark McGinness, "Portrait of the critic in the artist, John Ogburn, 1925-2010," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 February 2010; John Ogburn, "Prospectus," (c 1960), hand-written one-page manifesto distributed to students enrolled in his Studio in The Rocks. I am indebted to Susie Berk for providing a copy from Olga Horak estate.
6. Interview with Olga Horak, conducted by the author, December 2023; the artist reflected on the influence of John Ogburn's teaching.
7. Ogburn, "Prospectus".

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Her sculptural training under Lyndon Dadswell (1908–1986) at East Sydney Technical College further shaped Horak's visual language. Dadswell, a key figure in Australian post-war sculpture and the nation's first official war artist, instilled in his students a commitment to structural clarity, proportion, and "truth to materials", aligning closely with international modernist thought.[8] Under his guidance, Horak approached the human figure not as a point of trauma or testimony but as an expressive exploration of volume, gesture, and material. Her figurative studies – executed in plaster, resin, timber, soapstone, cement, wood, fibreglass, and, in one significant instance, bronze – reflect this disciplined engagement with form.[9]

Dadswell's influence extended beyond the studio. As Head of the Art Department at East Sydney Technical College, he played a formative role in shaping post-war Australian sculpture and was a key advocate for public commissions and civic works. Of coincidental relevance is his monumental sculptural relief of a seven-branched menorah carved into the façade of the building adjacent to the Sydney Jewish Museum on Darlinghurst Road, where Olga Horak later pursued her mission as a dedicated Holocaust history educator. Designed in 1965 in a boldly brutalist style, the work asserts the visual presence and symbolic gravity of one of Judaism's most enduring emblems. Today, as part of the Museum's planned expansion, it also resonates with contemporary conversations about Jewish memory and the built environment.[10]

The Sydney art scene into which Horak entered around 1960 was marked by considerable diversity. Developments of the preceding decades, described as "years of unparalleled intellectual and artistic ferment... characterized by a deep and pervasive concern for realism, the reality of human social and psychological experience..."[11] continued to resonate in the work of artists who favoured figurative painting, often associated with expressionist circles that contested the growing presence of abstraction. At the same time, the Contemporary Art Society advocated for international modernism, while a number of smaller artist-run studios fostered alternative approaches. Migrant

8. Deborah Edwards, "Dadswell, Lyndon Raymond (1908–1986)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/dadswell-lyndon-raymond-12389.

9. Olga Horak revealed during an interview in 2024 that only one of her sculptures, *Exodus* (1965), which was selected for a representative exhibition at the National Museum of Australia, Canberra, in 2008, was cast in bronze, a financially ambitious undertaking at the time, but one that signalled the artist's the personal interest in the subject. https://sydneyjewishmuseum.com.au/news/the-art-of-holocaust-survivor-olga-horak/

10. Among the earliest scholars to examine Jewish memorials in depth is James E. Young, who sought both "to reveal the many layers of meaning in these memorials and to examine the processes by which such monuments are understood." See James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), "Preface," x. For further discussion of Jewish memory and its expression in architecture and the built environment, see also Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, *Building After Auschwitz: Jewish Architecture and the Memory of the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

11. Richard Haese, *Rebels and Precursors: The Revolutionary Years of Australian Art* (Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1988), 1–7.

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artists – many of them European – were also increasingly contributing to the city's artistic life, bringing skills, training, and visual languages shaped abroad. For an artist such as Horak, whose early education had been disrupted by war, this environment offered both structure and openness: a place where technical training remained valued, yet personal exploration could unfold without rigid stylistic constraints.[12]

Within this context, Horak's decision to maintain a private, independent practice acquires added significance. She was neither part of a movement nor engaged in the professional exhibition circuit. Instead, she positioned herself at a deliberate remove from the competitive and often factionalised art world of the time. Her independence was not an absence of ambition but a sustained commitment to working on her own terms. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s she continued to develop her visual language while running the family business, maintaining that her work was "not for public eyes".[13] Only her immediate family understood the scale of her production.

Sources and Method

This study draws on several key sources. First, it reflects the author's direct viewing of the works in Horak's family home, and a series of interviews conducted with Horak between December 2023 and August 2024. Second, following Horak's death, a comprehensive online auction catalogue comprising more than two hundred paintings, drawings, and sculptures revealed for the first time the extent and variety of her artistic output.[14]

Next, the author's most extensive encounter with Horak's oeuvre undoubtedly occurred at *In Her Light*, the posthumous exhibition curated by Nina Sanadze at Melbourne's Goldstone Gallery in April 2025 – the first exhibition to assemble her works as a coherent body of art.[15] Finally, the author's research undertaken in the National Art School's archive and collection database, focusing on the 1960s and 1970s, provided contextual insight into Horak's teachers, peers, and the pedagogical environment in which she developed as an artist.[16]

12. For the diversity of the Sydney art scene in the post-war period, including the contribution of immigrant artists, see Haese, Rebels and Precursors, 258–68; Christopher Allen, Art in Australia: From Colonization to Postmodernism (London: Thames & Hudson, 1997), 113–26, 132–37, 154–59; Bernard Smith, Australian Painting 1788–2000 (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2001), esp. 382–405; Sasha Grishin, Australian Art: A History (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2013), 215–45; and Ann Stephen, Andrew McNamara, and Philip Goad (eds.), Modernism & Australia: Documents on Art, Design and Architecture 1917–1967 (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2006), 350–90.

13. Interview with Olga Horak, conducted by the author, December 2023–August 2024.

14. Theodore Bruce Auctioneers, *The Horak House*, auction catalogue, 8 December 2024, Lots 152–241, https://www.theodorebruceauctions.com.au/v1/auction-catalog/the-horak-house-rose-bay-onsite_3TIIG0DXJ4.

15. *Olga Horak: In Her Light*, Exhibition and Catalogue, Goldstone Gallery, April 2025, https://goldstonegallery.com/olga-horak

16. National Art School (NAS), East Sydney Technical College Archives and Art Collection Database (1960s–1980s), accessed in person in September 2025; thanks are extended to Dr Deborah Beck and Sonia Legge for facilitating access. Horak's period of study coincided with that of fellow students, some of whom later became prominent Australian artists and art teachers, including Ann Thomson (born 1933), Una Foster (1912–1996), Guy Warren (1921–2024) and Bruce Goold (1948–2025).

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Because many of Horak's works are undated, unsigned, or untitled, a strictly chronological reconstruction is not feasible. This study therefore adopts a visual and comparative approach, grouping selected works according to subject, style, and technique. To contextualise her artistic development, the discussion begins with an overview of Sydney's visual art scene around 1960—the year Horak first enrolled in an evening art class to pursue painting.

Australian Visual Art During the 1960s

The post-war cultural landscape in Australia was transformed by the arrival of European émigrés – Holocaust survivors among them – whose intellectual breadth and artistic training broadened the country's cultural horizons.[17] Within this milieu, Olga Horak, a multilingual and elegant young woman in her late twenties, arrived in Sydney carrying the weight of profound trauma but also the determination characteristic of many post-war migrants' intent on rebuilding their lives. Although her own artistic practice remained private, her re-engagement with art emerged within a rapidly changing environment that increasingly welcomed modernist ideas and international influences.

In the early 1950s, abstract painting in Sydney remained largely geometric, drawing on constructivist principles. Australian artists and audiences were still cautious in their embrace of European modernism. Sculptors, rather than painters, often led early experimentation, exploring new materials and expressive forms. Lyndon Dadswell – already discussed as Horak's teacher – was among the most prominent figures encouraging students to expand beyond academic realism. His emphasis on research, experimentation, and international perspectives resonated strongly in a post-war generation seeking new artistic vocabularies.[18]

A pivotal cultural moment occurred in 1953 with the arrival of *French Painting Today*, an international touring exhibition that brought original works by Braque, Chagall, Derain, Dufy, Ernst, Matisse, Picasso, Rouault, Utrillo, and

17. On the influence of European-trained émigré artists on post-war Australian art education and studio culture, see Bernard Smith, Australian Painting 1788–2000 (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2001), esp. 360–90; Sasha Grishin, *Australian Art: A History* (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2013), 200–30; and Ann Stephen, Andrew McNamara, and Philip Goad (eds.), *Modernism & Australia: Documents on Art, Design and Architecture 1917–1967* (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2006), esp. 300–60. *Migration and Modernism: Émigré Artists in POst-War Australia*, National Gallery of Australia, forthcoming exhibition May 2026, https://nga.gov.au/exhibitions/migration-and-modernism/. For the Sydney teaching context, including the role of émigré artists such as Desiderius Orban and the emphasis on discussion-based studio practice, see John Ogburn, "Desiderius Orban," *Art and Australia* 3, no. 1 (June 1965): 20–23.

18. Bernard Smith, *Australian Painting, 1788–2000* (Oxford University Press, 2001), vi–vii, 333–418, 452–94.

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Vlaminck to Australian audiences. It was widely regarded as the most significant post-war exhibition yet seen in the country, offering an unprecedented encounter with the breadth of twentieth-century European modernism. Its impact extended well beyond the gallery through catalogues, reviews, and sustained public debate.[19]

There are no records that would indicate Horak's knowledge of the exhibition. Such cultural events probably contributed to a broader moment of aesthetic curiosity and renewal – conditions that later helped foster the environment in which Horak resumed her artistic development. According to Susie Berk, the artist's daughter, Horak did not visit art exhibitions or art public lectures in Sydney during the period under review. She was, however, an avid reader of art history literature, and her bookshelves contained a range of reference works, monographs, and instructional texts, including the instructive art anatomy manual, *The Human Machine* by George Bridgman, as well as exhibition catalogues on French sculptor Auguste Rodin, Austrian Expressionist painter Egon Schiele, and various Old Masters.[20]

By the 1960s, Australian art had entered a more dynamic phase. At its centre was the East Sydney Technical College – later the National Art School – widely regarded as the heart of post-war art education in Sydney. Located within the former sandstone buildings of the Darlinghurst Gaol, the school became an incubator for modernist ideas, combining traditional disciplinary foundations with growing exposure to international trends. In 1955 it formally became an independent institution, and in the years that followed, an enormous influx of evening students, many of them working adults, reshaped the composition of its classes. Life drawing remained the core of its curriculum, but its teachers were practising artists whose approaches were informed by abstraction, expressionism, and minimalism. Visiting exhibitions, artist talks, and an increasingly international intellectual climate made the school a place of openness and experimentation.[21]

For Jewish émigré artists such as Horak – who had lived through both cultural richness and profound destruction –

19. Smith, *Australian Painting*. For a broad survey of post-war art developments in international art, see H. W. Janson and Anthony F. Janson, *Janson's Basic History of Western Art,* eighth edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson 2009), esp. chap. 28, "Postwar to Modern, 1945-1980," 596–614.
20. Interviews with Susie Berk conducted by the author, May–August 2024.
21. Deborah Beck, *National Art School* (2010), https://dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/national_art_school.

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the National Art School offered an ideal context in which to pursue or rediscover creative identity. Her drawings from this period, later found in her family home, include life studies, figurative explorations, abstract experiments, and sketches for sculptural forms. Executed with fluency and immediacy, they reveal both the discipline she acquired and the delight she took in the physical act of drawing. They also testify to her strong foundation in observational technique, an element particularly valued within the College's teaching philosophy.

As mentioned earlier, Horak studied alongside a generation of post-war students who were reshaping Sydney's artistic culture.[22] Among her cohort were artists such as Klaus Friedeberger, Frank Hinder, Ann Thomson, and others who combined rigorous drawing with experimental approaches to colour and form. Many had been taught by émigré artists who had fled Europe and whose own training reflected Central European, German, or French modernist traditions. Within this collegial environment, students would likely engage in lively dialogue – formal and informal – about materials, composition, and visual expression.[23] Although Horak's practice remained deeply private, her work developed in parallel with this broader redefining of Australian art. She absorbed the visual languages circulating around her and applied them with independence in her home studio.

The wider artistic culture of post-war Australia was significantly enriched by the presence of émigré artists such as Desiderius Orban, Judy Cassab, and Klaus Friedeberger, whose varied practices introduced new modes of expression. Orban's expressionist palette, Cassab's psychologically attuned portraiture, and Friedeberger's abstract compositions expanded the Australian understanding of modernism and encouraged dialogue between local and European traditions. Their influence helped shift Australian painting away from the conservative tendencies and nationalist frameworks that had dominated earlier decades, ushering in greater cosmopolitanism and technical diversity.[24]

Against this background, Horak's independence becomes

22. National Art School (NAS), East Sydney Technical College Archives and Art Collection Database (1960s–1980s).
23. See Smith, *Australian Painting*; Grishin, *Australian Art*, 200–30; and Stephen, McNamara, and Goad (eds.), *Modernism & Australia*.
24. Ian Milliss, *Modernism in Sydney and International Trends* (Penrith Regional Gallery & The Lewers Bequest, 2017), 84–91.

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especially striking. While she shared the training, discipline, and curiosity of her peers, she chose not to pursue public exhibition or professional artistic identity. Instead, she cultivated a practice centred on personal exploration, technical engagement, and expressive immediacy. Her work thus occupies a parallel trajectory to the modernisation of Australian art: shaped by its pedagogical structures and cultural shifts, yet developed deliberately outside its institutional frameworks. Her drawings and sculptures from this period reveal an artist deeply embedded within the intellectual and artistic climate of the 1960s, even as she maintained a private sanctuary for her creative life.

Olga Horak's Art Themes

Mother and Child

Among the most persistent and significant motifs in Olga Horak's oeuvre is the image of the mother and child. This subject appears to hold symbolic and deeply personal significance, perhaps evoking lost parents and family. She returned to this motif repeatedly, each time exploring variations of form, gesture, and emotional charge. This return to a central figure reflects the influence of the formalist training she received at East Sydney Technical College, where drawing from life formed the core of the curriculum and abstraction was strongly encouraged as a language of emotional and compositional experimentation.

One of the paintings in this theme group (Fig 1) is strikingly reminiscent of Picasso's Cubist compositions – its contours, curved planes, and centralised spiral form suggesting motherhood, embrace and enclosure. This enveloping composition with rounded limbs and torsos folding into each other remained characteristic of Horak's treatment of the subject in later years as she progressed with her painting and sculpting. These artworks, most likely created in her home studio, show clear stylistic affiliations with European modernism, and as mentioned, particularly with the late Cubist style of Picasso.

Fig. 1

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The sculptural relief *Mother Protecting Child* (Fig 2), now in the collection of the Sydney Jewish Museum,[25] demonstrates Horak's ability to translate pictorial ideas into three-dimensional form. Executed in plaster of Paris and coated in fibreglass, the work replaces visual density with a sense of stillness. The two elongated figures are framed by a stylised branch. Their bowed heads suggest quiet reflection or prayer. This almost one-meter-tall relief artwork expresses the artist's personal experience of loss and survival. It was donated by Horak to the Sydney Jewish Museum in memory of her parents and sister, who were murdered in the Holocaust.

Material here is not incidental. Fibreglass – a synthetic, post-war industrial compound – carries associations of modern fabrication and durability, as well as novel possibilities for experimental sculptural creations.[26] Its use by Horak in a memorial context creates tension between the fragility of the subject and the resilience of the material. The embossed copper backing introduces a liturgical undertone, recalling repoussé surfaces of European ecclesiastical artefacts.

The elongated proportions and pierced compositional framing recall British organic abstraction associated with two leading figures of British modernist sculpture, Henry Moore (1898–1986) and Barbara Hepworth (1903–1975), an influence mediated to Horak by her sculptor-teacher Lyndon Dadswell. Yet Moore's monumental works typically explore universal maternity, while Horak's scale remains intimate and personal.

The small wall-mounted relief *Mother and Child* (Fig 3), another piece in the collection of the Sydney Jewish Museum,[27] presents two stylised, gilded figures in quiet, yet expressive contrast. The mother turns away and raises her hand to cover her face, while the child reaches toward her. The work evokes a sorrowful moment of separation – personal and archetypal. Though the child reaches out, the mother withdraws, embodying the unbearable loss Horak herself experienced when her mother died in Bergen-Belsen on the day of liberation. In both theme and material, the piece carries a quiet monumentality. It is both testimon-

Fig. 2

Fig. 3

25. Sydney Jewish Museum Collection Database, M1999/025, https://sjm-web.adlibhosting.com/AIS/Details/museum/4400.
26. Danielle O'Steen, "Eva Hesse and plastic: a study of collaborative fabrication," *Sculpture Journal* 33, no. 4 (2024): 507–23.
27. Sydney Jewish Museum Collection Database, https://sjm-web.adlibhosting.com/AIS/Details/museum/6084.

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ial and symbolic, memorialising not only one mother but the irretrievable loss of countless others. In Horak's own words, it symbolised "the exodus of the Jewish people – the going away and not returning."[28]

The largest sculpture in this thematic group, titled *Family* (Fig 4) stood for decades in the front garden of Horak's home. Cast in fibreglass and painted in dark bronze tones, the multi-figure composition consists of four abstracted human forms, their elongated limbs and vertical massing enclosing a shared central space. The aperture carved through the middle of the work invites light, shadow, and interpretation. Its formal vocabulary recalls once more the modernist idiom of Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth, both artists who influenced Horak's sculptor-teacher Lyndon Dadswell and were central to the East Sydney Technical College teaching environment in the 1960s and 70s. Yet Horak's use of these forms is distinct: her *Family* figures cluster, not in embrace, but in a moment of stillness, they appear interdependent, yet emotionally restrained. Their interlinked presence and simultaneous apartness suggest both connection and separation, echoing the experiences of Holocaust survivors rebuilding fractured family lives in Australia.


Fig. 4

These two works mark an apparent evolution in Horak's visual language – from the intimate expression of grief embodied in the mother-and-child pair to a more universal, yet equally poignant, meditation on the fragility of family and memory. In her hands, fibreglass – an industrial, post-war material – became a vessel for layered emotion, transformed through gesture, surface, and spatial modulation.

Parallel to Olga Horak's explorations of the *Mother and Child* theme is a large public sculpture *Earth Mother* (Fig 5) created in the 1950s by her contemporary, Anita Aarons (1912–2000). Commissioned by the City Council and installed in the children's playground near St Mary's Cathedral in Sydney, Aarons' sculpture presents a modernist vision of maternal protection shaped for everyday interaction. Made in reinforced concrete and painted in soft tones of grey and rose, the work's biomorph-


Fig. 5

28. Comment by Olga Horak to the author, early 2015.

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ic forms suggest both shelter and intimacy: a reclining and a seated figure arranged in an open, non-literal embrace. Its sensuous curves and hollowed interiors invite children to climb and rest within the sculpture, fusing art, play, and archetype in a way that foreshadows community-based sculpture practices in Australia.[29]

In its form, the *Earth Mother* sculpture suggests the established influence of Henry Moore, whose work both Aarons and Horak would have encountered through the teaching environment at East Sydney Technical College and through exhibitions of the period, though less so for Horak. Moore's modernist abstraction of the reclining figure, his emphasis on negative space, and his sensitivity to human form rendered monumental had wide-ranging impact on post-war sculpture. In Aarons' case, these ideas were translated into a civic idiom; in Horak's, they were internalised and refracted through personal memory and private scale. Both artists, however, engaged in a visual language that was recognisably modernist and materially innovative, turning to synthetic compounds such as fibreglass or concrete, and adapting international aesthetics to local Australian contexts. While one belongs in a room interior, and the other in a public park, both works reflect the art of women artists of the post-war generation.

The City

By late 1960s, after five years of evening art classes under John Ogburn, Olga Horak's artistic style and technique had matured with notable confidence. Her later paintings stand out for their assured compositions, expressive linearity, and a bolder use of colour – often structured through intuitive forms and dynamic spatial arrangements. She daringly experimented with oil on board, frequently applying thick layers of pigment with a palette knife to create textured, impasto surfaces. This gave her work a tactile dimension, where the physicality of paint became inseparable from emotional expression.

Already mentioned, the *William Street at Night* painting (1963), one of Horak's most vibrant and resolved works (Fig 6), reimagines a familiar Sydney streetscape not as a

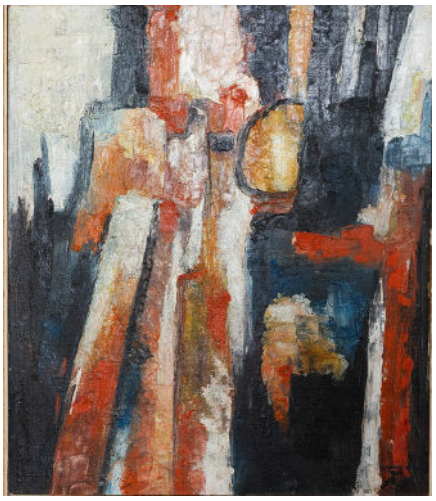

Fig. 6

29. *Earth Mother Play Sculpture*, https://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/sculptures/earth-mother-play-sculpture.

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sombre passageway, but as a joyful abstraction of light and energy. The painting pulses with vertical bands of red, orange, black, and white, intersected by glowing circular forms that hint at streetlamps or passing headlights. Dense impasto and scraped textures animate the surface, particularly in the heavy verticals and central sphere. Rather than depicting the city in literal terms, Horak imbues it with an almost musical rhythm – transforming the night, traditionally associated with fear, into a moment of brightness and renewal. In her own words, this painting marked the moment when "a dark night could be colourful and happy," and her expressive palette "blossomed bright again,"[30] suggesting colour as psychological reclamation.

While Olga Horak worked independently and outside formal art exhibitions of the time, her abstract urban works nonetheless resonate with the visual language explored by several of her Australian contemporaries. The energetic verticals and palette-knife textures in *William Street at Night* evoke parallels with the work of John Passmore (1904–1984)[31] and Ralph Balson (1890–1964)[32] two Australian artists, both of whom experimented earlier with expressive abstraction rooted in geometry and material presence. Passmore's gestural surfaces and Balson's structured colour rhythms predate Horak's interest in movement and mood rather than literal place. Her tactile impasto technique also recalls that of Judy Cassab (1920–2015)[33], a fellow Jewish émigré artist and friend, whose palette-knife portraits from the 1960s balance formal construction with emotional depth. There is, too, a certain kinship with the cubist-inflected urban scenes of Hungarian-born Desiderius Orban (1884–1986)[34] whose art, as discussed earlier, shaped Sydney's mid-century modernist sensibility. Yet Horak's cityscapes remain uniquely her own: intimate in scale and emotionally charged. By contrast, the monochromatic *Cityscape* (Fig 7) adopts fractured perspective and angular disjunction. We observe buildings tilt, streets collide, and shadow elongate. In monochromatic greys and angled lines Horak created a fractured perspective of buildings and roads. The composition evokes a sense of disorientation, recalling the

Fig. 7

30. Jana Vytrhlik, "Remembering an Artist: Olga Horak OAM (1926-2024), In Her Light," exhibition catalogue essay, Goldstone Gallery, April 2025.
31. John Passmore, https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/?artist_id=passmore-john.
32. Ralph Balson, https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/artists/balson-ralph/.
33. Judy Cassab, https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/artists/cassab-judy/.
34. John Ogburn, "Desiderius Orban," *Art and Australia* 3, no. 1 (June 1965): 14-23; and Desiderius Orban, https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/64.1972/.

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psychological tension of the Norwegian pioneer Expressionist Edvard Munch's urban paintings of the early decades of the 1900s. Here, Horak channels emotion through distortion – eliminating human figures but retaining the weight of presence and absence. The elongated shadows and austere palette suggest an emotional undercurrent of post-war disquiet, a city still shadowed by memory.

Still Life

Among the identifiable works from Olga Horak's art lessons are several still lifes painted during her studies with John Ogburn in the mid-1960s. One of them, *Still Life with Fish* (Fig 8) can be directly compared to Ogburn's painting of the same subject and setting, *Mullet* (Fig 9). Both works were evidently executed in the same studio session, depicting the identical motif: two fish placed diagonally across a crumpled newspaper and a toned cloth, accompanied by pieces of citrus fruit.

Fig. 8

Ogburn's composition is bold and architectonic. The perspective is deliberately flattened, the brushstrokes thick and structural, and the palette dominated by greys, mauves, and earthy greens. The arrangement reflects Ogburn's modernist interest in French painter Cézanne's geometry and spatial rhythm, where every line contributes to a visual architecture of balance and order. Ogburn's emphasis on compositional logic and tonal contrast served as both instruction and challenge to his students.

Horak's *Fish* reveals her effort to be an attentive student while also asserting her artistic independence. Her handling of paint is looser, and her brushwork more responsive to texture and light. The composition retains Ogburn's structural order but is softened by tonal warmth and sensitivity to surface. Pale blue and yellow undertones, together with a gentler rendering of the fish and cloth, introduce a lyrical quality absent from her teacher's more rigid execution. Horak's background is less defined, suggesting a more open space rather than a firm, enclosed composition seen in Ogburn's work.

Fig. 9

During the mid-twentieth century, still life was regarded

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as a fundamental discipline in art education across Australian art schools. At East Sydney Technical College, it was grounded in European academic tradition but crosspollinated with modernist sensibility. It formed the basis of both drawing and painting instruction, offering students a means to study proportion, tone, colour harmony, and compositional structure. Under the guidance of practising artists such as John Ogburn and Lyndon Dadswell, students were encouraged to move beyond literal observation and to consider the expressive possibilities of form and surface. Traditional still-life arrangements – fruit, bottles, drapery, and reflective vessels – were used not only to train the eye but also to instil an awareness of rhythm, balance, and spatial tension. The photographic record (Fig 10) from the NAS collection shows this pedagogical environment in practice: modest classroom settings where easels surrounded a central arrangement of objects illuminated by directional light. It is not difficult to imagine Olga Horak, a young woman artist, absorbed in her work on the subject in front of her.

Fig. 10

From Figurative to Form and Colour

Horak's later canvases of the 1970s mark a clear shift towards an emphasis on colour and form. Her figurative works, likely produced during evening classes, are dominated by blue, yellow, and red, and treat colour and form as the primary means of expression. In the painting depicting the concentrated activity of fellow students (Fig 11), Horak reduces the figures to interlocking planes of colour, dissolving bodily form into a unified pictorial surface. In the *Nude* (Fig 12), arcs and flattened planes of vivid colour replace descriptive modelling, as contours give way to pure form and rhythm. While comparisons may be drawn with John Coburn (1925–2006), whose use of pure colour and organic abstraction helped define the Australian modernist style,[35] Horak's approach remains distinct. Her abstractions were not decorative nor theoretical. Her art was based on emotions and the energy of renewal. She boldly experimented with the material qualities of oil paint,

Fig. 11

Fig. 12

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employing the palette knife technique in thick layers on both board and canvas (Fig 13). Resulting impasto surfaces feature physical presence of peaks and ridges of the medium. In this context, colour probably served to Horak as a metaphor for her regained vitality reclaimed in her new life in Sydney after previous tragic loss.

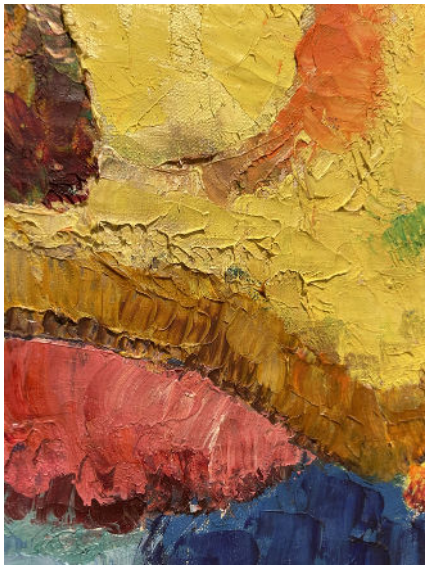

Fig. 13

The Nude

The survey of Olga Horak's art themes concludes with this powerful figurative study (Fig 14). Painted in oil with rapid, confident brushstrokes, the composition captures a semi-reclining female nude, positioned diagonally across a warm, untreated ground. The nude's form is defined not by outline but by dynamic areas of colour – ochres, greens, blacks, and flashes of crimson – applied again with a palette knife and brush, at times verging on impasto.

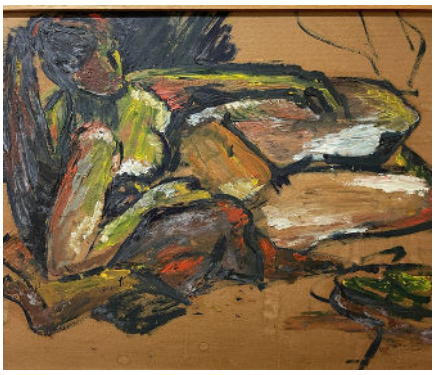

Fig. 14

The painting synthesises Horak's formal trajectory. While the subject matter is classical – a reclining nude, almost odalisque-like in pose – the execution is modernist, revealing Horak's certain awareness of post-war expressionist trends. The brushwork – at times recalling expressionist intensity associated with, for example, Austrian artist Oskar Kokoschka (1886–1980)[36] and his intense portraits and figures. The model is not idealised but observed with empathy and intimacy.

In the context of gendered modernism, where women artists often worked within male-dominated art schools, Horak's confident treatment of the nude demonstrates technical skill and authority. Her work avoids both sentimentality and eroticism, presenting the body as an artistic exploration rather than as a spectacle.

Olga Horak's Art

Olga Horak saw herself as "an amateur who loves colours,"[37] and her artistic achievements remained silent for decades. Despite her profound talent, her artwork stayed largely hidden during her lifetime; as she herself acknowledged, she never felt the ambition to exhibit. What has now emerged from storage and private walls is not a

35. John Coburn is represented in Australian public and private collections, see for example the 1974 portrait of Vaike Liibus https://www.portrait.gov.au/portraits/2015.96/john-coburn.
36. Oskar Kokoschka https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/?artist_id=kokoschka-oskar.
37. Interview with Olga Horak, conducted by the author, December 2023–August 2024.

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casual pastime but a long-term project of self-discovery in *paint and clay*.

> Art brought me back to my youth, to the times when I first discovered the joy of creating. I didn't need anybody's opinion then, and I don't need it now. My paintings and sculptures are not for public eyes. They were my diary when the words failed me. Over and over again, my art brought me the happiness that is hard to find in other aspects of one's life.[38]

This testimony underscores the transformative power of her creativity. For Horak, art was not only a rediscovered passion but a process of lifelong restoration, a sustained return to self. What began as modest evening classes in drawing and sculpture became an intense, disciplined practice that articulated survival in visual form. Within the broader landscape of survivor art in the post-war period, such a coherent, privately maintained oeuvre is rare, particularly in the Australian context. As a Jewish émigré, Horak shared certain experiential affinities with Judy Cassab, but unlike Cassab she did not pursue a public exhibiting career or a program of portrait commissions. Her urban abstractions and family sculptures are instead characterised by modest scale and an inward orientation; their address is intimate rather than spectacular. In this, she belongs to a quiet modernism whose strength lies in concentration rather than assertion.

Art, for Horak, was not a career but a return – a return to youth, to colour, to agency, and to the human form. It was, as she described, a diary when words failed. That diary is now opened to scholarly scrutiny. To position Olga Horak convincingly within Australian art history is to recognise both the limits of her public artistic visibility and the distinctiveness of her aesthetic legacy, and to acknowledge that significance can reside in the private studio no less than in the public gallery.

Horak's art does not depict atrocity directly. Instead, it distils trauma into contrasting forms and compositional elements: vertical elongation and central voids; chromatic renewal in urban abstractions and tactile impasto that

36. Oskar Kokoschka https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/?artist_id=kokoschka-oskar.
37. Interview with Olga Horak, conducted by the author, December 2023–August 2024.
38. Interview with Olga Horak, conducted by the author, December 2023–August 2024.

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asserts material presence. Her art does not illustrate suffering; it transforms it. Nowhere is this more evident than in her sketches and paintings of the nude male and female body, created during her classes at East Sydney Technical College, where life drawing was taught as essential for understanding proportion, anatomy, and form. For Horak, however, the act of drawing the unclothed human body appears to have carried a more personal charge.

Surviving the horrors marked by the dehumanisation of Nazi persecution, the act of drawing the nude may have carried for Horak a significance that exceeded technical discipline. It could be read as a symbolic reclamation of the human form itself. Her charcoal and pencil sketches reveal a disciplined hand and a measured attention to structure, yet also an unexpected tenderness of line. Unlike the more gestural or exaggerated figure studies produced by some contemporaries, Horak's nudes often appear introspective: their contours softened and enfolded, their postures composed rather than exposed. In several works, the body turns inward, resting or abstracted almost to the point of emblem, suggesting that for Horak the figure was less a subject to be displayed than a locus of quiet meditation on endurance, vulnerability, and renewal.

In the words of Nina Sanadze of the Goldstone Gallery, "Olga's exhibition was wildly successful – visitation, public response, and sales were all remarkable. People were deeply moved and impressed by her work and the story behind it. It remains one of the most colourful, joyful, and memorable shows we've had, running for two months with many guided talks."[39] All proceeds from the exhibition were directed to support the film maker Danny Ben-Moshe's documentary on cancelled Jewish artists in Australia and the recent rise of antisemitism. "I hope this would have made Olga happy—her paintings continue to support causes she dedicated her life to, even after her passing,"[40] Sanadze concluded. The exhibition thus formed a postscript to Horak's life, enabling her work to contribute to contemporary debates on antisemitism, and Holocaust memory.

39. Interview and email correspondence with Nina Sanadze, conducted by the author, April 2025–January 2026.
40. Interview and email correspondence with Nina Sanadze, conducted by the author, April 2025–January 2026.

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Conclusion

By bringing Olga Horak's art from private setting into academic discussion, this article examines the significance of her work within Australian art history. Her paintings and sculptures extend the narrative of post-war Australian modernism and deepen our understanding of the visual afterlives of the Holocaust. Horak's art, until recently confined to the home studio, now enters the shared domain of cultural memory and invites further scholarly attention.

Fig. 15

This study also highlights the need for wider research in this area. Perhaps surprisingly, as recently noted by art historian Lynne Swarts, while the collections of the Jewish Museums in Sydney and Melbourne contain both original Holocaust artworks created in concentration camps and works created from memory after the war, scholarly publication on Holocaust representation in Australian art remains limited.[41] Horak's work therefore provides an important point of departure for comparative studies of Holocaust survivors artists in Australia whose contributions have yet to be fully recognised.

In retrospect, and in line with early twenty-first-century art historical scholarship, Olga Horak's art – whether depicting still life, the nude, or portraiture – may best be understood as a reinterpretation of historical experience. As pioneered in the Routledge research series on art history, such an approach moves away from a "linear narrative of facts" towards a "dynamic collection of memories … that simultaneously move in multiple directions across time and space."[42] For the viewer, even if not originally intended by the artist, Horak's art thus opens new interpretive possibilities for understanding the meanings of history. This "multi-modal perspective," in turn, advances our perception of "history as a lived and living experience,"[43] perceived through multiple senses.

Olga Horak's art represents a rare genre in post-war Australia and is possibly amongst the first of its kind worldwide. It is the work of a Holocaust survivor committed to preserving the truthful memory of the Shoah victims, while doing so through the joy of artistic creation. Motivated by her genuine love of art and creativity that provided an

41. See Lynne Swarts, "Imaging the Unimaginable: Holocaust Representation in Australian Art, 1937 to the present," in T*he Palgrave Handbook of Australia and the Holocaust*, ed. Avril Alba and Jan Láníček (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming 2026). The forthcoming chapter examines artistic responses to the Holocaust in Australia, including works by Judy Cassab (1920–2015), Walter Preisser (1891–1981), Mirka Mora (1928–2018) and Alan Moore (1914–2015).

42. Dipti Desai, Jessica Hamlin, and Rachel Mattson, *History as Art, Art as History: Contemporary Art and Social Studies Education* (New York and London: Routledge, 2010), 64.

43. Desai et al., *History as Art, Art as History*, 64.

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outlet for expressing her trauma and resilience, her art demonstrates how creative practice can serve as a form of long-term restoration. It also invites us to consider memory not only as testimony spoken in the public sphere, but as a visual force sustained over many years within the solitude of the artist's studio.

FIGURE CAPTIONS

Fig 1. Olga Horak (1926–2024), *Mother and Child*, 1960s, oil on canvas paper, 95 x 81 cm, private collection. Photo author.

Fig 2. Olga Horak (1926–2024), *Mother Protecting Child*, 1980s, bas-relief, plaster of Paris, copper-wooden mount, 91 x 28.5 x 2.5 cm, Sydney Jewish Museum, M1999/025. https://sjm-web.adlibhosting.com/AIS/Details/museum/4400

Fig 3. Olga Horak (1926–2024), *Mother and Child*, 1980s, polyester foam, resin-gold patina, marble mount, 18 x 15 x 3 cm, Sydney Jewish Museum, M2010/066. https://sjm-web.adlibhosting.com/AIS/Details/museum/6084

Fig 4. Olga Horak (1926–2024), *The Family*, 1966, cement fibre glass, coated, 163 x 100 cm, private collection. Photo Giselle Haber.

Fig 5. Anita Aarons (1912–2000), *Earth Mother*, 1952, patinated cement, 120 x 168 cm, playground sculpture, Cook + Phillip Park, 4 College Street, Sydney. Photo Mark Pokorny, City of Sydney.

Fig 6. Olga Horak (1926–2024), *William Street at Night*, 1963, oil on canvas paper, 45 x 38 cm, private collection. Photo Giselle Haber.

Fig 7. Olga Horak (1926–2024), *Cityscape*, 1970s, oil on canvas paper, 92 x 81 cm, private collection. Photo author.

Fig 8. Olga Horak (1926–2024), *Still Life with Fish*, 1960s, oil on paper canvas, 90 x 62 cm, private collection. Photo author.

Fig 9. John Ogburn (1925–2010), Mullet on Newspaper, 1960s, oil on canvas, 60 x 70cm, private collection. Photo Maitland Regional Art Gallery (2014) © John Ogburn Estate.

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Fig 10. *Still life painting class*, 1960s, National Art School (NAS), East Sydney Technical College Archives and Art Collection Database, Photograph ARS2009.170.

Fig 11. Olga Horak (1926–2024), *Figurative*, 1970s, oil on canvas, 65 x 51 cm, private collection. Photo author.

Fig 12. Olga Horak (1926–2024), *Nude*, 1970s, oil on canvas, 51 x 60 cm, private collection. Photo author.

Fig 13. Olga Horak (1926–2024), Detail of Fig 12. Impasto surface, palette knife technique. Photo author.

Fig 14. Olga Horak (1926–2024), *Nude*, 1962, oil on board, 49 x 69 cm, private collection. Photo author.

Fig 15. Olga Horak (1926–2024) with her sculpture *The Family* (Fig 4) in front of her family house in Sydney in 2023. Photo Robert Brestan. https://hlidacipes.org/sousede-nas-udali-a-dodnes-lide-ziji-s-vecmi-ktere-nam-ukradli-vypravi-olga-horak/

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