

Vale Judy Cassab

While best known for her portraits, the late artist found her most distinct voice as a painter of landscapes, writes **Anne Ryan**.

Judy Cassab AO, who died in November, was a well-loved and highly regarded artist whose fame drew as much from her skills as a portraitist as from her extraordinary life, retold in her diaries published in 1995, and in Brenda Niall's biography of 2005.

One of the most successful migrant artists of her generation, Cassab fled war-shattered Europe to settle in Sydney in 1951. Her career was to become inextricably linked with this city, and the Art Gallery of New South Wales in particular. In less than a decade, she had won the Archibald prize with a portrait of her friend and fellow émigré artist, Stanislaus Rapotec, and then went on to win it again in 1967 with another artist's portrait, this time of Margo Lewers – a first for a woman artist in the history of the prize. This cemented her reputation with the public, inspiring portrait commissions from society and business identities, celebrities and even minor royalty.

Cassab loved to draw and the company of others, especially artists. She regularly met with her peers including Kevin Connor, Margaret Woodward and Nora Heysen to draw from the model and enjoy conversation and friendship. Her affinity for people and sharp perception of character were evident in portraiture and life studies of great clarity and insight.

While Cassab's strength was undeniably in figurative art, a trip to Europe in 1957 sparked a



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new urge in her to explore abstraction. In Paris she saw paintings by artists such as Hartung, Soulages and Manessier that had their source in nature which was to prove a revelation – here she was finally able to see a way to approach abstraction in her own work. It was reinforced only two years later, when on a trip to Uluru and the Olgas, the desert landscape struck a powerful and lasting chord with her, and confirmed for her that emigration to Australia had been the right choice.

From that moment until her last decades working, Cassab continued to explore and reinvent landscape as a subject, one that could truly challenge her, and where she found her most distinct voice as an artist.

Cassab served as a Trustee of the Art Gallery of New South Wales from 1980-88, was a Society member for many years and in the 1990s donated a large number of her works to the collection, broadening our holdings to include drawings, prints and especially landscapes in addition to the portraits already in the collection.

The Gallery now has over 60 works by Cassab, from an early still life painting made in Hungary in 1947 to a powerful watercolour of a Central Australian desert hillside from 2003. She has left an indelible mark on the story of Australian art, and on this Gallery.

Anne Ryan is Curator, Australian prints, drawings & watercolours.