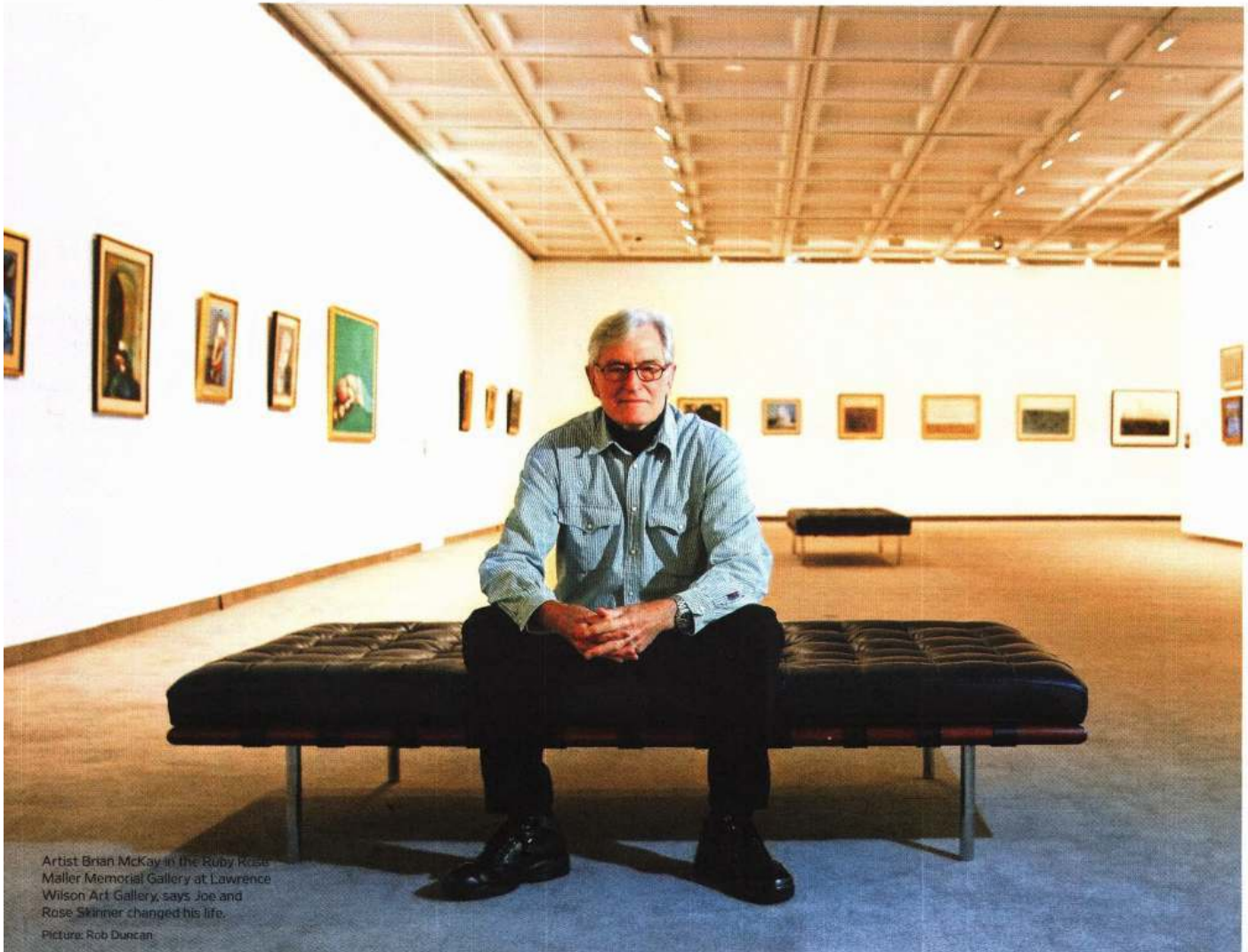




culture



Artist Brian McKay in the Ruby Rose Maller Memorial Gallery at Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, says Joe and Rose Skinner changed his life.
Picture: Rob Duncan

The Skinner legacy

Fifty years ago the direction of WA art changed forever through the influence of art pioneers Joe and Rose Skinner. **Patrick Cornish** looks at the impact the Skinners had on the art scene.



Windscreen wipers, said the painter to the prince, were wonderful for adding distinctive streaks to one's work.

"Oh, yes," Sidney Nolan revealed, as the Duke of Edinburgh, hands respectfully behind his back, continued to inspect the works. "I started using them while painting in Greece. Bought a dozen rubber blades. Most effective."

The eminent visitor and the artist were deep in conversation, at a gallery only one good drop kick from Perth's Parliament House, thanks to a remarkable woman, part dynamo and part dreamer, and a calm, deep-pocketed husband of the sort that such combustible mixtures need.

Rose Skinner had heard that in November 1962 the Duke would be in WA to open the British Empire and Commonwealth Games. Surely, she told anyone who cared to listen, he could fit more than that into his schedule. He agreed to open her exhibition of 29 recent Nolan works at the Skinner Galleries she and her husband Joe ran at 31 Malcolm Street.

The show was a huge success. All the paintings sold; *Strange Fruit* went to Buckingham Palace. Nolan's international reputation grew and the Skinners, who had been collecting art since the early 50s, were confirmed as hosts of WA's commercial art world.

Half a century later, a tribute to the couple's innovation and enterprise is running at the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery at the University of WA. More than a dozen walls testify to their eye for the modern and memorable. Entitled *Creating Taste: the Collection of Joe and Rose Skinner*, it embraces Nolan, Fred Williams, Robert Juniper, Arthur Boyd, Brian McKay, Wim Boissevain, George Haynes, Sam Fullbrook and other luminaries.

The curators have also given a glimpse into how the Skinners lived and, in four portraits, how Rose liked to look. The exhibition recreates one of the walls of collected works virtually as it was in Joe and Rose's home decades ago. There, in the left-hand bottom corner, is the striking blue of Donald Friend's *The Bay*. Centre stage, a charcoal face by Matisse, said to be one of Joe's favourite gems. On the right, a Kathleen O'Connor.

"We've tried to show how the Skinners were so influential in extending the taste and vision of Perth people in the 1950s and 60s," says Lawrence Wilson director John Barrett-Lennard. "Rose had many international connections and was adroit at attracting publicity and voicing opinion."

"The core of the exhibition is the Joe and Rose Skinner Bequest, which to the great good fortune of UWA came here in 1981, five years after the Skinner Galleries closed."

The family link was underlined by the attendance at the exhibition opening two weeks ago of Joe's daughter-in-law, Angela Skinner, and her daughter and granddaughter. Near her, while speechmakers praised the Skinner taste, not to mention generosity, was a man who is grateful to Rose for "changing my life for ever."

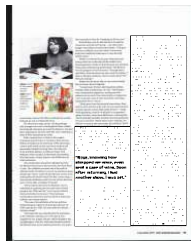
Brian McKay, now 81, had met Rose through his connection with the Perth Group — the others were Juniper, Tom Gibbons and Guy Grey-Smith. "This gave me every confidence at a time when I was moving away from traditional landscapes to more daringly modern ideas."

McKay is renowned for his pure abstraction and strong colour but in the early 60s he needed every encouragement to strike out from the gum-tree scenarios of his youth in Meckering and Northam. The Skinners were his passport to fresh horizons: "Through them I met Nolan. 'Rose has shown me your work,' he told me. 'I detect a European influence. Have you been there? No? Well, you must go.'"

McKay sold his house and car and took his family first to Greece, then to England.

"I stayed away 10 years, learning about politics, reading widely and painting," he said. "The Skinners were tremendously supportive, sending me cash advances on my work. Rose, knowing how strapped we were, even sent a case of wine. Soon after returning, I had another show. I was set."

"Quite apart from this practical benevolence, Rose and Joe were such fun to be with. He was a gracious host at dinner parties; always impeccably dressed — except while gardening, when he would pull on a carpenter's apron. One day a visitor from Melbourne, a Beaurepaire-class Toorak lady probably, marched into their garden on the way to see them. 'Watch where you're walking,' Joe told her. As soon as she went inside, she told Rose, 'You'll have to get rid of that rude gardener.'"



McKay still has a daily reminder of the Skinner generosity — a Brett Whiteley screen print they gave him.

At those dinner parties neither Skinner was inclined to talk much about the past, but their life stories were as colourful as any canvas they ever owned or sold.

Rose was born in Perth in 1900, the only daughter of a woodcutter from either Russia or Poland, depending on your source. He farmed near Rockingham and sent her to Methodist Ladies' College in Claremont. She was married

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Brian McKay

and divorced and then remarried in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) before returning to WA to work as a censor during World War II. She was divorced again and legend has it that she met Joe through their love of the arts and leftist politics. The more mundane truth is that she was initially a tenant of one of his many houses.

Joe, born in England in 1891, emigrated in 1911. He signed up for World War I and was wounded in a leg at Gallipoli. This left him not quite limping but the bearer of an impressive scar, says Angela Skinner, who married Joe's son John in 1954. Both he and a daughter, Joy, were from an earlier marriage.

Joe prospered as a property developer and was well established in the post-World War II business world by the time he and Rose began living in Mount Street, just next to where the gallery was built, fronting on to Malcolm.

It is hard to overestimate the effect their business/cultural venture in 1958 had on anyone in Perth thirsting for something imaginative and exotic. Gastronomically, the scene had just improved. The Pink Lotus Chinese restaurant opened in Hay Street East and "exquisite continental cakes" could be had at Leandri's, in William Street.

Though for five years the Festival of Perth had been bringing foreign films, there was still no television to provide instant mass entertainment.

Within a year much changed. Channel Seven got the cameras rolling. The Narrows Bridge linked the city with South Perth. And at Malcolm Street there was

the exciting Skinner atmosphere that included jazz and poetry.

Alan Robson, then an impoverished agriculture graduate student, now vice-chancellor of UWA, was one of many whose weekend picnics in Kings Park included a visit to the gallery just down the hill and possibly a coffee at Leonardo's, which occupied the top storey of the building.

The year 1962 began with US astronaut Colonel John Glenn dubbing Perth the "City of Light" after he saw the big switch-on during one of his orbits; it ended with Prince Philip's double act, opening the Games at Perry Lakes and the Nolan exhibition, allowing the not-too-fanciful conclusion that this was at last a city of enlightenment.

The 60s were the heydays for the Skinners. Art historian Christine Sharkey has recorded how a "euphoric buzz of excitement attended Juniper's exhibitions ... as red sticker after red sticker was placed on works".

Rose was offered an MBE in the Queen's honours list in June 1972. She declined. Great publicity. Two days later, she accepted. More publicity. Eventually it took a stroke to still that voice.

In hospital it was her turn to listen, as George Haynes put aside his brush so he could read poetry to her. This brought tears to her eyes, as did the sight of her favourite Boyd painting, which she asked to be put in her room during her last weeks.


The woodcutter's daughter died in September 1979, at a time when international publicity for WA was coming from spectacular accidents such as the break-up of Skylab and the collapse of the Perth Entertainment Centre stage during the Miss Universe contest.

Joe carried on, organising their bequest to UWA, and died in 1984, in his 94th year.

And today, at 31 Malcolm Street? Architect Gus Ferguson, who remembers the Skinners well, can point from his office window to the path they took daily from the gallery to their home, past the avocado tree which he is sure Joe must have planted.

"Rose persuaded me to collect a satin dress for her, when she heard I was going to Singapore. It took a while to find the dressmaker, then to discuss the payment. She always had some idea, some project, on the go."

Just inside the entrance, the words "Contemporary Art" on a glass door represent a direct link with the old days when Rose launched careers, coaxed contacts into making deals and refused to take "maybe" for an answer.

The words, however, belong to another gallery, Goddard de Fiddes, which occupies the space that once housed paintings fit for princes. 



Above Pioneer of WA modern art Rose Skinner.

Right Robert Juniper's 1958 painting of Skinner Galleries.

Picture: Rob Duncan

