



22 MAY, 2024

SHILLAM'S BRISBANE

Ipswich Tribune, Ipswich



FELICITY SMITH

BRISBANE can be proud of her public artworks.

From the architectural embellishments carved into the soft sandstone of the late 19th century and early 20th century buildings, adornments fixed to the brick and concrete edifices of the mid 20th century, to the marble and glass buildings set into wide plazas today, the artworks of Queensland's subtropical capital are a celebration of her people's creativity since colonisation.

This aesthetically pleasing built environment is a measure of the capital's success but so too is the legacy left by the various art movements that is reflected in these monumental artworks. Decade by decade, we can trace the transitions through neoclassicism, to modernism and brutalism.

And, since art is a reflection of society, we can see our wants, needs and desires chiselled, cast, and pieced together throughout these transitions.

Shillams Brisbane is a reflection of the mood and modality of the Mid-century modern aesthetic of Western art.

Kath O'Neill and Len Shillam met at art school in 1932, and

married ten years later. They attended Brisbane Central Technical College (now demolished) in George Street, Brisbane. Previously, Kath had attended Brisbane Girls Grammar, and Len went to Brisbane Grammar next door.

It was at Central Tech that Len studied under FJ Martyn Roberts.

Roberts was an influential Brisbane artist whose painting 'Evening' (held in the Queensland Art Gallery of Modern Art collection in Southbank) demonstrates the influence of the French Impressionists on the Australian avant-garde art scene.

Roberts had been taught by Julian Ashton at the Julian Ashton Art School in Sydney in the late 19th century. Ashton was a champion of the Australian Impressionists including Roberts' Australian contemporaries Arthur Streeton, Tom Roberts, and Charles Conder.

Despite his training, Len was a man of his time, and his work reads clearly as Mid-century modern, a development from art deco - more realist, a little less glamorised and with no trace of Impressionistic sensibilities.

He was credited for bringing modern sculpture to Brisbane. Though a capable painter and draughtsman, his reputation today is focussed on his sculptural works.

His work 'Seal and Pup', originally commissioned as a water feature for Lennon's Hotel in 1956, now has pride of place at the entrance to the Gold Coast Convention and Exhibition Centre, and is listed on the Heritage

Register.

The bas relief 'Centaur' at the Shrine of Memories at Anzac Square, commissioned by the Memorial Fund for Nurses to commemorate the sinking of the hospital ship by the Japanese in WWII, was sculpted a year later as was 'Mining and Agriculture' a tribute to the two main industries Ipswich relied on. This sculpture is attached to the Players Nightclub facade in Brisbane Street.

'Enlightenment' is his 1959 aluminium sculpture at Queen's Wharf. The work celebrates the centenary and depicts three figures reaching for heavenly rays, representing mankind receiving illumination and knowledge from above.

The following year he was commissioned to produce a sculpture for Union Precinct at St Lucia for the University of Queensland. His work 'Union' depicts a unified, yet distinct couple - perhaps a reflection of his long and successful union with Kath.

'The Banker' on the wall of the Westpac Bank in Queen Street, was installed in 1970, at the height of his career.

Kath and Len collaborated on a number of sculptures, many of which they produced at their bronze art foundry in Brisbane.

These include 'Pelicans', an installation at the Queensland Art Gallery's water mall; the bronze Queensland Coat of Arms at Parliament House, the 'Proclamation Figure' in St John's Cathedral in Anne Street, Brisbane, Cormorants at Einbunpin Lagoon in Sandgate, and The Lost Sheep at The South-



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port School.

Kath's smaller works are represented in a number of State art collections including the Art Gallery of Western Australia; the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery Tasmania; the Art Gallery of New South Wales; HOTA Gold Coast Art Gallery, QUT collection, and QAGOMA Brisbane.

Kath and Len Shillam left an indelible mark on Brisbane. Despite working closely together from their art studio and foundry for more than 50 years, their works are those of individuals - they exhibit quality, diversity and originality.

These attributes earned each of them the Order of Australia, and Honorary Doctorates from Queensland University for services to the Arts. Their legacy lives on in the Shillam Prize which is managed by Sculptors Queensland from funds left by the Shillams.

The \$4,000 Shillam Prize is awarded annually as part of The Brisbane Sculpture Festival at Mt Coot-tha Botanic Gardens. The 2024 festival opens at 6pm this Friday (May 24) at the gardens main auditorium, and features works from at least three Scenic Rim artists.





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