

National Portrait Gallery

Art galleries are scattered all over our magnificent country, hosting and promoting the works of Australia's diverse exponents of art. On the pages of Artist's Palette magazine we will seek to showcase an extensive selection of these venues. In this Issue, we focus on the National Portrait Gallery and an important recent work by a renowned Canberra artist.

Now located in the Old Parliament House on King Georges Terrace in Canberra, the National Portrait Gallery boasts 150 years of history.

In March 1856, Philip Henry Stanhope (Fifth Earl Stanhope) moved to establish a National Portrait Gallery: "A gallery of original portraits, such portraits to consist as far as possible of those persons who are most honourably commemorated in British History as warriors or as statesmen, or in arts, in literature or in science." (Hansard Parliamentary Debates, 2 March 1856)

The idea received broad support. Three months later, Parliament agreed to commit a sum of £2,000 to establish 'a British Historical Portrait Gallery' and the National Portrait Gallery was formally established by Treasury Minute. The first chairman was Earl Stanhope.

Early in 1857 when the trustees met to draft rules governing the acquisition of portraits, they agreed that the gallery was to be about history, and not about art; and that admission to the collection was to be about the status of the sitter in the first place, and the quality of a particular image in the second place. These criteria are still used today to determine which works should enter the National Portrait Gallery.

Originally, it was ruled that: "No portrait of any person still living, or deceased less than ten years, shall be admitted by purchase,

donation or bequest, except only in the case of the reigning Sovereign or his consort." (Trustee Minutes, 16 February 1857: Rules for the Admission of Portraits, Rule 3)

It soon became apparent that such a rigid decree might disadvantage the gallery's collection, since it was often easier and less expensive to acquire portraits of living sitters. Following much debate, the rule was eventually changed in 1969.

UNVEILED: COMMISSIONED PORTRAIT OF FRANK FENNER AC CMG MBE

On 30 August 2007, the National Portrait Gallery unveiled a landmark commissioned work, a painting of the remarkable virologist Frank Fenner AC CMG MBE FAA FRS by Jude Rae. The portrait of Fenner was made possible through the generosity of Melbourne-based donors Anthony Adair and Karen McLeod Adair.

Andrew Sayers, Director, National Portrait Gallery invited members of the media to attend the unveiling.

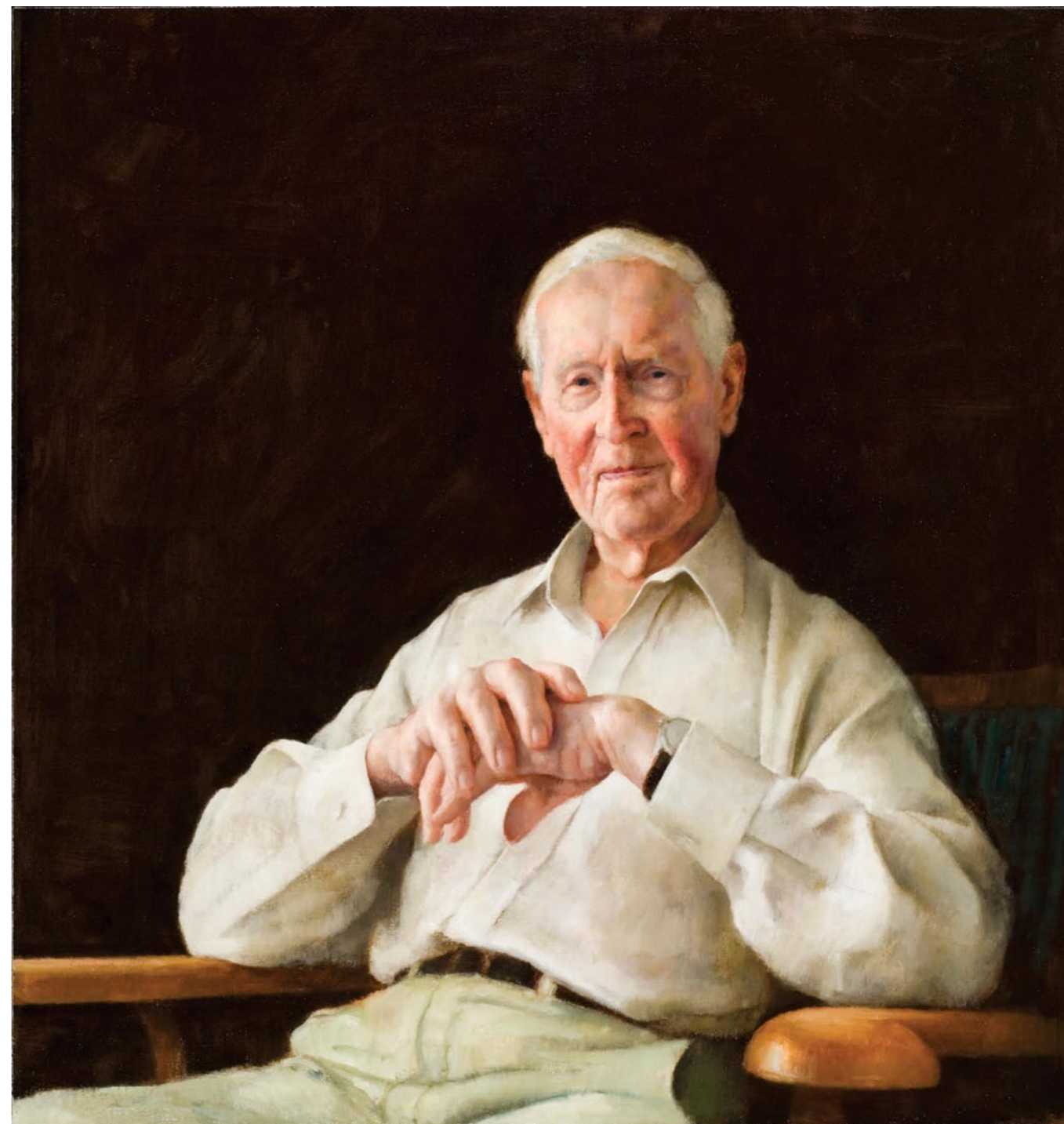
Emeritus Professor Frank Fenner (b. 1914), virologist, began his research career during World War 2, working to curb malaria in New Guinea. Appointed Professor of Microbiology in Canberra's John Curtin School of Medical Research in 1949, he began investigating pox viruses. After many years' groundbreaking research into myxomatosis, from 1969

he worked with the World Health Organisation to eradicate smallpox, chairing a Global Commission for the Certification of Smallpox Eradication from 1977 to 1979.

Director of the John Curtin School from 1967 to 1973, and later of the Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies at ANU, Fenner has published some 300 scientific papers and written or co-written 22 books. His many honours include the Japan Prize (1988); the Copley Medal of the Royal Society (1995); the Albert Einstein World Award for Science (2000); and the Prime Minister's Prize for Science (2002). He has five honorary doctorates – the most recent from his alma mater, the University of Adelaide.

Fenner has lived in Canberra for the past 58 years, in the Red Hill house which Robin Boyd designed for him and his late wife Bobbie in 1952. Since retiring from the John Curtin School in 1979, Fenner has continued to work there as a Visiting Fellow. Active, productive and still vitally engaged in major scientific issues, he was the ACT's Senior Australian of the Year for 2006.

Jude Rae is a Canberra-based artist whose elegant, introspective paintings featured in the National Portrait Gallery exhibition 'Truth and Likeness' recently. Rae trained in art and art history in Sydney, where she participated in her first group exhibition in 1985. During the 1990s she lived



Professor Frank Fenner AC CMG MBE 2007 by Jude Rae. Oil on canvas. Collection: National Portrait Gallery, Canberra. Commissioned with funds provided by Mr Anthony Adair and Ms Karen MacLeod.

and worked in New Zealand, teaching in various art institutions; exhibiting in Christchurch, Wellington and Auckland; and completing a Masters degree at the University of Canterbury.

She returned to Australia in 1999, to teach painting in Sydney for three years. She now lives in Reid, ACT, where she painted Frank Fenner in

the studio attached to her home.

Jude Rae's portrait of Frank Fenner hangs in the National Portrait Gallery's current space in Old Parliament House, Canberra.

National Portrait Gallery Curator Michael Desmond marked the unveiling with the following insightful account ...

THE HIGHEST HONOUR

Bringing eminent scientist Frank Fenner and artist Jude Rae together for the National Portrait Gallery commission was like matchmaking.

It isn't surprising to learn that Frank Fenner is 93. After all, it is almost inconceivable that he could achieve as much as he has in less



time. But meeting Fenner is a different matter. His good humour and gentle nature are immediately apparent. His mannerisms, his speech patterns and his innate curiosity are those he possessed as a young man; they are barely altered by the years. Frank Fenner somehow manages to give the impression of being the same age of whomever he is speaking with.

This is not to say he is not imposing. Professor Frank Fenner is one of Australia's most distinguished scientists. His eminence in the field of virology is particularly associated with the control of Australia's rabbit plague and the eradication of smallpox – achievements of global significance.

John Frank Fenner AC CMG MBE was born in Ballarat in 1914. Both his parents were teachers; his father being the principal of the Ballarat School of Mines. The family moved to Adelaide in 1916, when Frank's father was appointed Superintendent of Technical Education in South Australia. His father's interest in science sparked an early interest in geology but Fenner ended up completing degrees in medicine at the University of Adelaide in 1938; however, according to Fenner 'this was before the mineral boom and the only jobs in geology were in universities'. His medical studies complete, Fenner served in the Australian Army Medical Corps in the Middle East and in Papua New Guinea.

His decision to take a diploma of tropical medicine in the early days of the war was prescient and his work as a malariologist in the Army was to save the lives of many Australian soldiers in the Pacific

theatre. Fenner was awarded an MBE for his wartime studies of malaria.

Fenner's interest had always been in research rather than in practicing medicine and after the war he was hand picked by Sir Macfarlane Burnet to work at the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research in Melbourne, researching the mousepox virus as a model for human poxviruses such as smallpox.

After a fellowship at the Rockefeller Institute in New York, he was, in 1949 (at the age of just 34), appointed Professor of Microbiology at the new John Curtin School of Medical Research at the Australian National University where he continued his research on the myxoma virus. The beautiful new buildings that house the school today bear little resemblance to the scratch built laboratories in temporary wooden huts that Fenner had for his research in the early 1950s. Despite initial teething problems, the department prospered, attracting motivated staff and dozens of visiting workers from all over the world.

In Canberra, Fenner's work on the myxoma virus was instrumental in

controlling the devastating rabbit plagues that had savaged Australian agriculture for nearly a century. In a daring gesture, Fenner together with colleagues Macfarlane Burnet and Ian Clunies Ross injected themselves with the myxoma virus prior to its release to reassure the public that the virus was not dangerous to humans. While most rabbits were killed by the imported virus that produced myxomatosis, a small number survived. The recording and analysing of the impact of the virus, the transmission and the build-up of resistance to the disease established his research as a classic and enduring model of viral evolution in the scientific world.

Fenner's pioneering work in the emerging field of viral genetics was recognised when he was appointed President of the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses (1970-75). Fenner was appointed Director of the John Curtin School in 1967, the same year he started with the World Health Organisation as Chairman of the Global Commission for the Certification of



Smallpox Eradication, perhaps his greatest project.

Fenner has been elected to the fellowship of numerous faculties and academies, and has received many awards. His current project is a history of medical research.

Commissioning a portrait is something that aspires to be an objective process, but is ultimately an intuitive practice. While a new breed of matchmakers and online dating services trusts the authority of computer databases to compare like fields to come up with a perfect match, ultimately the power of emotion inevitably triumphs over logic.

Just knowing who is out there and bringing them together is the science. Jude Rae is an artist renowned for her subtlety, attention to detail, keen powers of observation and conceptual vision. Like Fenner, she lives in Canberra. It seemed like a good match.

When Andrew Sayers showed Professor Fenner the series of small paintings by Rae that were on display in the exhibition 'Truth and Likeness', he was full of admiration for her skill. It was an easy next step to bring artist and sitter together and the two responded positively to each other. Rae was commissioned to produce a portrait of the scientist soon after and a series of sittings took place. A combination of chatty meetings, cups of tea and preliminary drawings allowed the artist to get to know the scientist better and to work up the portrait.

Rae described Fenner as the ideal subject: "He was entertaining and lively. And gentlemanly in an old-fashioned way, if that makes sense. He only insisted on one thing, and that was that I would paint him in his white shirt ... this was the nearest he got to vanity."

Rae toyed with the idea of adding select objects in the background,

the kind of telling accessories

that would inform the viewer of Professor Fenner's life and achievements. For a short time she considered the many medals and awards that he had earned but dismissed the notion as too cold. The sole exception perhaps was a crude home-made trophy crafted by his friends in the lab that parodied the double needle inoculators that Fenner invented and used in the final campaign to banish smallpox. Typically, this was the award that Fenner valued most.

In the end Rae decided that there was no need for any props. If she could capture in paint the impressive power of Fenner's complex personality, that would be enough.

She has. And yes, it is.

– Michael Desmond