

## GWEN RANKIN

# Conflict on the home front: choosing the commemorative mural for the Library

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The mural that buttresses the staircase door to the Queen's Hall at State Library Victoria was the brainchild of National Gallery Director, L Bernard Hall. With the Queen's Hall antechamber scheduled for refurbishment in 1922, Hall saw a chance to demonstrate the truth of his conviction that 'architecture is the mother of all the plastic and graphic arts', and that the latter should always 'refer to and acknowledge this sometime connection and universal source'. Fittingly this could now be achieved in the context of a celebration of Australian involvement in the Great War.<sup>1</sup>

In late 1921, a rare moment of cooperation between the National Gallery Trustees and the Felton Bequests Committee augured well for his ambition. Artists across Australia were invited to submit charcoal designs, colour sketches and full-sized figure studies, using pseudonyms to ensure a level playing field.<sup>2</sup> The Trustees would provide prizes of £100 and £50 for the best work and commission a new frame for the doorway it was to embellish. The Bequests Committee, in its turn, would make £1000 available to pay for the completed mural, although this would only be handed over if, after viewing the finished work, the members agreed that it had 'an artistic and educational value ... calculated to raise or improve public taste'.<sup>3</sup>

As none of the Bequests Committee members had any artistic expertise and two, at least, were notorious for their didactic, often overzealous application of the provisions of Felton's will, this was problematic. The mural



H Septimus Power, mural war memorial over entrance to the Queen's Hall, State Library Victoria, 1923, oil on canvas. Digital panorama (Peter Mappin, 2016) from original photography (Adrian Flint, 1996)

would be a major commission, likely to take a year or more to complete.<sup>4</sup> The consequences of rejection at the last moment were unthinkable, creating a singular challenge for the judges. When Hall told one artist, Hilda Rix Nicholas that 'I am so glad the Felton people allowed us to draw on them for means, as it [the mural] is not exactly in or for the purpose of the National Gallery', he was not so much praising the Bequests Committee as tactfully ensuring that she knew how important a role its preconceptions would play.<sup>5</sup>

Although the *Australasian* reported the competition in September 1921, no formal advertisement appeared until December.<sup>6</sup> Whether due to the approaching holiday or the Bequests Committee's reputation for snubbing Australian artists, the response was disappointing. By April 1922, the closing date was imminent and Hall was scrambling to motivate his contemporaries.<sup>7</sup> Time-poor aspirants were grateful when an extension of several weeks was approved, but few, it seems, responded to Hall's subsequent urging to inspect the site itself, relying instead on the schematic drawing of the area sent to all who had enquired about the competition.<sup>8</sup>

Fourteen designs were hung in the McArthur Gallery in August, where they were judged by Hall, William McInnes and Clewin Harcourt. Their report focused on the submissions of *La Croix de Guerre* (George Lambert), *Patria* (Hilda Rix Nicholas) and *Degga* (Harold Septimus Power). While the 'capacity and experience' shown by each was applauded, the design of *La Croix de Guerre* was described as 'too crowded in composition' and likely to be 'wholly ineffective in situ', and that of *Patria* was deemed 'too void in content'. Both, therefore, 'failed to meet the definite requirements of mural decoration'. Only *Degga's* entry, despite lacking the full-sized figure-studies stipulated by the rules, was pronounced 'suitable to our purpose ... and ... fitting the site chosen'.<sup>9</sup>

The confusion these remarks engendered was considerable, leading to lengthy arguments between the Trustees. Their eventual decision to award



first prize to Lambert but give the commission to Power drew heated public criticism.<sup>10</sup> The cursory accounts of their deliberations that were made available to the press, however, avoided acknowledgement that this seeming inconsistency had been dictated by a problem they had themselves created.<sup>11</sup>

It appears that, while the profile of the new doorframe had been shown on the competitors' plans, details of its proposed construction had not.<sup>12</sup> Installed in early June, the opulent brown edifice devised for the Trustees changed the character of the site entirely, critically compounding the task facing the judges. Rix Nicholas's evocative drama, for example, with its emphasis on comradeship rather than victory, would have worked well with the restrained architrave her design anticipated. The 'real' structure's formidable mass would now dominate and disrupt her austere narrative.<sup>13</sup> Even the rising sun conceived as the focus of her soldiers' attention would have to compete with a light positioned to draw attention instead to the veining of the marble.

No formal record of Lambert's submission has been located, but the appraisal of the judging panel suggests it was related to a picture he had completed for the opening of the Australian War Museum in Melbourne's Exhibition Building that year. *Anzac, the landing 1915* (1922) not only exemplifies the 'capacity and experience' of the artist, but also the validity of the judges' concern for the impact a work of this type would have in the refurbished antechamber.<sup>14</sup> Lambert's myriad 'scrambling, crawling, khaki figures scarcely discernible against the rocky precipitous ground' would certainly have been rendered 'ineffective' by the Trustees' monumental frame.<sup>15</sup>

Only Power's submission responded to the challenge of the site itself. Its structural coherence and earthy palette exploited the weighty thrust of the marble to suggest a mountain, quite rationally flanked by the infantry of the Western Front and the light horsemen of the Middle East; even as its narrative vigour directed the viewer's eye upwards, towards the warplanes circling the lintel. In this, the doorframe became an integral part of the composition rather



Hilda Rix Nicholas's 1922 'Design for War Memorial Mural', photographed in 1930. Hilda Rix Nicholas Papers, National Library of Australia MS 9817

than a competing element, and the whole could be admired without any sense of dissonance.

In early 1924, much to the relief of all concerned, Power's mural was completed and approved by the Bequests Committee.<sup>16</sup> Today it continues to exemplify Hall's understanding of the potency of graphic art and architecture in strategic interaction. Its history, too, confirms that the realisation of this ideal depends on the artist's readiness to 'refer to and acknowledge' the architecture itself. One question continues to tease this writer. Evidence suggests that Power's submission was a last-minute undertaking, only conceived after the doorframe had been completed.<sup>17</sup> Did Hall, increasingly afraid that his cherished project would end in embarrassment, perhaps beg the intervention of his widely respected colleague?