

# Bea Maddock

## Modern master

Katarina Klarić

Bea Maddock's reputation as one of Australia's most accomplished printmakers has been formed by her deeply considered and diligent commitment to her life's work as an artist and teacher. Born in Hobart, Tasmania, in 1934, Maddock has led a life governed largely by her artistic pursuits, which have taken her to Melbourne, London and even Antarctica. Her work possesses an elusive quality, the artist rarely providing detailed information on its intent or meaning, yet the works remain powerful in their penetrating suggestions of contemplation, personal introspection and humanity at large.

Bea Maddock is represented in the Baillieu Library Print Collection by 38 works, all of which were purchased from the collection of Mr Warwick Reeder, a former student and personal friend of the artist. Most of these prints are from the *Melbourne* series, which were a product of a brief time Maddock spent living in South Melbourne in 1964. The reason she moved to the city was to involve herself in the artistic circles of the mainland, with a hope of finding employment at one of the art schools.<sup>1</sup> Despite her previous artistic experience, having spent two years studying at the Slade School of Fine Art in London, she was unable



to secure a position and within six months had returned to Tasmania.<sup>2</sup>

Although Maddock did not achieve her goal of settling in Melbourne, the experience of her struggle had a resonating influence that expressed itself in her art for a number of years. *Head II* is a sketchily rendered image of a face gazing directly at the viewer with blank, gaping eyes. The head fills the entire composition, though its identity is impossible to determine as very little detail of the physical features is delineated. Instead, the artist has focused on the expressive qualities of her subject, an endeavour particularly suited to the medium of drypoint.

In drypoint, a sharp needle is used to score the surface of the copper plate, creating a burr by raising small slivers of metal around the incised line. When printed, the ink settles unevenly and creates an effect of toothed lines and deepened tones. Traditionally used as a finishing tool to highlight engravings and etchings, drypoint was increasingly used as a technique in its own right from the late 19th century onwards.<sup>3</sup> The direct contact between needle and plate allows for greater freedom of form than other etching techniques, which in Maddock's prints has resulted in a palpable immediacy. Her careful cropping and subtle suggestions of movement seem to distil a moment in time, similar to when one encounters a face at a glance on the street.

Like *Head II*, *Lane figure* is a drypoint that depicts a recurring subject in Bea Maddock's oeuvre: the solitary being. Her emphatic use of the drypoint needle for the wall has given it a slashed appearance—a striking contrast to the slumping figure with its back to us, who exists only as a simple outline. The scene suggests more than a pedestrian observation, as the shadowy wall closes in upon the anonymous figure, evoking a sense of isolation and inquietude. The influence of the

Previous page: Bea Maddock, *Head II*, from series *Melbourne II*, 1964, drypoint on copper, 10.0 × 7.4 cm (plate). Accession no. 2012.0030, purchased 2012, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne. © Bea Maddock.

Below: Bea Maddock, *Cripple IV*, from series *Melbourne II*, 1966, drypoint on copper, 9.9 × 7.3 cm (plate). Accession no. 2012.0026, purchased 2012, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne. © Bea Maddock.



German expressionists here is clear, an art movement that markedly inspired Maddock when she travelled in Europe as a young student.<sup>4</sup> Also influential was the French artist Georges Rouault (1871–1958), whose emphasis on maintaining truth to oneself was to remain an important philosophy in Maddock's personal life and career.

Maddock's depictions of the urban environment and its inhabitants in the Melbourne series also reflect her state of mind at the time. During this unsettling period, her lack of success in securing suitable employment was coupled with 'exposure to life as it is

lived in crude reality by thousands of city dwellers'.<sup>5</sup> Her interest in existentialism can offer an added insight. In the seminal text on the subject, *Being and nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre discusses at length the notion of understanding the world through one's emotions. Existentialist thought emphasises the individual human experience when ascribing meaning to the things around us, and this principle can be recognised in Maddock's heavily self-referential works.

Through her prints, Bea Maddock identifies with the solitary and the overlooked. *Cripple IV* depicts a simplified form of a figure fallen to the ground, their hands covering their face. The person lies forlorn between two crutches—a picture of helplessness. Through this simple image Maddock conveys an emotion that she has felt deeply, and which is universally understood. Indeed, she has at one point described all of her work as a self-portrait.<sup>6</sup> This artist's method of inquiry is to explore the self through the world, and the world through the self.

Bea Maddock's later work retains this sense of interior reflection, even when she is experimenting with the relatively impersonal mediums of screen-printing, photo-etching and text-based imagery. The Baillieu

Library holds several examples of her photo-etchings.

Maddock's innovations in printmaking technique have made her one of Australia's most esteemed living artists, and her services as a teacher have been highly valued. She was offered a teaching position at the National Gallery of Victoria Art School in 1970, and was promoted to senior lecturer in 1973. This school was soon after to become the Victorian College of the Arts, and is now part of the University of Melbourne. The conceptual aspect of her work has remained consistently strong, and is equalled by her inventive and constantly developing approach to technique.

In 1983 Maddock returned to Tasmania, settling in Launceston, and soon after retired from teaching to focus solely on her art-making; she resides there still. Over her long career, Maddock has addressed important social issues such as land rights, cultural policy and the environment. Although she has represented these concerns in her art, the indirect nature of her style results in a high level of ambiguity and many opportunities for differing interpretations. The serial format of many of her works suggests an open-ended examination of her subject, asserting no final statement. Her

Bea Maddock, *Lane figure*, from series *Melbourne II*, 1966, drypoint on copper, 10.0 × 7.4 cm (plate). Accession no. 2012.0023, purchased 2012, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne. © Bea Maddock.

very personal reflections on states of being are essentially founded on the principles of humanism. In this way, Bea Maddock's presence in the Baillieu Library Print Collection is perfectly fitting. Alongside the Old Master prints for which the collection is best known, the works of Bea Maddock are wholly welcomed as we recognise her as an Australian modern master.

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- 1 Therese Mulford, 'Biography 1934–1983', in Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, *Bea Maddock: Catalogue raisonné* (vol. 1, 1951–1983), Launceston: Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, 2011, p. 62.
- 2 Maddock was a postgraduate student at the Slade School from 1959 to 1961, her second year being financed by a scholarship from the Tasmanian Department of Education.
- 3 Bamber Gascoigne, *How to identify prints* (2nd edn), London: Thames & Hudson, 1986, p. 38.
- 4 Roger Butler, 'But there was time to return', in Anne Kirker and Roger Butler, *Being and nothingness: Bea Maddock: Work from three decades* (exhibition catalogue), Canberra: Australian National Gallery, 1992, p. 25.
- 5 Mulford, 'Biography 1934–1983', p. 69.
- 6 Janine Burke, 'Portrait of the artist: Bea Maddock's prints', *Art and Australia*, vol. 16, no. 2, 1978, p. 161.

