A recent exhibition at the Ian Potter Museum of Art provided the opportunity to view a remarkable group of drawings by the renowned portrait artist Louis Kahan AO (1905–2002), now in the Special Collections of the Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne. Depicting notable writers, the 129 portraits were gifted by Kahan over four years from 1979 to 1983, a benefaction arranged by the then Vice-Principal of the University of Melbourne, Ray Marginson. On 5 November 1981, at the University of Melbourne Gallery, Marginson launched a handsome book illustrating a selection of the works with an adroit estimation of the artist’s career:

How can one say anything more about a man who has served in the French Foreign Legion, worked for thirty years at the heart of the Australian Literary and Artistic establishment, and not only survived both, but emerged universally loved and unscarred.

Intelligentsia: Louis Kahan’s portraits of writers ran at the Potter from 22 January to 19 April 2009 and brought together an array of portraits depicting poets, essayists, philosophers and political writers created for the journal Meanjin. They provide a rich microcosm of Australian intellectual life from 1955 to 1974, depicting many of the key thinkers of the day who opened up for local Australian culture the contemporary international world of ideas. Kahan’s inclusive vision was ideally suited to interpreting this extraordinary array of talent and intellect, which spanned writers from the right and left of politics, early female authors, edgy cultural commentators, novelists, speculative poets, and scholars of subjects obscure, refined and pioneering. Through his uncanny ability to capture likeness, this exhibition recreated the intensity and verve that animated these minds.

Trained as a tailor in his birthplace Vienna, Kahan worked for the couturier Paul Poiret, and as a theatre set designer in Paris in the 1920s where he encountered first hand the work of Picasso, Matisse and the School of Paris. With the outbreak of war he joined the French Foreign Legion and, after demobilisation, began his life as an artist in Oran, Algeria. After travel in the United States, he moved to Perth in 1947 where he was reunited with his family, had his first solo exhibition and began to gain recognition from the art world. In 1950 he moved to Melbourne where his talent for portraiture was recognised by the Melbourne Herald art critic Alan McCulloch, who introduced him to
Clem Christesen, editor of Meanjin. On a return trip to Perth in 1953 he met and married Lily Isaac. His contribution to Australian cultural life was recognised when he was made an Officer of the Order of Australia in 1993. Louis Kahan died in Melbourne in 2002, aged 97.

Kahan’s prodigious capacity for swift summation of the human face was honed in an unusual training ground: the hospitals for wounded soldiers in Oran, Algeria, where he donated his time and talent to the Red Cross, producing over 2,000 portraits of soldiers which the men sent back to their families. With this experience he was able to produce portraits with a sense of spontaneity under almost any conditions. The majority of the Meanjin portraits were drawn directly from life, sometimes in the subject’s home or workplace, often in Kahan’s own home studio. Occasionally however he was compelled to work from photographs or even from television, grasping the essentials of a face with minimum input.

The portraits in this collection were commissioned for the provocative literary and cultural journal Meanjin by its founding editor Clem Christesen. Meanjin provided a ready network for writers and a platform for new writing, a resource for innovative ideas and a forum for debate at a time when the media in Australia were at a rudimentary stage. Meanjin exerted considerable power; at its 21st anniversary dinner Arthur Calwell, leader of the opposition Labor Party, gave a speech and Prime Minister Robert Menzies sent a telegram. Contributors to Meanjin represent a who’s who of Australian writing. Since 1945 the journal has been supported by the University of Melbourne and in 2008 it became an imprint of Melbourne University Publishing.

The exhibition Intelligentsia demonstrated how the creative interaction of literature and the visual arts was integral to Meanjin’s broad cultural purpose. While Kahan’s drawings gave a distinctive graphic quality to the journal for nearly 20 years, other innovative work was also featured, including sketches, prints and paintings by Aboriginal artists (usually unnamed) and artists and designers such as Arthur Boyd, Roger Kemp and Douglas Annand. Kahan’s portraits, however, played a special role. Featured next to the subject’s writing or a review of their work, they provided an unabashed tribute to their subjects and their intellectual and creative achievements. While postmodern critics, whose theories diminish the importance of the author, might disparage this elevation of individual identity, the effect of these portraits is to illustrate the personal engagement involved in keeping such an independently minded journal alive. The exhibition paid homage to this spirit of free speech that has motivated and guided the journal. In his foreword to the first issue of Meanjin (Christmas 1940), Clem Christesen wrote:

“… at a time of war and transition, we still strive to ‘talk poetry’…”

Literature and art, poetry and
drama do not spring into being at
the word of command. Their life
is a continuous process growing
within itself, and its suppression
is death.3

Kahan’s portrait of his patron, Clem
Christesen (illustrated opposite), head
resting on his hand with cigarette,
book and glasses, is both determined
and contemplative, almost
melancholy. It makes a remarkable
comparison with van Gogh’s wistful
portrait of his physician Dr Gachet
(1890, now in the Musée d’Orsay). By
contrast, Meanjin’s second editor, Jim
Davidson, who took over in 1974, is
portrayed as gently benevolent. This
group of drawings also includes some
of the wider field of experts who
contributed to Meanjin: Asian studies
expert C.P. Fitzgerald; politician,
diplomat and academic Neal Blewett;
agricultural chemist Geoffrey Leeper;
and geographer, geologist and writer
Marcel Aurousseau.4

As editor of Meanjin, Clem
Christesen was supported by his wife
Nina who founded the Department
of Russian Language Studies at the
University of Melbourne. Kahan’s
portrait of Nina, depicted next to
Professor R. Douglas (Pansy) Wright,
is one of several group portraits
drawn at Meanjin’s 21st anniversary
dinner in 1961, when the artist wove
through the crowd recording the
lively interactions of guests such as
professor of English Ian Maxwell,
eminent art historian Dr Ursula Hoff,
Labor leader Arthur Calwell and
writer Frank Dalby Davison. In
another, Christesen darts a glance at
Overland editor Stephen Murray-
Smith, with literary historian H.M.
Green in the background.5 Kahan
relished the aesthetic possibilities of
the occasion’s collegiality, commenting:
‘A chance group—so often its
members complement minds while
their bodies compose a study for the
artist.’6

Kahan’s forte was to depict the
creative mind at work. This is
especially apparent in his portraits of
the poets—established, mid-career
and upcoming—who chose to publish
in Meanjin. Instead of a static record
of facial features, his pen and ink lines
fly and coalesce around nodal points
in the face correlating with the
workings of the active mind within;
the poet’s synthesis of free, disparate
thoughts at high velocity. In his
depiction of A.D. Hope (illustrated
above), a long prophet-like face
conjures up the oracular cadence of
his poetry with its mythic themes
and, for the 1950s, provocative
sensuality. Described by Clive James
as ‘the leading poet of his day’, Hope
was also known as ‘the antipodean
Augustan’ and was a scathing critic
of unstructured modernism. With
T. Inglis Moore he introduced the
first degree course in Australian
 literature as professor of English at
the Australian National University.

Kahan was equally insightful in
his depiction of the legendary Dame
Mary Gilmore (illustrated below). Her
highly popular poetry was bound
up with her activism, her concern
with urban poverty, the rights of
women, children and indigenous
Australians and her patriotism. Her
politics were radical; she was the first
woman member of the Australian
Workers Union and worked as editor of
the Australian Worker. In 1937 she
was appointed Dame Commander of
the British Empire for her
contributions to literature and in 1993 she was depicted on the Australian ten-dollar note. Kahan emphasised the active life of his subjects. His empathetic depiction of Gilmore evinces her vital determination with eyes fixed on a vision beyond, despite the age apparent in her stiffly folded hands. The drawing can be compared with the theatricality of William Dobell’s portrait of Gilmore of 1957 (entered in the Archibald Prize) and with Kahan’s own more reflective painted portrait of 1960.

Later in his career Kahan was to depict the poet Fay Zwicky. She responded with an evocation of Kahan’s method of working:

to sit
and let the master work his miracle, humming away over black pots and nibs,
the sunny room, the light, the harmless ease of it.

Portrait (Louis Kahan, 1992)\(^7\)

Zwicky’s words indicate Kahan’s unusual rapport with his sitters. Besides the poets, these included many other luminaries of Australian literature, including Patrick White, Christina Stead, Miles Franklin and Alan Marshall.\(^8\) Avoiding simple idealisation, Kahan created images that reveal the psychology of his sitters as well as contributing to their mythic stature.

His frontal depiction of the novelist Patrick White (illustrated above) floats like an icon on the page with a mesmerising stare and ruminating mouth, aptly illustrating Kahan’s response to ‘those unforgettable, unforgetting seer’s eyes, looking through you, and beyond …’\(^9\) This sketch laid the basis for his depiction of the writer that won the Archibald Prize in 1962, a work that intensifies the emphasis on prophetic vision, a ‘behind-the-scenes Voss’ as Alan McCulloch put it,\(^10\) surrounding the head with a turbulent sky and desolate landscape.

Equally powerful is his semi-abstract depiction of Katharine Susannah Prichard (illustrated right), whose evocative novels of Australian country working life attracted national and international recognition. Active as a journalist, she helped found the Communist Party of Western Australia in the 1920s and remained committed to her political causes, campaigning for the peace movement and social justice. Kahan captures her steadfastness in a face of monumental structure, the eye socket a bony crevice, the hands a supportive plinth for the head.

Kahan’s depictions anticipate recent analysis of the facial ‘micro-expressions’ that indicate personality. The face with its numerous working muscles is a complex arena of forces. Rather than expressing one emotion or attitude at a time, there can be several. His depiction of Kylie Tennant, for example, whose novels portray life in the Great Depression, combines judiciously narrowed eyes, empathetic smile, and assertively clasped hands.\(^11\) His unusual skills in creating a convincing likeness out of scant information was especially useful for providing *Meanjin* with representations of international writers, whose work was published or reviewed in the journal. The depictions of James Joyce and Alexander Solzhenitsyn, based on photographs, hold their own in...
sparkle and liveliness against those made from first-hand experience of their subjects.12

The subjects of Kahan’s portraits for Meanjin also include some of the most significant, vocal and controversial of Australian intellectuals and reflect the editor’s commitment to diversity of opinion. Manning Clark (illustrated above left) was the controversial author of the epic six-volume general History of Australia published between 1962 and 1987, criticised by conservatives for its declamatory rhetoric. In Kahan’s memorable portrayal he is aloof and enigmatic. Clark addresses the viewer with sombre deliberation, the lines in his forehead converging on the furrow between the eyebrows, a sign of concentrated thought since ancient portraiture. By contrast, the face of maverick historian Geoffrey Blainey (illustrated above right), author of the influential Tyranny of distance: How distance shaped Australia’s history, is open, engaged and curious. Modeled with incisive angular lines, the drawing demonstrates Kahan’s incubation in the quasi-abstraction of post-cubist artistic circles. Blainey mused after sitting for Kahan: ‘When I left I had a slight feeling that I had been X-rayed.’13

Typically for the time, three of the academics portrayed by Kahan are smoking. T. Inglis Moore, writer, literary historian and indefatigable advocate for Australian literature, and Ian Maxwell, professor of English and expert in Old Norse, clutch their pipes as essential aids to thinking. The scholar of French literature, A.R. Chisholm, nervously gestures with a cigarette in hand, while a wild flurry of lines around his head evokes a frenetic intellectual force.14 Yet, despite his remarkable ability to capture the distinct individuality of his subjects, Kahan’s portraits never verged on caricature. He always moderated his feel for expressive forms with observation of subtle detail. Commenting on the striking appearance of A.A. Phillips, critic and inventor of the phrase ‘cultural cringe’, Kahan wrote: ‘A crowded literary party; here there is this remarkable profile, nose and chin trying to meet. My pen couldn’t resist them.’15

The exhibition also included four of Kahan’s painted portraits of academics, revealing another dimension of his contribution to the cultural life of the University of Melbourne. His use of vigorous brushwork and rich colour are evident in depictions of George W. Paton, Vice-Chancellor 1951–1968; Zelman Cowen, Dean of Law 1951–1966; Victor M. Trikojus, Head of the School of Biochemistry 1943–1968; and Warwick Eunson, Principal of Melbourne Teachers’ College until 1972.16

Kahan’s portraits continue to play a crucial role by documenting the diversity of the intellectuals who have been embraced by Meanjin. Lively and seemingly spontaneous, his depictions usually occupy a full page and are positioned next to the text, bringing the speaking voice and its ideas to life. With Kahan’s inspired contributions over 25 years, Meanjin became, in Geoffrey Blainey’s words, ‘an illuminating mirror of Australian cultural life’.17

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Notes
1 For their generous assistance in researching Kahan’s portraits I want to thank Ray Marginson, Chris Wallace-Crabe, Lily Kahan, Belinda Nemec, Chen Chen, Bala Starr and Joanna Bosse.
2 Ray Marginson, Speech notes for the launch of Louis Kahan’s book Australian writers: The face of literature, held on 5 November 1981 in the
Installation view, *Intelligentsia: Louis Kahan’s portraits of writers*, exhibition at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, 2009, photographed by Viki Petherbridge. Visible are photographs of Kahan in his studio at Kew by Henry Talbot (1984) and an unknown photographer. In the showcases are copies of *Meanjin* from Special Collections, Baillieu Library, while a video plays of the ABC television program *Panorama* (episode on *Meanjin*, originally broadcast 9 December 1960).