

# ANTONIO DATTILO-RUBBO

ART  
GALLERY  
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ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES  
Australian Collection Focus Room  
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# ANTONIO DATTILO-RUBBO

Emma Collerton

Antonio Dattilo-Rubbo (1870–1955) is enshrined in Australian art history as the charismatic teacher and champion of the Sydney Moderns, who include Grace Cossington Smith, Roy de Maistre and Roland Wakelin. His contribution to the course of Australian art history in the role of teacher is paramount and his legacy is witnessed first-hand when viewing 20th century Australian art, with many prominent artists and art custodians having at some time passed through Dattilo-Rubbo's studio: artists Earle Backen, Gladys Owen, Dora Toovey, Donald Friend, Margo and Gerald Lewers, Frank Hodgkinson, Erik Langker (AGNSW Trustee), George Duncan, Roy Dalgarno, Frank Hinder, Lucy Hertz (former Director of the National Art School), Arthur Murch, Tom Bass, Cedric Flower, Neil Gren, Joy Ewart (founder of Workshop Art Centre, Sydney), Evelyn Chapman, Alison Rehfish, John Santry, Alice Danciger, Margaret Coen and Frances Ellis to cite a few. The flamboyantly attired bohemian was greatly admired by his pupils, to whom he dedicated much of his time, almost to the detriment of his own art practice.

After graduating with a Professor of Drawing diploma from the Naples Royal Academy in 1896, Dattilo-Rubbo migrated to Australia the following year. He had studied under leading Neapolitan artist Domenico Morelli, who, in addition to the academic training of drawing from antique, perspective, anatomy and life drawing, introduced students to en plein air painting. Similarly, Dattilo-Rubbo emphasised both the importance of draughtsmanship and craftsmanship in his pupils, and encouraged the exploration of new ideas in art.

On disembarking at Circular Quay in 1897 Dattilo-Rubbo met 17-year-old Eirene Mort, granddaughter of industrialist and philanthropist TS Mort, of Mort & Co, who had been the first president of the NSW Academy of Art. Artistically inclined, Eirene identified Dattilo-Rubbo as an artist by the rolled-up canvases under his arm, and invited him to stay at the family home in Strathfield. (The artist's grandson Mike Rubbo suggests that 'perhaps the truth is that the Mort family was on the dock to meet an art teacher they had recruited by letter'.<sup>1</sup>) In return for board and English tuition, Dattilo-Rubbo became Eirene's art teacher. A typed document in the Mitchell Library records:

Shortly after his arrival he sold a number of canvases he brought with him. Then followed 12 months of hard work, marked at the close by the exhibition with the Society of Artists of the 'Veteran' which was purchased by the National Gallery - (later renamed the Art Gallery of New South Wales).<sup>2</sup>

The purchase of *The veteran (1857–1858)* 1899, which the artist claimed to be the first work he painted in Sydney, increased Dattilo-Rubbo's stature, and assisted with his election onto the Society of Artists' committee the following year. His sympathy for vagrants, whom he continued to paint throughout his life, possibly stemmed from economic hardship encountered during his youth, coupled with the effects of the depression of the 1890s that he witnessed upon his arrival in Australia. These works were well received, especially in the early years of his Australian career when such genre paintings were popular and his craftsmanship admired. Dattilo-Rubbo became known for this portfolio of work, as noted by the influential artist and publisher Sydney Ure Smith in 1938:

Cav. Dattilo Rubbo is a well-known Sydney painter. His portraits of old people are his greatest achievement, though lately he has broken new ground and tackled varied subjects.<sup>3</sup>

The 'new ground' to which Ure Smith alluded included an aspect of Dattilo-Rubbo's work reflecting his embrace of the impressionist and post-impressionist ideas he championed.

A trip to Europe in 1906 during which he visited Paris, London and Italy ignited his passion for modern art. In an interview shortly after his return, Dattilo-Rubbo said of the 1907 Venice Biennale:

I felt that Australia would do a great benefit to her local art by having a section there also, and had a talk with the Hon. Professor A. Fradeletto, the general secretary of the exhibition, on the subject. He received my suggestion enthusiastically.<sup>4</sup>

He later added:

I would be glad to do all in my power to make the enterprise successful. The artistic fraternity of Europe and America gathers at Venice for the occasion, and Australian artists would have an opportunity of ascertaining how their work compares with that of their brother painters of all parts of the civilised world. It would be an education which could not fail to be of great benefit to them ...<sup>5</sup>

While amused that many of the recipients of the National Gallery of Victoria's travelling scholarship became expatriates, Dattilo-Rubbo nevertheless advocated in 1907 that similar opportunities be made available for artists in New South Wales. In addition, he endorsed the idea of inviting foreign professors to teach at Australian art academies, a practice followed by the Royal Art Society in London, a means by which new ideas could be circulated.



**Harry Julius** *Caricature of Dattilo-Rubbo* 1911  
black pen on paper  
Collection of the Rubbo Family

One product of Dattilo-Rubbo's foresight and tuition is Roy de Maistre, who attended Scots College, where Dattilo-Rubbo was art master, and later attended Dattilo-Rubbo's classes at the Royal Art Society and gatherings at the artist's Rowe Street studio before being awarded the travelling art scholarship by the Society of Artists in 1923.

In addition to advocating the new art of Europe through the education system, Dattilo-Rubbo championed modern art with lectures and in the press. Although Australian coverage of modern art can be traced back as early as July 1907, with the *Adelaide Register* publishing an article on Zola's early struggles, a book review of C Lewis Hinds's *The Post Impressionists* was published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1911, and reproductions of modern art from Europe accompanied the *Sydney Mail*'s 1913 article entitled 'The revolutionary spirit in art', reception of this new school of painting was not always complimentary. On one occasion in 1910 the degree of antagonism was such that it compelled Dattilo-Rubbo to write to the *Bulletin* defending the impressionists and urging the critic,

a friend of his, to 'Come to my studio, dear friend, top of Rowe Street, and I shall put before your critical eyes many reproductions of these damnable Impressionists!'<sup>6</sup>

When Roland Wakelin's *Down the hills to Berry's Bay*<sup>7</sup> 1916 was rejected for the Royal Art Society's annual exhibition in 1916, Dattilo-Rubbo came to his pupil's defence, challenging fellow artist and committee member CES Tindall to a duel with 'pistols, swords or fists'. The committee backed down and the painting was hung. Such passionate outbursts in favour of modern art and against the academically minded establishment have enshrined Dattilo-Rubbo in the history of Australian art as the charismatic teacher and champion of the Sydney Moderns.

The return from Europe in 1913 of Norah Simpson, a former pupil who brought with her photos, reproductions and samples of her own post-impressionist-inspired work, transformed his studio into the hub for Sydney's avant-garde. Roland Wakelin later recalled:

I remember Rubbo showing us some of Simpson's own painting which fascinated me, mainly I think at that time, because of the new developments in colour technique. Simpson's picture *Studio portrait, Chelsea* 1915<sup>8</sup> may not appear revolutionary to painters of this generation, but at that time such a painting was liable to give old gentlemen apoplexy.<sup>9</sup>

Dattilo-Rubbo spoke at the opening of Wakelin and Roy de Maistre's *Colour in art* exhibition at Gayfield Shaw's Art Salon in Sydney in 1919. Apparently tensions between the moderns championed by Dattilo-Rubbo and the conservatives led by Julian Ashton and his art-critic son, Howard, were fraught prior to the opening. In an interview with Carmel Oakley for her thesis on Dattilo-Rubbo, Lloyd Rees in 1982 recalled that 'a minor artist, Percy Pickles, confided in him that Howard Ashton over lunch in the Farmer's cafeteria a few days before the opening had told him that he would "destroy this thing for good and all", even though he had not yet seen the paintings'. Of the opening Rees recalled an impassioned Dattilo-Rubbo at one stage on his knees with arms outflung, pleading for artistic freedom of his two students.<sup>10</sup>

When not battling the establishment or his peers, and in spite of teaching and family commitments, Dattilo-Rubbo found time to paint and received recognition in his lifetime. In addition to the acquisition of his artwork by public institutions in Australia and New Zealand, in 1912 he won the James Fairfax Prize for Pencil Drawing and sold a painting exhibited in the *Salon des Artistes Professionels* in Paris the same year. Six of his works were included in the *150 years of Australian art* exhibition of 1938. He featured in the 1924, 1925 and 1930 British Empire Exhibitions in London and exhibited in the Archibald and Wynne several times. He was appointed a member of the War Memorial Board in 1919. His work was included in the *Mostra d'Oltremare* (First Triennial Exhibition of Italian Labour in the World) held in Naples in 1952, and in 1930 at the New York International Art Centre of Roerick.



Despite these accolades, during World War Two Dattilo-Rubbo's Italian associations (in 1932, he was made a Knight of the Order of the Crown of Italy with the title Cavaliere by the then prime minister Benito Mussolini) raised concern over his loyalty, leading to his being interned briefly by the Australian Government in 1940, although not without protest from supporters, among them Dame Mary Gilmore. Deciding to ignore the humiliating incident, he gave many of his works to Australian charities, including the Sydney Legacy War Orphans Fund, Airforce House Association, the Rachel Forster Hospital for Women and Children and Sydney Hospital, and donated more than 50 works to *Art's tribute to Red Cross*, the Red Cross Coin Catchers group's fundraising exhibition, in November 1943.

Dattilo-Rubbo resigned from the Royal Art Society in 1934, fearing it had become too staid, and joined its rival, the Society of Artists. This decision, as his grandson Mike Rubbo points out, resulted in the artist fighting on two fronts: against the conservative forces within the Royal Art Society and against the Society of Artists itself, whose members undermined him.<sup>11</sup> His work was regarded as old fashioned and his views towards contemporary art were considered conservative.

Interestingly, although unable to embrace new directions in art beyond post-impressionism, Dattilo-Rubbo championed a new direction in design which began to flourish in the 1930s. In 1932 he gave lectures on adapting colour to everyday life at the Club Italia and at the Lyceum Club, both in Sydney. He spoke of colour harmony, the effect of colour on the nervous system, and using a colour wheel to illustrate his theory, he recommended colour schemes that would best suit house interiors and also women's complexions. His promotion of the colour wheel also reconnected him with Roy de Maistre, who a decade earlier had explored art and music through the use of the colour wheel. Coincidentally, de Maistre resided in the United Kingdom during this period and shared a studio with the British artist Francis Bacon. Bacon, an interior designer at time, greatly benefited from the painting and technical advice de Maistre bestowed on him, some of which would have stemmed from Dattilo-Rubbo's teachings.

At an exhibition opening in 1937 Dattilo-Rubbo, finding himself unable to embrace modern art beyond post-impressionism, and concerned over the direction of contemporary art, noted:

The public, grows more and more indifferent to art. Many think that lunacy is a malady hereditary in artists. The moderns say that the exponents of traditional art are soon forgotten. Nothing is more absurd. For true artists art comprises all the works of great masters ancient or modern.<sup>12</sup>

By the end of the 1940s, and now in his seventies, Dattilo-Rubbo had long been relieved of the avant-garde torch, marginalised by emerging artists. An unflattering review of a solo exhibition at Brisbane's Moreton Galleries included the remark:



Photo of bohemian-attired Dattilo-Rubbo 1906  
Manly Art Gallery and Museum

Anthony Dattilo-Rubbo has been closely associated with Australian art for over half a century. Unlike many of the older Australian painters, he has not moved with the years, and his works therefore bring nothing new in temper or trend.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps this perception was reinforced by memories of a lecture given several years earlier at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in which he had ridiculed reproductions of the works of a number of cubists, stating: 'To my mind, drawings like that are only fit for the incinerator'.<sup>14</sup>

The art world had moved on, and one-time students of Dattilo-Rubbo such as Frank Hinder had become the new avant-garde. As former Art Gallery of New South Wales curator Renee Free observed: 'In the early 1930s, Balson, Grace Crowley, Hinder and Fizelle came together in Sydney and were the leaders of the second phase of the modern art movement in Australia'.<sup>15</sup>

In his later years, Dattilo-Rubbo devoted his attention to Manly Art Gallery and Museum, donating more than 100 works on the proviso that an annexe be built for their display. The annexe was constructed in 1940. He also bequeathed the Manly Art Gallery and Museum part of his estate.

Additional works were donated to art galleries in Australian and New Zealand upon request in an attempt to secure his reputation as an artist.

Dattilo-Rubbo retired from teaching in 1941 and, following the death of his wife Mildred two years later, became reclusive. Overlooked and almost forgotten, he wrote inside an album containing photographs of some of his works of art: 'I have been simply a teacher, an Instructor, "The maestro" and I never felt to claim the laurels of an artist. No apology is required for having fulfilled my duty in the teaching of art to my best ability. A Dattilo-Rubbo.'<sup>16</sup>

In 1954, just a year before he died at the age of 85, Dattilo-Rubbo was made a life member of the Society of Artists. A few months after his death he was honoured with a posthumous exhibition at the Bissietta Art Gallery in Sydney.

Former student Donald Friend described him as a great teacher but an execrable painter. The artist Lloyd Rees acknowledged Dattilo-Rubbo's influence in conversation with Oakley, and in his *The small treasures of a lifetime* 1969 recalled how younger artists, including Wakelin and de Maistre, who congregated at Dattilo-Rubbo's Rowe Street studio, had urged him to lead them in a new contemporary art society. Dattilo-Rubbo declined, stating he had a family for whom he had to provide. Although Lloyd Rees gave an opening speech at the 1981 Dattilo-Rubbo retrospective, by the time he wrote *Peaks and valleys: an autobiography*, published the year he died, Dattilo-Rubbo is only vaguely referenced. Similarly, Wakelin, although acknowledging Dattilo-Rubbo's encouragement and support in the early years, later in life, like Rees, he neglects to reference his teacher's contribution in the importing of ideas from Europe and, perhaps unintentionally, in his recollections shifts the importance to Norah Simpson. Without Dattilo-Rubbo's empathy for the new, Simpson's legacy would be lessened.

Although many of the artists of this era had passed away, in the 1960s and 1970s Hazel de Berg interviewed a number of artists, among them Lucy Hertz, Grace Cossington Smith and Roland Wakelin, for a National Library of Australia oral history project; they provided a valuable insight into Dattilo-Rubbo's legacy. His son Sydney Rubbo embarked on a similar project in 1969, interviewing artists in attempt to record the importance of this father's work.

After his death, former pupil and Art Gallery of New South Wales trustee Erik Langker wrote:

Rubbo's force of personality and influence as a teacher had a greater impact on Australian art than [did] his painting. He will be remembered as the one who fought against academic authority for the freedom of the artist to venture along his own path.<sup>17</sup>

The Antonio Dattilo-Rubbo Focus Room display at the Art Gallery of New South Wales pays homage to an almost forgotten maestro who practised what he preached. It is

the second exhibition dedicated to the work of Dattilo-Rubbo. An earlier exhibition, *Cav Antonio Dattilo-Rubbo: painter and teacher and some prominent pupils*, organised by art historian Jean Campbell at the Manly Art Gallery and Museum in 1981, provided the foundation for a website devoted to the artist launched in 2008: [www.antoniodattilorubbo.com.au](http://www.antoniodattilorubbo.com.au)

#### NOTES

- 1 Rubbo, 'The second post – our first auction', 10 March 2008, <http://familyartstoriesrubbo.wordpress.com/>
- 2 Antonio Dattilo-Rubbo. The typed document located in the Rubbo Papers at the Mitchell Library is not dated.
- 3 Sydney Ure Smith, 'Art and Literature Down the Years', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 Jan 1938, p 21
- 4 'International art – lessons from Venice – Australian artist's on right lines – our shortcomings in sculpture', *Daily Telegraph*, Sydney, 22 June 1907, p 17
- 5 *ibid*
- 6 Antonio Dattilo-Rubbo, 'Artists and "the book fellow"', *The Bulletin*, 8 September 1910
- 7 *Down the hills to Berry's Bay* is in the AGNSW collection.
- 8 *Studio portrait, Chelsea* is in the AGNSW collection.
- 9 Roland Wakelin, 'Post Impressionism in Sydney: Some personal recollections', *Quarterly*, AGNSW, January 1962, p 91
- 10 Carmel Oakley, 'A Neapolitan in Sydney: Antonio Dattilo-Rubbo and his art, 1870–1955', unpublished University of Sydney thesis, 1982, pp 72–3
- 11 Mike Rubbo's notes on Antonio Dattilo-Rubbo compiled in May 2002.
- 12 'Painter's criticism, modern tendencies in art', *Argus*, 28 Jan 1937
- 13 W.T., 'No hint of a cubed corner', *Courier Mail*, 12 April 1949, p 2
- 14 'Present-day art. Mr Dattilo-Rubbo's criticism', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 October 1929, p 8
- 15 Renee Free, *Balson Crowley Fizzle Hinder*, exhibition catalogue, AGNSW, 1966, p 5
- 16 Album of photographs of paintings compiled by Antonio Dattilo-Rubbo, Mitchell Library, PXE 666
- 17 Erik Langker, 'Anthony Dattilo-Rubbo', *Quarterly*, AGNSW, January 1965, p 27

## A FAMILY PERSPECTIVE

Mike Rubbo

To have Antonio Dattilo-Rubbo as a grandfather was like having a treasure in the family, though I was just a boy when he died in the mid 1950s – a treasure only partly enjoyed because most of what I know about his flamboyant personality – the word was surely invented for him – comes second-hand, from stories handed down.

That is, except for one story I often tell, my own special encounter. We are in the garden at his house in Mosman, Vesuvius, a smelly old man and a small boy eyeing Blue, his old cattle dog, who is growling menacingly. Nonno, as we called him, pulls out of his pocket something shrivelled, and in the heavy accent he never lost, says, 'Eet's a 'uman ear.'

The awful trophy is pressed into my hand as Nonno goes on, suddenly slashing the air. 'This ear, I cut eet, like that! In a duel, boy!' I believe it, knowing even very young that grandfather was always demanding physical satisfaction if insulted, or if some selector refused to hang one of his prize students.

Fifty years later, I go back to the same house and find that his fibro studio is still standing up the back, hard against the lane. Empty, it looks like what it is a nondescript garage. Yet inside I remember it filled with easels, stacked canvases, all sorts of regalia, spears and masks, collected on painting trips. Arthur Murch is with me and he, having sculpted Nonno's head, declares that he sees him in me.

My grandfather loved to be outrageous, to excite, to attack if necessary. His classes could be explosive. If he did not like your drawing, and drawing was the basis of everything, he said, he'd rub it out with a feather duster. When not prowling his studio classroom looking for sloppy work, he'd be in noisy despair over a model not turning up, or dashing to the next room where rich food, such as no Australian ever ate, was burning aromatically.

I see him as always in a fury of communication with his new homeland, either one on one, or broadcasting ideas far and wide. Australia should have a pavilion at the Venice Biennale, he decried on returning from his only trip back to Europe in 1907. Australia had to have a national portrait gallery, and should have applied arts schools where you learnt useful art. Trams should be painted bright colours and houses should be harmoniously decorated.

He was a champion at getting letters published in the papers, writing forcefully, elegantly, no trace of the broken English in his speech.



top to bottom:  
Mike Ribbo beside Arthur Murch's bust of Antonio Dattilo-Rubbo  
Mike Rubbo's photos of Antonio Dattilo-Rubbo's Mosman studio

If he was partly the actor, he was never ingratiating. When invited to judge an art show in Bathurst, just ten years off the boat from Naples, he was almost run out of town when he told the committee that the prize money would have been better spent on encouraging local cooking.

Later, at the end of the teens, he went to battle for his students, the bold pair Wakelin and de Maistre, who wanted to make sound and colour blend into bold tilts towards abstraction.

As the Ashtons, running the rival arts school, roared in fury at the opening of Wakelin and de Maistre's 1919 show, my grandfather, Lloyd Rees reports, was down on one knee claiming that Wakelin and de Maistre were the new Anzacs, the fearless frontline scouts.

My great sadness is that I'm his natural heir, the child who loved painting and drawing more than all the others, yet I got nothing in terms of teaching from the old man and, later, only occasionally sought out those who knew him, like Arthur.

It's been growing on me, and the Art Gallery of New South Wales Focus Room tribute makes the sense of loss more intense, the feeling of how much I missed not having Nonno as my teacher, even for a year or two. He was just an old man living in another city, with bits of dried apple in his pocket.

May 2011



## THE WORKS

*The veteran (1857–1858)* 1899

oil on canvas  
 93.7 x 65 cm sight; 135 x 85.5 x 6.5 cm frame  
 Signed ur 'A Dattilo-Rubbo'  
 Art Gallery of New South Wales  
 Purchased 1899

This sombre portrait of an elderly man wearing an Indian Mutiny Medal was, wrote Dattilo-Rubbo in his album of works, now located in the Mitchell Library, 'the first picture painted in Sydney, and for the first time exhibited in the Society of Artists (annual exhibition)'.<sup>1</sup>

Although the Indian Mutiny, also referred to as the Indian Rebellion of 1857 and India's First War of Independence, occurred some 40 years prior to Dattilo-Rubbo's arrival in Australia, Sydney was abuzz with recollections published in books and newspapers. Dattilo-Rubbo's associations with the well-connected Mort family would have placed him in good stead to be au fait with topics of the day. A month after the Art Gallery of New South Wales purchased this painting from the Society of Artists' August 1899 exhibition, a play by George Daventry entitled *The Indian mutiny* opened at Sydney's Criterion theatre on the corner of Pitt and Park streets.

Australia, as part of the British Empire, had dispatched troops to help subdue the mutiny, which lasted two years and acted as a precursor to Indian Independence, eventually granted in 1947. Some 290 000 British and colonial soldiers and civilians who saw action there were awarded the Indian Mutiny Medal, worn by Dattilo-Rubbo's unidentified sitter. The Australian War Memorial in Canberra does not have a definitive list of Australian veterans of the mutiny, as soldiers from Australia were listed as British.

Described in 1899 as a powerful masterpiece, *The veteran (1857–1858)* elevated Dattilo-Rubbo's stature with his election to the Society of Artists committee in 1900. The sale of this painting also enabled Dattilo-Rubbo to set up his studio in bohemian Rowe Street, a narrow laneway between Castlereagh and Pitt streets adjacent to today's MLC Centre. According to Margaret Pearson in *Tales of Rowe Street*, his studio became Sydney's first bachelor flat – 'a studio, bathroom, bedroom and kitchenette, all specially designed by the occupant, the artist Dattilo-Rubbo'.<sup>2</sup>





## *Poverty makes strange bedfellows* 1905

oil on canvas on board  
74.5 x 135 cm sight; 99.2 x 159.7 x 6.5 cm frame  
Signed and dated ulc 'A. Dattilo-Rubbo/ Sydney 1905'  
Art Gallery of New South Wales  
Purchased 2009

The title, *Poverty makes strange bedfellows*, is derived from a line in William Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* – 'Misery acquaints a man with strange bedfellows' – in which a shipwrecked man seeks shelter beside a sleeping monster. Dattilo-Rubbo's title and 'politics makes strange bedfellows' were popular phrases at the time this painting was created.

In preparation for his trip to Europe, Dattilo-Rubbo auctioned a collection of his paintings at James R Lawson and Little in June 1906. Publicising the event, a writer for the *Sydney Morning Herald* wrote:

Connoisseurs will readily recognise the chief works in the collection, several of which were exhibited in places of honour by the Royal Art Society at the annual shows of the past five years. Attention will be especially attracted by the fine oil painting 'Poverty Makes Strange Bedfellows', one of the pictures of the year in 1905. These derelicts on the sea of life who jostle one another in their sleep on a park-bench illustrate the painter's talent and indifferenciation of human character, and in the skill with which a colour-full result has been won from the shabby garments of a row of vagrants.<sup>3</sup>

Mr William McLeod, one of the founders of the Sydney magazine *The Bulletin*, purchased the painting.



### *The strike's aftermath* 1913

oil on canvas  
121.6 x 91.4 cm stretcher;  
140.5 x 110.5 x 8.5 cm frame  
Signed and dated lrc 'A. Dattilo-Rubbo/ Sydney 1913'  
Art Gallery of New South Wales  
Purchased 1913

The extraction of crude oil from wells in Ohio and California in the 1890s heralded the arrival of the oil industry. In the 1900s additional wells were drilled off the US coast, and in 1913 oil was discovered in British Columbia. Astute companies such as the Canadian Pacific Railway began modifying their transportation to oil, ending the coal industry's monopoly. This coincided with the National Coal Strike of 1912 in the United Kingdom, by miners seeking a minimum wage. Similar campaigns were launched by coal miners in Australia and New Zealand. Social realist Dattilo-Rubbo has drawn on these turbulent times for *The strike's aftermath*. A dispirited miner – possibly contemplating his future – is portrayed with a copy of the Labor Party's *The Worker* newspaper at his feet, his unused pick and shovel leaning against the bare wall behind. This sympathetic and skilfully rendered painting was exhibited at the Royal Art Society's annual exhibition and purchased by the Art Gallery.



### *Betty (girl in red bonnet) 1917*

oil on canvas  
46.0 x 36.5 cm stretcher; 59.4 x 47.5 x 6.5 cm frame  
Signed and dated llc, 'A. Dattilo-Rubbo/ 1917'  
Manly Art Gallery and Museum  
Purchased 1980

'He was the only one in Sydney at that time who knew anything about modern masters Cézanne, Gauguin, van Gogh: they were hardly known in Sydney at that time' recalled Grace Cossington Smith of Dattilo-Rubbo.<sup>4</sup> Wakelin similarly noted: 'I looked up all I could about them – it wasn't much in those days. There weren't many reproductions, certainly no colour reproductions. In this I was greatly encouraged by Dattilo-Rubbo, and I can't speak highly enough of the help he gave me in those early days.'<sup>5</sup>

Championing modern art to a wider audience, in 1914 Dattilo-Rubbo gave a lecture on colour harmony at the Royal Art Society's rooms, putting forward the scientific and artistic theories of colour and light behind the Impressionistic approach. He painted *Betty (girl in red bonnet)* three years later. Almost acquired by the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the painting was instead purchased from the 1917 Royal Art Society exhibition by the actress Althea Glasby, a student of Dattilo-Rubbo.

It is plausible that the sitter is Betty Morgan. Her sister Patricia, born in 1925, recalls Betty pestering her parents to go to Dattilo-Rubbo's art school. Glasby, at age 84 in 1980, recalled that Betty would accompany her mother to Dattilo-Rubbo's Saturday morning classes at the Art Society's gallery. On viewing an image of this painting, Patricia said, 'the painting has Betty's hair colour, eye colour, high cheekbones and nobble on end of nose'.<sup>6</sup> Betty Morgan was a pupil of Dattilo-Rubbo from the age of 17, became one of his favourite models, and later assistant teacher. Another portrait of Betty as a sophisticated young woman, painted in 1934 and exhibited in the Archibald, is in the Manly collection.



## Self-portrait 1924

oil on canvas  
90.5 x 70.5 cm stretcher; 108.3 x 88.9 x 6 cm frame  
Signed and dated lrc 'A. Dattilo-Rubbo/ Sydney 1924'  
Art Gallery of New South Wales  
Gift of the artist 1939

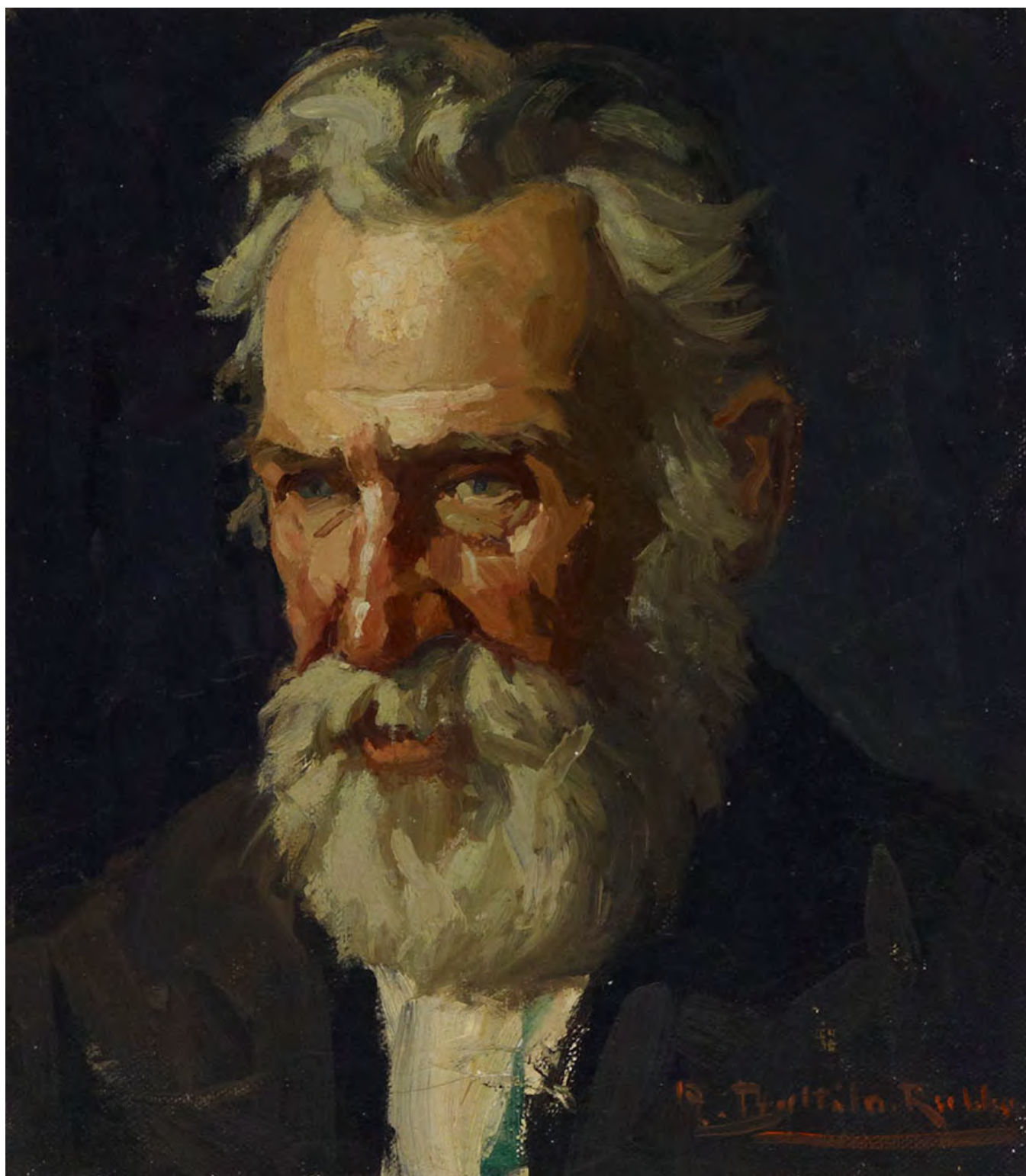
The only possible way to learn to appreciate the art  
Mr Dattilo-Rubbo advocates is to travel and see and study  
the great galleries of the world and then possibly the traveller  
will come back absolutely at enmity with the impressionists  
as I did.

— John S Dence, SMH, 12 September 1925

Exhibited in the 1924 Archibald Prize, Dattilo-Rubbo's Self-portrait acts as a presentation piece, a statement epitomising his status of a bohemian artist, a champion of the new. Neapolitan artist Domenico Morelli's appointment as professor of painting at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Naples in 1855 could be likened to Dattilo-Rubbo's arrival in Sydney. Championing Morelli in 1905, Dattilo-Rubbo recalls his professor saying: 'We fought the old Academy because we wished to fight mediocrity in Art'.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, six years earlier, the opening of Roland Wakelin and Roy de Maistre's 1919 Colour in art exhibition at Gayfield Shaw's Art Salon saw the battle of the new championed by Dattilo-Rubbo against the conservatives led by Julian Ashton and his art-critic son, Howard. In an interview with Carmel Oakley for her thesis on Dattilo-Rubbo, Lloyd Rees described the opening as the most exciting and dramatic night of his life and 'recalled the impassionate Dattilo-Rubbo at one stage on his knees with arms out-flung, pleading for artistic freedom of his two students'.<sup>8</sup>

Self-portrait was painted the year that Dattilo-Rubbo moved to his new Bligh Street studio, which had lift access and a view of Darling Harbour. In 1924, he was included in the British Empire Exhibition, held in London, and the Atelier Club was formed, comprising students and former students who congregated monthly to discuss art with presentations by Dattilo-Rubbo, Roland Wakelin, Thea Proctor, George Lambert and George A Taylor. It was also the year that the Manly Art Gallery and Museum committee was formed, of which Dattilo-Rubbo was a member and to which he gave his *Aboriginal head* 1924 watercolour.





*Old age* c1928

oil on canvas on board  
36.5 x 32 cm sight; 46.5 x 42 x 4 cm frame  
Manly Art Gallery and Museum  
Gift of the artist 1940



### *Le froid (The cold)* 1938

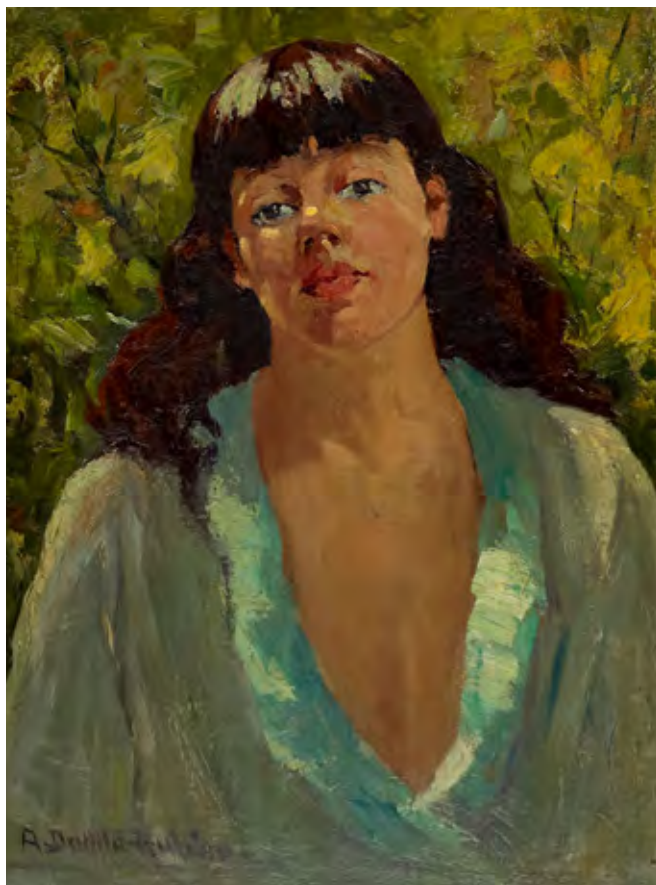
oil on canvas on board  
54 x 37 cm sight; 74.5 x 56.8 x 2.5 cm frame  
Signed lrc 'A. Dattilo-Rubbo'  
Manly Art Gallery and Museum  
Gift of the artist 1940

In recognition of the lack of representation of modern European art in Sydney, a letter signed by 73 artists and 198 students was sent to the Trustees of the Sydney Art Gallery (AGNSW) in 1933 appealing for the purchase and permanent display of colour reproductions by 'such artists as Gauguin, Cézanne, Monet, Manet, Renoir, Van Gogh, and Matisse, all of whom are recognised in Europe by the most conservative authorities as painters of the greatest significance'.<sup>9</sup> Signatories included Grace Cossington Smith, Roland Wakelin, Rayner Hoff, John D Moore, Thea Proctor and Dattilo-Rubbo.

The post-impressionist-inspired *Le froid (The cold)* was painted when Dattilo-Rubbo was aged 68 and a year prior to the Herald French and British Contemporary Art Exhibition. Sponsored by Sir Keith Murdoch, managing director of the Melbourne-based Herald & Weekly Times group, and organised by the art critic Basil Burdett, the 1939 blockbuster comprised more than 200 works and showcased some of the art that Dattilo-Rubbo had been championing. The exhibition enabled many to experience first-hand, and for the first time, the work of Van Gogh, Seurat, Matisse, Picasso, Bonnard and Braque. As with the 1919 *Colour in art* exhibition, tensions arose between the advocates of the new and the more conservative. With the outbreak of World War Two, three-quarters of the exhibition was offered for sale; only 11 paintings were purchased by Australian galleries.

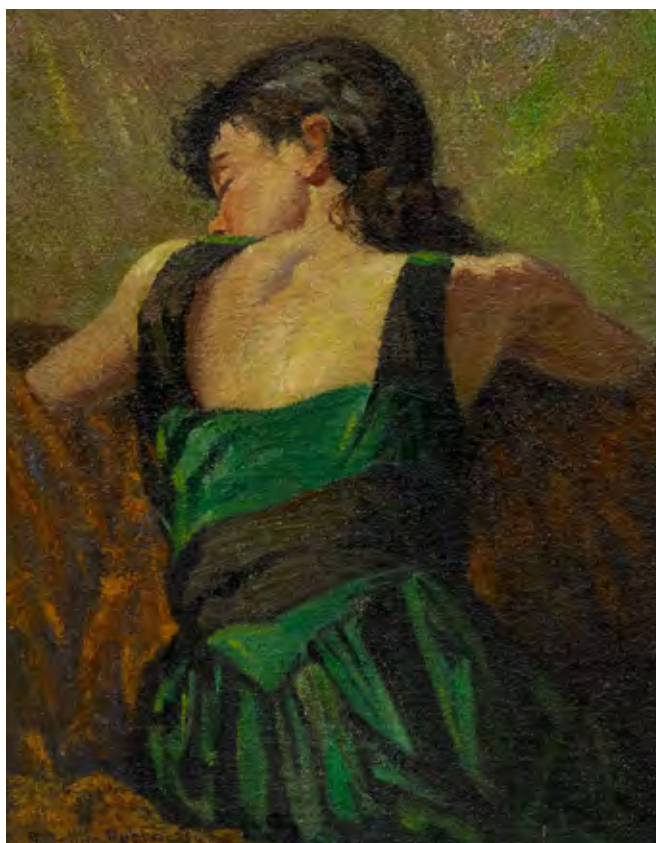
In 1952, *Le froid (The cold)* travelled to Naples, where it featured in *Mostra d'Oltremare* (First Triennial Exhibition of Italian Labour in the World).





### *Sun spots* 1941

oil on canvas on board  
45.5 x 34 cm board; 57 x 46 x 4.5 cm frame  
Signed II 'A. Dattilo-Rubbo'  
Manly Art Gallery and Museum  
Bequest of Antonio Dattilo-Rubbo 1955



### *Weary* c1943

oil on canvas mounted on board  
57 x 44 cm sight; 67 x 54 x 2.5 cm frame  
Signed II 'A. Dattilo-Rubbo'  
Manly Art Gallery and Museum  
Gift of the artist

With teaching commitments including art master at St Joseph's College, Hunter's Hill and Scots College, instructor at the Royal Art Society and classes at his studio, plus a family, Dattilo-Rubbo miraculously found time and energy to paint. He told M J MacNally of the *Daily Telegraph*, 20 November 1926:

My paintings have been carried out during the few spare hours I have had, mostly on holiday time. I have never been able to start a picture and devote myself to it for any long period. They have been built on the scraps of hours and I quite realise the consequence and result of such a method.

After some 43 years of teaching, Dattilo-Rubbo retired in 1941. His beloved wife Mildred accidentally died in the kitchen of their Mosman house two years later in 1943. Painted around this period, the model draped over chair with her back to the viewer alludes to the artist's mindset.



### *An old bachelor* 1944

oil on board  
68.0 x 49 cm sight; 82 x 64 x 4 cm frame  
Signed lrc 'A. Dattilo-Rubbo'  
Manly Art Gallery and Museum  
Bequest of Antonio Dattilo-Rubbo 1955

'With a stomach full of eggs and capers Rubbo took a sentimental turn about himself. I paint the old man's head, I paint the wrinkles. Nobody cares. Who is Rubbo? Nobody. Bah! ... Ah, Rubbo you are no good ... Rubbo you will never paint the masterpiece. They will find you dead. Who will care? No one...' Having got all that off his chest, Rubbo picked up his guitar and sang a merry Italian air ...'  
— Undated typed document located in Rubbo Papers in the Mitchell Library



## WATERCOLOURS

*On the wallaby track* 1913

watercolour and pastel on paper  
78.5 x 58 cm sight; 110.5 x 81 x 8 cm frame  
Signed and dated lrc '(ileg.)13/ Dattilo-Rubbo'  
Manly Art Gallery and Museum  
Gift of the artist 1940

Our parents toil'd to make a home –  
Hard grubbin' 'twas an' clearin' –  
They wasn't crowded much with lords  
When they was pioneering.  
But now that we have made the land  
A garden full of promise,  
Old Greed must crook 'is dirty hand  
And come ter take it from us.<sup>10</sup>

So wrote the poet Henry Lawson in a verse of 'Freedom on the wallaby', published in the *Brisbane Worker*, 16 May 1891. His words evoke the economic hardship of life in Australia at the time, when the sight of swagmen on the road (on the wallaby) seeking employment was common. Five years later, Australian impressionist Frederick McCubbin addressed a similar theme in his painting *On the wallaby track* 1896, which was purchased by the Gallery and which Dattilo-Rubbo would have seen. While Dattilo-Rubbo was familiar with the light of the Australian bush, having travelled two years earlier to Bathurst to judge an art prize, his training included copying, and the landscape in his watercolour-and-pastel drawing is reminiscent of McCubbin's painting.

The unidentified sitter posed as the down-on-his-luck swagman would most likely have been a Sydney street character. Interestingly, at the time Dattilo-Rubbo created this work, Henry Lawson was a well-known figure on the streets of Sydney, and it is plausible that he and Dattilo-Rubbo crossed paths: both were affiliated with *The Bulletin* and were members of early bohemian clubs, as recorded in George Taylor's *Those were the days*, published in 1918.



### *Australian Aboriginal* 1923

watercolour on paper  
44 x 33.5 cm sheet  
Signed ll 'A. Dattilo-Rubbo'  
Manly Art Gallery and Museum  
Gift of the artist 1924

Dattilo-Rubbo gave more than 100 works to the Manly Art Gallery and Museum, of which this watercolour was the first. Located among his papers at the Mitchell Library are a few commercial black-and-white studio photographs of Aboriginals, perhaps used as reference for this painting.





### *An old scholar c1938*

watercolour on paper, 59 x 39 cm sheet  
Signed lrc 'A. Dattilo-Rubbo'  
Manly Art Gallery and Museum  
Gift of the artist 1940

'Derelicts raking over the city garbage tins in search of food do not form a pretty group. But they are real, however. The artist appears to have been imbibing the spirit of Zola, with a dash of Tolstoi. Mr Rubbo's watercolour life studies are the most striking ... he has certainly proved that the watercolour medium is equal to oils for portraiture.'

— *Sunday Sun*, November 1915



### *A hawker c1940*

watercolour on paperboard  
56 x 40 cm board  
Signed lrc 'A Dattilo-Rubbo'  
Manly Art Gallery and Museum  
Gift of the artist 1940

'The artist is happiest in portraiture, in which field he contributes one or two penetrating and pleasing analyses of character. Of these, 'A Hawker' (water colour) and 'Joe' (oil) are outstanding.'

— *Courier-Mail*, 12 April 1949



### *The fisherman's wife 1940s*

watercolour on paperboard  
51.5 x 37 cm board  
Signed ll 'A. Dattilo-Rubbo'  
Manly Art Gallery and Museum  
Bequest of Antonio Dattilo-Rubbo 1955



## DRAWINGS

*Study 1904*

black and white pastel on grey paper  
 41 x 33.5 cm sight; 67.8 x 60.2 x 2.1 cm  
 Signed and dated llc 'A. Dattilo-Rubbo/ 1904'  
 Art Gallery of New South Wales  
 Purchased 1904

The rendering of this early *Study 1904* stems from the academic training the artist received in Italy, which involved anatomy, copying from casts and life drawing. In his final examination at the Royal Academy in Naples, Dattilo-Rubbo was awarded second-class honours. Recalling his student days, Dattilo-Rubbo wrote in 1905:

We were expected to attend the classes every day from nine o'clock to three, from October to July; exemption from such attendance being only permitted on production of a doctor's certificate of ill health. It was hard work – several students were driven mad by over-study – but we managed to get some amusement from it too.<sup>11</sup>

One of the amusements was the mimicking of animal noises. So good was Dattilo-Rubbo's impersonation of a buzzing blowfly that the professor recommended to the board that screens be supplied for the windows in an attempt to keep out the wretched creatures.

Two years prior to *Study* being made, Dattilo-Rubbo wrote to the *Sydney Evening News*, advocating that drawing be made compulsory in schools and colleges. He also recommended that drawings be exhibited alongside paintings and maps in galleries.



### *Portrait of Norah Simpson 1915*

charcoal on gesso primed paper  
120.5 x 74.5 cm sight; 140.5 x 98.5 x 6 cm frame  
Signed l/c 'A Dattilo-Rubbo/ 1915'  
Manly Art Gallery and Museum  
Gift of the artist 1940

Dattilo-Rubbo departed for Europe in 1906, visiting Paris, London and Italy. On his return to Australia the following year, he championed modern art, improved methods of teaching and endorsed opportunities for Australian artists, including advocating a NSW travelling art scholarship and for Australia to be represented in the Venice Biennale. A few years later, in 1910, Dattilo-Rubbo defended the impressionists against a particular critic, writing in *The Bulletin*, 'Come to my studio, dear friend, top of Rowe Street, and I shall put before your critical eyes many reproductions of these damnable impressionists!' <sup>12</sup>

Norah Simpson attended Dattilo-Rubbo's classes in 1911, gaining a foundation in contemporary art, and in 1912 she travelled to Europe with her parents. While abroad, she attended the avant-garde Westminster School of Art in London, and was introduced to the post-impressionists under Spencer Gore, Harold Gilman and Charles Ginner. In Paris, she frequented art dealers where she viewed works by Cézanne, Gauguin, van Gogh, Matisse and Picasso. Her return to Australia in 1913 with books, photos, reproductions and samples of her own post-impressionist-inspired work, coupled with Dattilo-Rubbo's enthusiasm for modern art, transformed his studio into the hub for Sydney's avant-garde. Former student Grace Cossington Smith recalled, 'We had very interesting lunch hours, because he always read something interesting to us about the contemporary painters of that time, Cézanne, Gauguin, van Gogh and others ...' <sup>13</sup>



### *Idleness* c1941

sanguine, charcoal and white conte on cardboard  
52 x 32 cm board  
Signed lrc 'A. Dattilo-Rubbo'  
Manly Art Gallery and Museum

After judging a beauty contest, Dattilo-Rubbo once cheekily remarked: 'Rembrandt liked fat women, and Botticelli liked them thin. My idea of perfection would be a woman shaped like the Venus de Milo and possessed of a cultured mind. It would help if she could cook.'<sup>14</sup>

The sitter for this drawing is Jean Morgan, who is also the model for the oil painting *Sun spots*.





### *Study of an old man seated post 1932*

charcoal on paper  
55.5 x 38.5 cm sight; 84 x 66.5 x 4.5 cm frame  
Signed ll 'A. Dattilo-Rubbo'  
Art Gallery of New South Wales  
Purchased with funds provided by the Watson Bequest Fund 1961

'When I want a model I go out into the parks and look at the old men sitting in the sun. When I see a likely face, I offer him a cigarette, then I suggest that he should make a few shillings cleaning out the studio. Finally, I get him to pose.'  
— Dattilo-Rubbo in *Sunday Pictorial*, 6 July 1930



### *Old man 1910s*

charcoal on gesso on primed board  
50 x 80 cm board; 84 x 66.5 x 4.5 cm frame  
Signed lrc 'A. Dattilo-Rubbo'  
Art Gallery of New South Wales  
Purchased 1938





### *Here's a health unto His Majesty 1911*

charcoal and white pastel on gesso primed paper  
 75.5 x 90.5 cm sight; 145 x 70 x 4.5 cm frame  
 Signed and dated lrc 'A. Dattilo-Rubbo/ 1911'  
 Art Gallery of New South Wales  
 Purchased 1911

Colour sense is a sort of gift so I can take no credit for that, but what is more essential is the mastery of drawing and tone and the application of the medium, before one can hope to create one's conception.

— Dattilo-Rubbo to Mr Buttin, 1924

Somewhat advanced in years, newsman Mr Buttin – aware of the artist's dislike of the press – posed as a potential model experiencing hardship. A conversation was sparked before Buttin's true identity was revealed, to Dattilo-Rubbo's dismay.



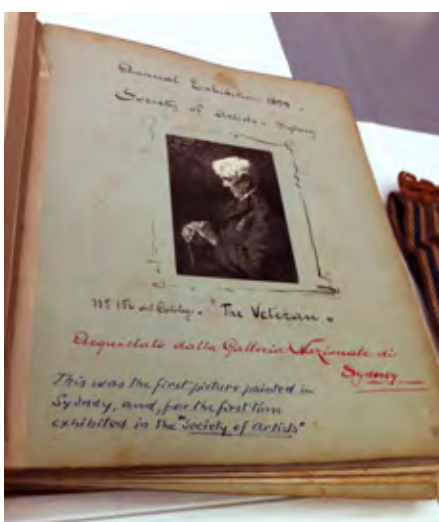
*Portrait study of an old man c1937*

brown oil pastel and charcoal on board  
60.5 x 46 cm board  
Signed lrc 'A.Dattilo-Rubbo'  
Art Gallery of New South Wales  
Gift of Mrs Lawrence Byrne 1972



*Study 1904*

black and white pastel on grey paper  
41 x 33.5 cm sight; 67.8 x 60.2 x 2.1 cm  
Signed and dated lrc 'A. Dattilo-Rubbo'  
Art Gallery of New South Wales  
Purchased 1904



## ALBUMS, PHOTOGRAPHS AND SKETCHBOOKS

The following are from the Mitchell Library Collection at the State Library of New South Wales unless stated otherwise

**Cecil Bostock**

Photo of Royal Art Society Committee members selecting works for Annual Exhibition date unknown

Envelope addressed to Dattilo-Rubbo at Rowe Street with a watercolour caricature of him on the front and inscribed 'Light of the world'. The unknown sender of the letter admired Dattilo-Rubbo referring to him as the 'Light of the world'. (pictured left)

Sketchbook of pencil drawings, mainly during European tour 1906–07

Photo of Dattilo-Rubbo in his studio date unknown

Album compiled by Dattilo-Rubbo featuring reproductions his work (pictured below left)

Photo of bohemian-attired Dattilo-Rubbo 1906

Manly Art Gallery and Museum (illustrated p 4)

**Harry Julius**

*Caricature of Dattilo-Rubbo 1911*

The drawing was reproduced in *The Bulletin*, 7 September 1911, and accompanied an article on the Royal Art Society's annual exhibition. Collection of the Rubbo Family (illustrated p 3)

### NOTES

- 1 Album of photographs and paintings compiled by Dattilo-Rubbo, Mitchell Library collection. PXE 666 vol 1.
- 2 Margaret M Pearson, *Tales of Rowe Street*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1947. Tale titled 'The sign of the enterprising bachelor'. Not paginated.
- 3 'The Dattilo-Rubbo Collection', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 June 1906, p 9
- 4 Grace Cossington Smith interview with Hazel de Berg 1965, in Ann Stephen et al, *Modernism and Australia: documents on art, design and architecture 1917–1967*, Miegunyah Press, 2006, p 760.
- 5 Roland Wakelin interviewed by Hazel de Berg, Sydney 1962, in Geoffrey Dutton (ed), *Artists' portraits*, National Library of Australia, Canberra, 1992, p 40
- 6 Email from Louise Klein, 30 April 2011. Louise Klein is Patricia's daughter and Betty Morgan's niece.
- 7 A Dattilo-Rubbo, 'The royal academies of fine art in Italy', *Art & Architecture*, July/August 1905, p 157
- 8 Carmel Oakley, 'A Neapolitan in Sydney: Antonio Dattilo-Rubbo and his art, 1870–1955', unpublished University of Sydney thesis, 1982, pp 72–3
- 9 'Modern art prints. National Gallery asked to buy. Letter from 73 artists', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 July 1933, p 10
- 10 As reproduced in *A camp-fire yarn, Henry Lawson complete works 1885–1900*, Lansdowne, 1984
- 11 A Dattilo-Rubbo, 'The royal academies of fine art in Italy', *Art & Architecture*, July/August 1905, p 158
- 12 Antonio Dattilo-Rubbo, 'Artists and "the book fellow"', *The Bulletin*, about 8 September 1910
- 13 Grace Cossington Smith interview with Hazel de Berg 1965, in Ann Stephen et al, *Modernism and Australia: documents on art, design and architecture 1917–1967*, Miegunyah Press, 2006, pp 759–60
- 14 Untitled and not dated press clipping located in an album of press clippings compiled by Dattilo-Rubbo located in the Rubbo Papers. Mitchell Library.

## FURTHER READING

Rubbo family papers, Mitchell Library

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<http://www.antoniodattilorubbo.com.au>

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Hazel de Berg interviews with Lucy Hertz, Roland Wakelin, Grace Cossington Smith, National Library of Australia, Canberra, 1970s. Transcripts available.

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Eileen Chanin & Steven Miller, *Degenerates and perverts: the 1939 Herald exhibition of French and British contemporary art*, Miegunyah Press, Melbourne, 2005

Brian Davies attrib, *The cavalier*, unpublished research notes for a proposed SBS documentary c2000.

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Carmel Oakley, *A Neapolitan in Sydney: Antonio Dattilo-Rubbo and his art, 1870 – 1955*, unpublished University of Sydney thesis, 1982

Stephen Naylor, 'Australian space from the outside in: Australia's representation at the Venice Biennale 1954–2005', pp 320–332 in Jennifer Rutherford & Barbara Holloway (ed) *Halfway houses: the poetics of Australian spaces*, UWA Press, Perth 2010

D H Souter 'Signor A. Dattilo-Rubbo', *Art & Architecture*, vol 3, no 3, 1906

Roland Wakelin, 'Recollections of a post-impressionist', *Art and Australia*, vol 4, no 4, March 1967

John Williams, *The quarantined culture: Australian reactions to modernism 1913–1939*, Cambridge University Press, England, 2006

'International art: lessons from Venice, Australian artists on right lines ...', *Daily Telegraph*, Sydney, 22 June 1907

'Modern art prints: National Gallery asked to buy. Letter from 73 artists', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 July 1933, p 10

'Solving the colour problems', *The Sun*, 27 September 1932, p 25

A Dattilo-Rubbo, 'Colour harmony', *The Salon*, August 1914, pp 5–7



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Art Gallery of New South Wales

Gift of artist 1939

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