

Australian photo curator unearths national treasure

Arts Hub

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A mixture of serendipity and perseverance brought Australian-born photo curator Graham Howe to the discovery of a collection of photographs of Australia, taken by one of history's master photographers.

Among the photographs are depictions of "quintessentially Australian" scenes such as the Sydney Harbour Bridge, Canberra cityscape, Bondi and Collaroy Beach in Sydney and the early morning view at Pemberton, Western Australia, as well as a Pearling look-out man and an Aboriginal dance.

But the collection of over 3700 prints is far more diverse, according to Howe "it is a huge body of work made across the entire continent, with photographs taken up and down the social ladder."

"We've got Chinese praying at the Chinese Nationalist Party Assembly in Darwin, Afghan camel herders, a German dingo hunter ... I think he just gets what it means to be Australian," marvelled Howe of the work of Emil Otto Hoppe, an early 20th century photographer of such notaries as Marlene Dietrich, Albert Einstein, T. S. Elliot, Thomas Hardy and Vaslav Nijinsky, as well as King George, Queen Mary and the Queen Mother.

Howe discovered the photographs at the Mansell Collection, a picture library in London, courtesy of a few leads offered by photo historian Bill Jay and Michael Hoppé, an experimental new age musician and E. O. Hoppé's grandson.



Aboriginal dance, Palm Island Queensland, 1930 one of the many photographic treasures unearthed by Graham Howe.

“In the early 70s I was working at The Photographers Gallery, London, where I met Bill Jay, an extraordinary photo-historian who told to me, “I’ve just come back from doing an oral history with E. O. Hoppé, the most famous photographer in the world in 1920.”

But Hoppé’s reputation had by then been lost to the world, and Howe stored this titbit of information in the back of his mind until a chance meeting, twenty years later, with Michael Hoppé.

“So Hoppé’s grandson asked me, ‘Tell me, Graham – you’re a photo historian. Was grandpa any good?’” recalled Howe. To find out, Howe recovered an essay that Bill Jay had written on Hoppé in 1978 and tracked down the sources of the photographs that had been used in the article, one of which was a London picture library called the Mansell Collection, the other was with Michael Hoppe's brother in Weisbaden, Germany.

“Contained this the Hoppé Collection that I eventually acquired from the Mansell Collection was one extraordinary body of work on Australia,” Howe explained. “In 1930 Hoppé came to Australia to photograph the entire continent on a partial commission for a German publisher. Before leaving on his journey to Australia via India one of Hoppé's London friends told him, ‘After glitter and pagentry of Ceylon and India you will exhaust the pictorial possibilities in six weeks!’

“But Hoppé stayed in the country for ten months, taking some amazingly rich photographs, and created a body of work that I think is one of his greatest. It’s a treasure for Australia because it’s a collective portrait of the country done by one of the greatest photographers of the 20th century.”

“The magic of these photographs is that Mr. Hoppé understood and captured what it was to be Australian,” Howe added. “He read the qualities unique to the Aussie character and made our national portrait with such a depth and understanding that it will now always endure in our history as a great Australian work. This collection is such an important part of Australian’s cultural heritage that it belongs here. Our goal is to find an Australia buyer to help repatriate this national treasure rather than lose it to foreign art collectors and investors.”

Gael Newton, senior curator of photography at the National Gallery of Australia, also believes the collection is of immeasurable value to Australia, and is eager for its debut appearance to result in its repatriation.

“The images, thankfully intact and preserved as a single archive, present an unprecedented picture of Australia at the beginning of the 1930s,” she said. “No other photographer, Australian or foreign, had presented such a comprehensive view of the nation by that time.”

The unearthing of Hoppé’s work is also helping to restore his once-forgotten reputation as one of the greatest masters of his field, a fact that delights not only Howe but Hoppé’s grandson, Michael Hoppé.

“I’ve continued to support and be influenced by my grandfather's work, and have produced five albums of my music with his stunning photography,” Michael Hoppé said. “With Graham Howe's tireless commitment and support, I am very delighted to see grandfather gradually regain the recognition he always deserved.”

Howe's collection of Hoppé photographs is now being exhibited at Customs House, Circular Quay, in Sydney. He has also co-authored *E. O. Hoppé's Australia*, a book on the photographs, with historian Erika Esau.

Below: A post in response to this piece

From the Editor's Desk:

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Well, what can i say...? PLEASE bring these photos to Melbourne. I cannot afford to get to Sydney, yet feel a great need to see them! Help! (I have never written a post before, and didn't think I would write one like this). Where can I contact Graham Howe, and how can we convince him??? the picture posted with the article is lovely, makes the heart happy. h

posted by Helen Metzger | Wednesday, 16 May 2007