



Friend, Donald (1915-1989)

by Michelle Antoinette

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Donald Stuart Leslie Friend was an eccentric man of wide-ranging creative talents: a great painter, an exceptional figure draftsman, and a gifted satirical writer. Exhibiting widely in Australia during the 1950s and 1960s, Friend also produced many books, stories and diaries, including the controversial and erotic *Bumbooziana*, which was published in 1979.

Born in Warialda, northwest New South Wales, on February 6, 1915, into an aristocratic grazier family, Friend defied his family's wishes that he follow in his father's footsteps. Openly homosexual, he left school at the age of 16 to become an itinerant artist. Friend worked in many different parts of the world, his meandering reflecting an existential search for exoticism and romance.

Friend began his nomadic life by jumping freight trains to Cairns in North Queensland, travelling further north to Thursday Island, and then living with the island people of the beautiful Torres Strait. However, no one place ever completely satisfied Friend's aesthetic and spiritual needs, and it was not long before he was once again on the move.

Friend began his art training in Sydney under the guidance of Sydney Long in 1930, and then with Datillo Rubbo from 1933 to 1935. Assisted by a one hundred pound gift from his grandmother, he traveled to England in 1936 to further his art studies under Mark Gertler and Bernard Meninsky at the Westminster School of Art in London.

In London, Friend met a Nigerian, Ladipo, who became his model and lover. Inspired by Lapido, he traveled to West Africa in 1937 where he found work as the financial adviser to the Ogoga (ruler) of Ikerre. Here, Friend refined his love for the exotic and developed a special interest in ancient African bronze-casting.

With the outbreak of World War II, Friend returned to Sydney and enlisted in the Australian army. For four years he served mainly as an artillery gunner, but in early 1945 he was appointed an Official War Artist. During the last phase of the war in the Pacific, Friend worked in New Guinea and Borneo, two of the bloodiest theaters of Australia's Pacific campaign.

Many of Friend's official wartime works provide rare glimpses of male intimacy and closeness, such as in his figure studies for *The Showers Balikpapan 13 August 1945*, which depict the bare and brawny physiques of young soldiers engaged in the communal showering ritual.

Other works record rare moments of "solitude" and "privacy" such as in *The Mosquito Net* (1945), in which a seemingly unsuspecting naked soldier dozes under the thin veil of a net, his legs apart and groin exposed, oblivious to Friend's voyeuristic gaze.

For the most part, Friend found army life tedious, which encouraged him to produce two fascinating illustrated memoirs of his wartime experiences, *Gunner's Diary* (1943) and *Painter's Journal* (1946). As if to escape the tragedy and torment of the war, the drawings in these journals convey an overall sense of

detachment from reality. They are often parodic, witty, and satirical in their depictions of daily duties and general life in the army.

Significantly, Friend's diaries also record the beginning of his long friendship with fellow Australian artist Russell Drysdale, whom he met during the war and whose influence had a profound impact on Friend's creative and personal life.

After the war, Friend joined the bohemian "Merrioola" group of artists in Sydney for a brief period, before moving to the old New South Wales mining town of Hill End. His departure was prompted partly by unrequited love for handsome sculpture student Colin Brown.

Colin (1946), *The Young Sculptor* (1946), and *(Study of Colin)* (1946) form part of a series of richly textured paintings and sensitively etched drawings that reveal Friend's awe for the beautiful young Colin. Friend confessed in his diary, "My whole life is Colin. Not particularly Colin himself, but my love and appreciation and desire for the Colins of this world and my life."

During the two years Friend spent at Hill End he painted often with Drysdale and other artists. However, while Drysdale produced some of his most memorable landscape paintings during this period, Friend found himself cut off from his principal inspiration, the male nude.

In contrast, the female form is noticeably rare in Friend's art, a phenomenon he explained once by saying "[w]omen are just not interesting to me to paint; I suppose it's because I'm homosexual." Indeed, as Friend's art developed it became more difficult to separate his preoccupation with the young male form as an object of artistic inquiry from its attraction as an object of intuitive desire.

Beginning in March 1949, Friend made several trips to Italy, where he fell in love with another model turned lover, a good-looking Italian peasant named Attilio Guarracino, whom he brought back to Australia. However, the pattern of short but intense romance repeated itself and the relationship did not last.

Friend then returned to London, where some of his most beautiful figure drawings were executed, many of the young Ibaden boy Omu, an acquaintance of the Nigerian Lapido. *Omu Wearing Harlequin Trousers* (1953) and *Negroes with a Lute* (1953) show not only Friend's extraordinary ability to delineate the human form with almost calligraphic precision, but also a camp delight in casting Omu in the comic role of Harlequin.

In the former work, Friend accentuates the slender lines of his model's physique, with Omu shown standing with one hand leaning against the back of a chair, the other placed elegantly on his hip, and dressed in the brightly colored, diamond-patterned pants of Harlequin's costume.

Between 1957 and 1961 Friend settled in Ceylon, now Sri Lanka, before returning to Sydney in 1962. Six years later he moved again, this time to tropical Bali. Although Friend produced better works at other periods in his life, his fame as an expatriate artist was at its height during his time in Bali, where he lived an eccentric and promiscuous lifestyle. Friend considered these to be his "paradise years." He seemed to have found the exotic existence for which he had always yearned.

In 1979, Richard Griffin published Friend's salacious book *Bumbooziana*, an "investigation into the private habits of elephants, camels, zebras, leopards, etc. and the equally strange customs of men. . . ." Perhaps the most famous of Friend's publications, *Bumbooziana* generated much sensation when introduced to a prudish Australian public because of its erotic imagery and sexually-explicit nature, its cover page illustrating the sexualized bodies of half-human, half-zebra creations of Friend's wild imagination.

Also in 1979 declining health and difficulty in gaining visa extensions forced Friend back to Australia permanently. He moved first to Melbourne and then returned to Sydney, where he spent the end of his life

in a modest rented cottage in Woollahra.

After a lifetime in which the male nude was the centerpiece of his art, in his final years Friend turned mainly to still-lives. He grew increasingly embittered towards the end of his career, frustrated especially by the loss of his fine motor skills after a stroke that left him half paralyzed and annoyed at the lack of recognition he felt he deserved for his artistic achievements.

Sadly, it was a year after his death on August 17, 1989 that Friend's contribution to Australian art was finally acknowledged by mainstream society, when the Art Gallery of New South Wales mounted a major retrospective of his work, celebrating what truly was an extraordinary life and exceptional Australian talent.

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About the Author

Michelle Antoinette, a Ph.D. candidate at Monash University, Australia, studies contemporary Southeast Asian art and identity. A scholar of Australian and Asian visual arts, her recent publications in Australian art journals review the work of contemporary Australian and Asian artists.