

## Tuckson, John Anthony (1921–1973)

by Daniel Thomas

**This article was published in Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 16, (MUP), 2002**

John Anthony Tuckson (1921-1973), artist and art-gallery administrator, was born on 18 January 1921 at Port Said, Egypt, second child of William Tuckson, a Suez Canal pilot (and amateur painter), and his wife Eléonore, née Pegler. From the age of 8 Tony was a boarder, first at Gresham's School, Holt, Norfolk, and then at Christ's College, Finchley, London. He visited the Canal during holidays. After studying painting for two years at the Hornsey School of Art, London, he began work in a furniture store at Kingston-upon-Thames in 1939 and attended night-classes at the Kingston School of Art.

Enlisting in the Royal Air Force on 10 June 1940, Tuckson trained as a pilot at Edmonton, Canada, and flew Spitfires over Britain and Europe. In May 1941 he was commissioned. He arrived in Darwin in August 1942 with No.54 Squadron, R.A.F., and saw action against the Japanese. On leave in Sydney, he married Dorothea Margaret Bisset, a munitions worker and former design student, on 23 November 1943 at St James's Church of England, Turramurra. He served in a training unit as an instructor in Wirraway aircraft, and continued sketching throughout the war. Back in London in 1945, he admired the paintings of Picasso, Matisse, Klee and Cézanne.

Tuckson was demobilized from the R.A.F. with the rank of flight lieutenant on 10 August 1946 in Sydney. He studied at East Sydney Technical College for three years under the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme, qualified in December 1949, and began exhibiting with the Society of Artists and the Contemporary Art Society of Australia. Appointed assistant-director of the National Art Gallery of New South Wales under Hal Missingham in October 1950, he was reclassified as deputy-director in 1957.

In 1949 Tuckson had been 'bowled over' by an exhibition in Sydney of Ronald Berndt's collection of Aboriginal art from Arnhem Land. He accompanied Stuart Scougall, an orthopaedic surgeon and art patron, to Melville Island and Arnhem Land in 1958 and 1959 on collecting expeditions for the gallery. Most spectacular in the Scougall gift was a group of carved and painted *pukamani* burial-ceremony poles: Tuckson installed them near the entrance to the gallery in June 1959. He prepared a large exhibition of Aboriginal bark paintings, carved figures, and sacred and secular objects, which toured (1960-61) all State galleries. It gave rise to a book edited by Berndt, *Australian Aboriginal Art* (New York, 1964). Tuckson shifted Australia's perception of Aboriginal art. Whereas it had been exhibited as ethnographica in natural-history museums, he gave it the status of fine art.

Other curatorial innovations for which he was responsible included the introduction of Melanesian art to the gallery's collection in 1962, the major exhibition, *Melanesian Art*, in 1966, and the collection-display, *Aboriginal and Melanesian Art*, that opened in 1973. Following Tuckson's overseas study tour in 1967-68, the architect Andrew Anderson was engaged to upgrade and extend the run-down, nineteenth-century gallery. The Art Gallery of New South Wales, reopened in March 1972, is Tuckson's great museological achievement.

Tuckson exhibited a mere nine of his own paintings between 1954 and 1962, and claimed that he was 'only a Sunday painter'. Until 1958 he had been a 'School of Paris' painter of figure compositions, nudes, heads, and occasional still lifes and interiors. The derivative style obscured the merits of this work. Tuckson always painted at home—from May 1949 in a house at Gordon,

designed for the Tucksons by W. R. Richardson, and from 1962 in another new house at Wahroonga by Russell Jack.

In 1970 Tuckson's first solo exhibition, at Watters Gallery, presented one new painting, with sixty-four from 1958-65. His next and last exhibition, of twenty-two large, new works, was held in 1973. Tuckson's late abstract paintings were a kind of self-portraiture, emphasizing an inner, subjective world. He was promptly recognized as probably Australia's best Abstract Expressionist.

Tuckson died of cancer on 24 November 1973 at Wahroonga, and was cremated. His wife and their son survived him. The A.G.N.S.W. held a memorial exhibition in 1976. His paintings, displayed in an international context at the National Gallery of Australia, can seem as good as, or better than, those by Jackson Pollock.

### **Select Bibliography**

- P. Sutton (ed), *Dreamings* (Melb, 1988)
- D. Thomas et al, *Tony Tuckson* (Syd, 1989)
- T. Maloon, *Tony Tuckson, Themes and Variations* (Melb, 1989)
- S. Rainbird et al, *Guide to the Papers of Tony Tuckson (1921-1973) in the Archive of the Art Gallery of New South Wales* (Syd, 1999)
- 'Tuckson' (video, Sydney, 1988)
- private information.