Lloyd Rees: Artist and Teacher

Edward Duyker*

This year marks the twentieth anniversary of the death of the beloved Australian artist Lloyd Rees. His remarkable forty-one year teaching association with the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Sydney left an enduring legacy, not simply through the aesthetic and humanistic sensibilities of generations of architecture students that he nurtured, but through works of art which remain part of the university's permanent collection. Many of you will have your own special memories of working or studying with Lloyd Rees. Some of you knew him far longer than I did. And some of you will have far greater expertise regarding his work as an artist than I have: indeed I am only too happy to acknowledge the pioneering scholarship of Renée Free and my friend Hendrik Kolenberg in this area. Essentially what I propose to do here is to offer an overview of Lloyd's life and his association with the university, and to give some insight into his cultural engagement with Europe, particularly France, as a result of his family origins.

Early Life

Although he is so intimately associated with Sydney, Lloyd Frederic Rees was born in Brisbane on St Patrick's Day, 1895, the seventh of eight children. His mother, Angèle Burguez (1865–1945), was Mauritian-born of French and Cornish descent and his father Edward Owen Rees (1856–1932), employed by the mercantile firm of Fanning,

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Nankivell & Co., was of English and Welsh descent. He was drawn to architectural subjects from an early age and in 1910 studied art, among other subjects, at Brisbane’s Central Technical College. When his scholarship was not renewed, Lloyd found employment in an insurance office and then with the Union Bank of Australia. Nevertheless he continued to draw and earned extra money by creating a series of postcards bearing sketches of Brisbane’s landmarks. These included many government buildings and St John’s Cathedral, with its stone-vaulted ceiling, which he had seen built from its very foundations. He also produced a set of postcards of Women’s College at the University of Queensland and sketched newly-built St Brigid’s Church, Red Hill—designed by Robin Dods and inspired by the Romanesque and Gothic elements of the Cathédrale de Sainte-Cécile’s in Albi. During the First World War, Lloyd helped raise money for wounded soldiers by organizing concerts in Brisbane and providing program illustrations, often based on architectural subjects, such as Louvain Cathedral, Reims Cathedral, Heliopolis and Constantinople. Lloyd’s passion for architecture also led him to imagine Brisbane as an ideal city with a riverside drive and other features, which he sketched.

In May 1917, Lloyd Rees settled in Sydney with his sister Amy, after gaining employment as a commercial artist with the firm of Smith & Julius on a salary of £4 per week. It was there that he met fellow artist Roland Wakelin (1887–1971), who would become his dearest friend and who would also later teach at the University of Sydney. Initially
Lloyd was set to work on the account of Beard Watson, a company which sold interior furnishings and carpets, but that account was lost shortly after he arrived. So Sydney Ure Smith (1887–1949), co-founder of Smith & Julius, set the talented young artist to work sketching Sydney for advertisements published in their new magazine Art in Australia. Smith & Julius also commissioned the book Sydney University Drawings by Lloyd Rees, published in 1922. In the same year, Lloyd proposed to the sculptor Daphne Mayo (1895–1982), whom he had first met as a student in Brisbane; they would spend time together during his visit to Europe in 1923–24, but their engagement was broken off by Daphne in 1925. Arriving back in Sydney, Lloyd did not return to work with Smith & Julius; however, he did continue to do part-time commercial art for Farmers Department Store. The following year he married Dulcie Metcalfe, a teacher at Parramatta High School. Tragically, she died of septicaemia in October 1927, shortly after giving birth to a still-born child. A deeply sensitive man, Lloyd was already prone to depression; the loss of his wife and baby affected him so deeply that he had a nervous breakdown and for a time was unable to work. In 1931, however, he married Dulcie’s teaching colleague and closest friend, Marjory Pollard. Marjory had been profoundly supportive of Lloyd during his
illness. Her income as a teacher also helped him survive as an artist and she became the mother of his only son Alan. They were married for fifty-seven years.

Lloyd Rees’ formal association with the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Sydney did not begin until 1946, although he already knew Leslie Wilkinson (1882–1973), foundation Professor of Architecture, and William Hardy Wilson (1881–1955), author of *Old Colonial Architecture of New South Wales and Tasmania* (1924). The relationship with the university would prove to be a life-changing experience. With the end of the Second World War, there was a great influx of CRTS (Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme) students – mainly ex-servicemen who began university after being discharged from the military – and the Faculty of Architecture required an additional tutor for its burgeoning art classes. Leslie Wilkinson had long admired Lloyd’s architectural drawings and so too did Norman Carter (1875–1963), head of the faculty’s Art Department. Carter, a conservative Anglican, was politically and philosophically at odds with Lloyd, a life-long socialist and agnostic. Carter’s artistic work was also strongly realist in style, but the two were firm friends. Lloyd himself would later write: ‘I have always honoured Norman Carter for his bigness and broad-mindedness in this matter’. It was Carter who employed Lloyd as a part-time tutor.

When Lloyd joined the faculty, the Art Department was located on the top floor of the then unfinished west tower of the main quadrangle with a long attic studio. Lloyd remembered Professor Wilkinson as a ‘tall, majestic figure’ who would ascend the stairs and blow in ‘like a “southerly buster” scattering complacency and twisted thinking like the wind among the leaves’. Lloyd always regretted
the faculty's move across City Road into Darlington and the break with what he called the ‘heart of the university’.

However, he never regretted his contact with young minds, which he found a constant challenge and he particularly appreciated the democratic ethos of students who would meet him on ‘an equal level’, impossible during his own deferential Victorian upbringing. Some of his distinguished students, including Ken Woolley, Rick Leplastrier and Joan Domicelj (née Phillips), would become enduring friends. Another, art critic and historian Robert Hughes, who began architecture at the University of Sydney in 1957, wrote in his memoir *Things I didn't Know*, that Lloyd’s ‘tolerance was wide and loving and I feel I owe him part of my life’. He went on to record a conversation about a bridge on a ravine at Pitigliano in Italy. Hughes recalled that ‘every fibre’ in him yearned to see it, that years later he did and that perhaps his ‘expatriation from Australia truly began, with Lloyd, on that imagined bridge’.

Lloyd’s university appointment was also personally life-changing; it gave him financial security and the time to paint. In his autobiography, *Peaks & Valleys*, he summarised the personal significance of the relationship as follows:

> It was not only that it enabled me to give up commercial art as my regular source of income but it meant that my intuitive love of architecture, which led to quite an amount of knowledge of it, found a field of experience that I could not have attained in any other institution in Sydney. The conditions for teaching art and the carrying on of one’s own work at the same time were in my opinion, almost ideal.... Even with the influx of post-war students, I never taught more than three days a week and thus had time for my own painting. The three vacations, especially the long one at the end of the year, made it possible for me to approach painting in the same spirit in which I had approached my pencil drawings in the late twenties and early thirties – ‘the work was everything and the sale thereof was of no importance’. Whatever my present standard may be, the foundations began with this University appointment.

Lloyd weathered many changes to the academic staff and curriculum of the Faculty of Architecture. While some saw his lectures in art and aesthetics as anachronistic to architectural ‘science’, he enjoyed fierce loyalty from his students. During the heightened activism of the early 1970s, rumoured threats to his position were met with rumours
and rumblings of a threatened student strike. Lloyd stayed on. Even when he landed ostensibly unpopular hours on the timetable, he continued to lecture with ‘standing room only’ for the entire course. A few months after Lloyd’s death, Ian Sinclair reminisced in Federal Parliament: ‘He was a person of rare personal distinction and one whom those of us from other faculties used occasionally to sneak in and listen to, simply because of his reputation’. These lectures and their magnetic quality still have legendary status on campus to this day. Lloyd left his mark on campus in other ways. Many will be familiar with the two figures, one male and one female, on each side of the entrance to the Great Hall. It was Lloyd who commissioned and paid Tom Bass (born 1916) to sculpt these figures for the niches that architect Edmund Blackett had left empty. They were unveiled with great fanfare in 1984.

The French Connection

I mentioned earlier that Lloyd’s mother, Angèle Burguez, was Mauritian-born of French and Cornish descent, and that his father was of Welsh and English descent. For Lloyd, French culture and his sense of a personal French heritage (which he sometimes imagined back to the artists of the Lascaux Caves and the European ‘Dreamtime’ 17,000 years ago!) profoundly influenced his development as an artist. In November 1984 he told me personally that his father had pushed the ‘Welsh side’, but that ‘all things French’ affected him and ‘Mauritius, as such, was the link’ to his French heritage.

At this stage I should say more about this connection, which is the basis of my own family link with Lloyd. My great-great-grandfather, Théophile Lionnet (1819–1881), visited Australia during the Gold Rush, reaching Melbourne on the Walter Scott in March 1853. He arrived with Charles Léon Burguez (1830–1887), the half-brother of his mistress. The two men were destined to become brothers-in-law, not because my great-great-grandfather married his mistress, Cécile Dorlancine Burguez (by whom he had already had a son), but because the two men met and married Cornish sisters on the goldfields: Jane and Elizabeth Bone. The Bones had arrived with
their parents and siblings in South Australia in January 1849 and then overlanded to Victoria when gold was discovered in 1851. Charles Léon Burguez and Elizabeth Bone would become Lloyd’s grandparents. Neither my great-great grandfather, nor Lloyd’s grandfather struck it lucky on the Victorian gold fields. As we joke in the family, they couldn’t find gold but they did find bones! Both men sailed back to Mauritius with their young Cornish brides. As a result, Lloyd’s mother was born in Mauritius in 1865. However, in May 1878, her parents returned to Australia with her on the Clyde. Having worked in the sugar industry in Mauritius (then undergoing a major rationalisation), Lloyd’s grandfather was attracted to opportunities in the nascent sugar industry in Queensland, along with other skilled Mauritian planters and sugar chemists. Burguez was a Queensland pioneer and credited with naming the Trebonne district in Queensland from the French: très bonne. It must be the only Australian toponym with a direct Mauritian connection, with the exception of Mon Réduit on the Yass Plains. Unfortunately Burguez did not succeed in his endeavours and died, bankrupt, in Sydney in 1887, having been successfully sued by Henry Henderson Drysdale, a member of the family of yet another great Australian painter.14 (Lloyd always considered this subject too sensitive to discuss with Russell Drysdale, whom he met on numerous occasions and considered a friend.)15

Lloyd was always proud of the fact that the Burguez family came to Mauritius from Tarbes in the Pyrenees (at the beginning of the American War of Independence). Unfortunately, I was to bear him
disconcerting news when I informed him that his great-grandfather was actually a foundling on the estate of the naval-officer-turned-privateer Gabriel Vincent Burguez (c. 1750–1811) in 1808. The fact that this child was clearly of European descent (rather than one of the slaves of the estate) and was ultimately given the Burguez name, suggests that he might have been Gabriel’s natural son, but we can only guess at this. I don’t mean to suggest that Lloyd did not have a genuine French heritage. Far from it: his great-grandfather, although a foundling, was born when the island was still French and two years before it was captured by the British. He was unlikely, therefore, to have been an ‘enfant trouvé anglais’ – even if I acknowledge that Matthew Flinders was then in the same district, as a prisoner-of-war on parole living in the home of the widow Madame d’Arifat who had two attractive daughters! Before I am accused of spreading silly historical rumors, I should also remind my audience that Lloyd’s maternal great-grandmother Adélaïde Josset belonged to another local French family. And Lloyd’s mother, Angèle, despite having left Mauritius at the age of thirteen, was a native French speaker who emphasised her French background all her life. It is hardly surprising that this had a profound influence on her son.

From the age of eight or nine years, Lloyd Rees had memorised the map of Paris and its principal boulevards and monuments. In Brisbane, in January 1913, he had also purchased a book by the English author Samuel Bensusan (1872–1958) containing photographs of the French capital, which inspired him to sketch Notre Dame, L’Opéra and other major buildings from its pages. Despite his pronounced anti-militarism and his strong democratic beliefs, from childhood
he also had a fascination with the life of Napoleon. He would first see France in 1923 when he executed many architectural and landscape sketches. Alas, his first Paris sketchbook was lost on a London bus!

In 1937 he would exhibit his drawing ‘The Bridge, South Coast Landscape’ at the Exposition international des Arts et des Techniques in Paris in 1937. It won a silver medal and is in the collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. It was not the only honour Paris would bestow on him. Fifty years later he would also receive the Medaille de la Ville de Paris for his services to art.

Lloyd was deeply affected by the fall of France in 1940 and told me that he wrote to Le Courrier Australien (still the oldest non-English language journal in Australia) to share a sense of grief regarding the catastrophe and, what he saw then as, the tragic predicament of Maréchal Philippe Pétain (1856–1951), the hero of Verdun. In my own readings of Le Courrier Australien for that period, I have not found his letter. The paper, however, was then owned and edited by yet another Mauritian, Léon Magrin (1874–1942), who soon placed it at
Lloyd Rees, 'St James Church, Sydney' (1917). Courtesy of Alan and Iancis Rees.
Lloyd Rees, 'Notre Dame de Paris' (1928). Courtesy of Alan and Jancis Rees.
the disposal of the Free French Movement. Lloyd was certainly not a Pétainist. Aside from being very much to the social-democratic left of Vichy ideologically, he was quite proud that his aunt Léona Burguez’s husband, Albert Giraud (1860–1947), was a first cousin of General Henri Giraud (1879–1949), co-president, with General de Gaulle, of the Comité français de liberation nationale (in 1943) and one of the leading Free French Generals. Albert Giraud (1860–1947) was also Mauritian, but gained a degree in agronomy from the Sorbonne before he arrived in Australia in 1879.23 Lloyd frequently recalled that the Noble Street, Mosman home of his uncle and aunt was frequented by many Sydney artists and he often used the French term ‘salon’ to describe its cultural ambience. But what of Lloyd’s Mauritian mother? Angèle had helped Lloyd’s sister Amy run ‘Bondo’, a guest house on the Great Western Highway, Parramatta, from 1922 until shortly after Lloyd’s marriage to Dulcie Metcalfe in 1926. She returned to Brisbane and was widowed when Lloyd’s father died in July 1932. It will no doubt come as a great surprise to this audience to learn that she was diagnosed with leprosy in 1943 and was interned on Peel Island, in Moreton Bay, until her death from pneumonia on 13 July 1945.24

Unable to return to France until 1953, Lloyd’s ‘rediscovery of Paris’, according to Hendrik Kolenberg, author of *Lloyd Rees in Europe*, ‘was … doubly significant to him. He again dwelt lovingly on the city’s distinctive features, its architecture, streets and parks, and captured the splendour and vivacity of Paris’.25 In March 1953 Lloyd also made his first visit to Chartres. He returned in 1959 and 1966; and in 1973 spent five days doing pen and watercolour sketches inside the cathedral, which were later developed with oil, pastel and pen in Australia. A number of these works, part of the University of Sydney’s collection, formed the basis for a remarkable exhibition in the University Art Gallery between 25 August and 4 November 2007. I agree with the university’s Senior Curator Louise Tegart, that:

In many ways Rees was a painter steeped in the Romantic tradition, he pursued a singular vision depicting the spiritual in the landscape. He didn’t adopt Modernism as many of his contemporaries did, and as a result, his focus over a lifetime made him at odds with other artists who pursued new
fashions.... The Cathedral works are hallucinatory images tinged with nostalgia where light is used as symbolism; of the human spirit and the mystery of nature.  

Later Life

Aside from France, Lloyd visited the United Kingdom, Spain, Greece, Malta, Switzerland and repeatedly Italy (in particular San Gimignano) – inevitably distilling his experiences on paper in meticulous descriptive statements of light and shade. Just as the French Gothic had profound personal resonance for him, so too did the treasures of the Italian Renaissance. (Since 1995, his son Alan and daughter-in-law Jancis Rees have donated nineteen of his remarkable sketchbooks, containing some 700 drawings, to the Art Gallery of New South Wales.) During his lifetime he gained great critical respect for his work. In November 1969, Brett Whiteley described him as the ‘Cezanne of the emerging new Romanticism’. In the same year
James Gleeson declared, in his *Masterpieces of Australian Painting*, that Lloyd had ‘painted some of the most eloquent and stylish landscapes ever produced in this country’.29 And historian Manning Clark wrote that Lloyd Rees had ‘won for himself a niche in the pantheon of Australian immortals’.30 Aside from his work as an artist and teacher, Lloyd was the author of two autobiographical volumes; he was also a Member of the National Advisory Committee for UNESCO and President of the Society of Artists. In 1962 he was elected Dean of the Faculty of Architecture – an extraordinary honour for ‘a part-time lecturer in art without a definite appointment’, as Professor Peter Johnson later put it.31 In a letter to Daphne Mayo, Lloyd recorded the circumstances and the manner in which he organized his time:

My week is rather happily regulated with the University taking all Tuesday, Wednesday and half Thursday thus leaving 4 clear days for my painting & which I try to keep clear. A complication has been my election as Dean of the Faculty of Architecture, whilst Professor Ashworth is in Europe, but with rather amazing good fortune nearly all my duties have come within the Tuesday–Thursday period.33

Lloyd served his term with distinction, thoroughness and courtesy. In 1969, the Fifth Year Report from the architecture students themselves is perhaps the best testimony of the affection he had earned:

Mr Rees is a born teacher above the sentimentality that surrounds any description of him as a person. He has had the respect of every student that has passed through his hands simply because he can empathize with students, knows and loves his students, has a personal view, yet will judge any work of art on its merit (e.g. there is probably no one in the school better able to judge the art content of the present hard edge painting and sculpture yet his personal attitude to art is antithetical to hard-edge) ...33

In the same year Lloyd very proudly received an Honorary Doctor of Letters from the University of Sydney. In 1984 the University of Tasmania followed suit. On both occasions the graduating students spontaneously rose and applauded him – something which frequently occurred at the end of his classes too. Although a very modest man, he loved to be addressed as ‘Dr Rees’. But this was very much a reflection of the personal importance that the award had for him. Lloyd won many prestigious art prizes (including the Wynne Prize
for landscape twice) and was made a Companion of St Michael and
St George in 1978 and a Companion of the General Division of the
Order of Australia in 1985. In November 1988 he was included in the
Australian Bicentennial Authority’s list of the ‘Two Hundred People
who made Australia Great’.

I will never forget my first meeting with Lloyd Rees, soon after I
moved to Sydney. Although I had rung him in advance, he had
forgotten our appointment and seemed annoyed at the interruption to
his work. But in seconds his demeanour changed. I was accompanied
by my brother Francis and my Mauritian-born mother Maryse
(the daughter of his second cousin). When my mother introduced
herself in the same lilting accent as his own mother, he melted. Our
planned brief visit turned into an extraordinary, unplanned half-day
of tea, scones and seemingly endless reminiscence and philosophical
discussion. In the next four years we exchanged letters, met at book
launchings, exhibitions, at his Italianate villa-home of half a century
in Northwood and at the university (where my wife Susan was one of
his students in his second-last year of teaching). At his home, our sons
(then toddlers) sometimes tried his patience by exploring between
canvases leaning against the walls and un-tuning his wireless from
the sacred frequency of ABC Radio National, but his good humour
rarely flagged. At a time when he struggled to care for his increasingly
frail wife, Marjory, and his failing eyes surveyed the world through a
milky haze, he continued to produce amazingly ethereal testaments to
light and beauty – ‘painting to a vision’ as he sometimes put it. He
was a wonderful raconteur who could easily summon up personal
reminiscences of Federation, the death of Queen Victoria and the
first ANZACS – (including his brother Vyvyan, who was later killed
in action in Belgium) – and the Brisbane General Strike of 1912.
He remained a passionate advocate for the protection of Sydney’s
built and natural heritage, and actively campaigned to embellish
Martin Place with its ‘waterfall’ fountain. (Completed in December
1976, it bears a plaque with the following inscription: ‘The vision
and dedication of the artist, Dr Lloyd Rees and Mrs Rees made this
waterfall possible. They made the initial donation, guaranteed the
fund and with the help of many others raised the money by public
subscription.’) And he was not afraid to speak his mind in support of Jørn Utzon during his dispute with the Askin Government, in opposition to the construction of Sydney’s monorail, and as a strong critic of the design for the new Parliament House in Canberra. Six months before his death, during the ALP National Conference, he also spoke at a Wilderness Society rally of about 5,000 people in Hobart.

Lloyd Rees gave his last lectures at the University of Sydney in 1986 under extraordinary circumstances. In August 1986 the health of his wife Marjory worsened seriously, so he moved to Hobart with her to live with their son Alan and daughter-in-law Jancis. Nevertheless, Lloyd did not abandon his students. As Alan Rees recalled:

Dad rearranged his schedule so that instead of giving one lecture a week on Wednesday he gave two lectures every second Wednesday. We’d go up to Sydney on Tuesday afternoon; he’d give one lecture from 10 to 11, and another from 12 to 1; the university provided a car to take us to Mascot, and we’d get the 2 o’clock plane to Hobart. Not bad for a 91 year old. The final student assessments were based on projects which were read to him by Jan and our daughter-in-law Natalie.

In March 1988 Lloyd Rees was awarded the Sydney University Union Medal for services to art and to the university. He died in Hobart early on 2 December 1988, seven months after his beloved Marjory. Memorial services were held for him in Hobart and at St John’s Cathedral, Brisbane. A ceremony of thanksgiving for his life was held in the Great Hall of the University of Sydney, later in the same month.

Ultimately, an artist’s work must speak for him beyond the grave. Heir to both Turner and Corot, Lloyd Rees was an unabashed representational landscape artist in a neo-impressionist, neo-romantic school of his own. His work celebrates the beauty of natural and architectural forms and is informed by a unique European-Australian humanist vision; in my opinion far richer than that of any other Australian artist of his generation or since.
Notes

The author wishes to express his sincere thanks to Lloyd Rees’ son Alan and daughter-in-law Jancis for their assistance in the preparation of this commemorative lecture.

6 For a summary of the artist’s personal views on politics and religion, see Rees, Peaks & Valleys, chs 12, 15.
7 Rees, Peaks & Valleys, p.192.
8 Rees, Peaks & Valleys, p.192.
9 Rees, Peaks & Valleys, p.192.
12 The Right Honorable Ian Sinclair (New England, Leader of the National Party of Australia), House of Representatives, Hansard, 28 February 1989, p.3.
15 Duyker, interview with Lloyd Rees.
16 Auguste Toussaint, ‘Burguez, Gabriel Vincent Burguez (c.1750–1811)’, Dictionnaire de Biographie mauricienne, no. 41, janvier 1985, p.1231.
17 Duyker, ‘Notes on the Burguez Family’.
21 Hendrik Kolenberg assisted by Patricia James, Lloyd Rees in Europe: Selected Drawings from his Sketchbooks in the Gallery’s Collection, Art Gallery
of New South Wales, Sydney, 2002, p.11.
22 Jancis and Alan Rees, Lloyd Rees, pp.23, 37.
25 Kolenberg, p.11.
27 Kolenberg; see also my review in Explorations 33 (December 2002): 20–22, issued September 2003.
28 Quoted by Free, p.92.
29 James Gleeson, Masterpieces of Australian Painting, Melbourne, 1969, p.106.
31 Professor Peter Johnson, quoted by Jancis and Alan Rees, p.29.
32 Lloyd Rees to Daphne Mayo, 3 July 1962, quoted by Jancis and Alan Rees, p.29.
33 Fifth Year Report, Faculty of Architecture, University of Sydney, 1969, quoted by Jancis and Alan Rees, p.31.
37 Vyvian Reginald Rees, 2650, Bombardier, 13th Brigade, Australian Field Artillery, is not listed on the nominal roll, but is listed on the Roll of Honour; he died of wounds in Belgium in October 1917.
40 Jancis and Alan Rees, p.37.
41 Personal communication, Alan Rees to the author, 3 November 2007.
42 Janet Hawley, ‘How a great artist came to terms with death’, and ‘Obituary: Lloyd Rees One of the most loved of Australian artists’, Sydney Morning