

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person

Entry ID: AWE5979

Praeger, Laura

(1859 - 1950)

Born 1 January, 1859, Tunbridge Wells Kent England

Died 2 May, 1950, England

Occupation Painter, Professional photographer

Summary

Laura Praeger was one of only two professional women photographers working in Sydney in the 1890s. Praeger opened four studios between 1890 and 1895. Praeger was known for her portraits of Sydney's wealthy elite, as well as for her landscape and architectural photography. Praeger's portraits were known for their striking side lighting and the characteristic ease of their subjects. She produced Bromide prints and worked on large-scale photographs at every processing stage.

Details

Laura Praeger was the only professional woman photographer working in Sydney during the 1890s apart from Mrs Nixon, who had a studio at Balmain. Praeger opened four different studios between 1890 and 1895, and was known for her portraits of Sydney's wealthiest people.

She was born Laura Blundell in Tunbridge Wells, Kent, England in 1859. Her parents were Eliza and John Wilton Frankland Blundell. In 1870 the family migrated to Queensland, Australia, where her father set up a medical practice.

She married Francis Pasqual Praeger in Brisbane, August 1880, but the marriage was not a happy one and they divorced in 1894. By 1890 she had moved to 187 Macquarie Street in Sydney, NSW.

Little is known about how she came to be practising photography, or where and with whom she trained, but she and Mrs Nixon at Balmain were the only professional women photographers operating in Sydney in the early 1890s.

Between 1890 and 1895, she opened several photographic studios in Sydney. In 1890-1891 she went into partnership with a photographer called Chubb, setting up the Chubb and Praeger studio in George Street. Then, in 1892 she opened another studio, which she called Madame Praeger at Beale's Chambers at 480 George Street. She went on to open a studio at 506-508 George Street in 1893, and then in 1893-1894 another one at 76 William Street, Sydney. In October 1894 she married the solicitor and notary, George B. Harland at which point she closed her studio and returned to England. Her husband died soon after in 1900. Laura Harland died in Somerset, England, on 2 May 1950, aged 90. Her death notice indicates she had a son, Peter, and a daughter, Ruth. (Only Ruth, aged 3, was noted on the 1901 UK census).

Praeger was known for her portraiture, photographing Sydney's elite, as well as landscape and architectural photographs. A series comprising eight interior and external photographs of *Clarens*, *Potts Point* are among her earliest works. She used natural light to capture interiors and worked with unusual compositions to frame the views of the harbour. Her most important assignment came when she was approached to photograph the 55 delegates at the First National Australasian Convention, which met in March 1891 to draft the Bill to constitute the Commonwealth of Australia. The large portrait she produced of the delegates testifies to her high degree of technical proficiency. An enlarged copy was selected for display at the World's Columbian Exposition held at Chicago in 1893, along with her 'life-sized' portrait of the Hon. Stafford Bird; the Women's Work Committee noted with satisfaction that she had 'performed all stages in the work.' Writing in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1892, 'Faustine' commented that Praeger's photographs have 'a pleasantly artistic sentiment about them that a mere mechanic cannot give us' (*Design and Art Australia Online*).

It was arguably in the realm of individual portraiture, however, that she demonstrated most skill. The Mitchell Library holds seven of her portraits, each showing her sensitivity to character. Whether of three quarters body length or head-and-shoulders format, the sitters appear at ease with both camera and photographer. Among these is the side-lit photograph of Sir Alfred Stephen working at his writing desk, which was frequently reproduced as an engraving in the newspapers. The photograph itself was described by the *Illustrated Sydney News* on 16 June 1893 as 'decidedly the best that the aged statesman has yet had taken.' In 1895, she exhibited a 'painting' of Sir Alfred Stephen under the name of Mrs Harland, at the Women's College Exhibition (SU). The *Herald* described it as 'excellent both as to likeness and manner.' This was most likely a painted enlargement of her 1893 photograph although it may have been an original portrait since she was also an accomplished painter; indeed, as Madame Praeger, she often described herself as 'artist [i.e. painter] and photographer.'

Her portraits of Lady Windeyer (see Ethel Stephens) and Louisa Macdonald, Principal of Women's College, are particularly striking. Both women look directly into the camera with a confidence, alertness and humour seldom seen in the portraits of women of the time. What seems like an understanding between photographer and subject probably resulted from Praeger's constant mixing with and her subsequent familiarity with Sydney's elite classes. In March 1893, for example, she held an afternoon tea for selected ladies and gentlemen to show portraits at her new William Street studio. This subtle combination of fraternising and advertising enabled Madame Praeger to 'strike a fine balance between business and art, professionalism and feminine accomplishment' (*Design and Art Australia Online*)

Technical

Produced Bromide prints and was able to work on large-scale photographs.

Collections

Art Gallery of New South Wales holds a copy of the Catalogue to the Committee XII Chicago Exposition Committee 1892, which includes a listing of Australian women's work exhibited at this Exposition

Mitchell Library, Sydney

State Library of New South Wales

Events

1970 - 1970

1970 - 1970

Laura Praeger's work featured in the *Exhibition of Women's Work*

1970 - 1970

Laura Praeger's work featured in the *World's Columbian Exposition*

1970 - 1970

Laura Praeger's work featured in the *Women's College Exhibition*.

1981 - 1981

Laura Praeger's work featured in the *Australian Women Photographers* exhibition.

Published resources

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Newspaper Article

In Divorce,

<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article114080395>

A Lady's Letter from Sydney,

<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article138102590>

Scrap Notes and Comments, Bohemian,

<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article62723099>

The Sydney Morning Herald,

<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article13882792>

Advertising: The Praeger Studio,

<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article13872533>

Events of the Week,

<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article162193889>

Exhibition Catalogue

Australian Women Photographers 1840-1950, 1981

Book

Australian Women Photographers 1840 - 1960, Hall, Barbara and Mather, Jenni, 1986

The Mechanical Eye in Australia: Photography 1841-1900., Davies, Alan and Stanbury, Peter, 1986

Edited Book

Heritage : the national women's art book, 500 works by 500 Australian women artists from colonial times to 1955, Kerr, Joan, 1995

Resource Section

Laura Praeger,

<https://www.daao.org.au/bio/laura-praeger/>

Author Details

Anne Maxwell (with Morfia Grondas and Lucy Van)

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