

# The Australian Women's Register

---

**Entry type:** Person

**Entry ID:** AWE5984

## Cotton, Olive

(1911 - 2003)

---

**Born** 11 July, 1911, Hornsby New South Wales Australia

---

**Died** 27 September, 2003, Cowra New South Wales Australia

---

**Occupation** Professional photographer

---

### Summary

Olive Cotton is renowned for the pioneering photographic works she executed in the modernist style. In addition to Straight style, Cotton experimented with elements of Pictorialism. From the mid-1930s Cotton worked at the Max Dupain Studio in Sydney, where she experimented with close ups and lighting effects; during WW2 she ran this studio herself. As well as advertising and fashion photography, Cotton explored still life and landscape genres. In later life, she worked as a studio photographer in regional NSW, specialising in wedding photography and studio portraiture. After initially using a Box Brownie, Cotton used a Rolleiflex camera throughout her career.

## Details

Olive Cotton is renowned for the works she executed in the modernist style. The genres she explored include fashion, still life, landscape, wedding photography and portraiture, including children's portraiture.

She was born on 11 July 1911 in Hornsby, Sydney. Her parents were Leo Cotton, Professor of Geology at Sydney University, and Florence (née Channon) a painter and pianist. In 1922, aged eleven, she received her first camera – a Kodak Box Brownie. It was a gift from her father who was himself a 'hobbyist.' Furthermore, as a geologist, Leo Cotton had taken photographs for Ernest Shackleton's expedition to Antarctica in 1907. In conversation with Hawley, Olive Cotton remembered being shown slides of glaciers and ships in the Antarctic (Hawley 397). Leo Cotton also helped Olive build her first darkroom in the family laundry. She used Solio daylight paper to make her contact prints and she made her first enlarger 'from two open ended boxes [tins]: the smaller held the lens and slid up into the enlarger' (Australian Women Photographers 13). Her early work encompassed still life, landscapes and portraits of family and friends.

Cotton was educated at the Methodist Ladies College, Burwood, between 1921-1929, and it was during her last year there that she joined the Photographic Society of NSW. She went to Sydney University in 1930 and about the same time joined the Sydney Camera Club, where she benefitted from the encouragement and teaching of the well-known Pictorialist photographer Harold Cazneaux. She continued to work as an amateur photographer while completing her Bachelor of Arts, majoring in mathematics and English, graduating in 1934.

By mid-1934 she had joined the photographer Max Dupain in his studio at 24 Bond St, Sydney. Officially she was his 'assistant' but she also pursued her own work. Cotton and Dupain had been family friends since childhood, and spent many summer holidays taking photographs at Newport Beach. Their mutual passion for photography fuelled the friendship, and they went on to marry in 1939 but separated in 1941. They eventually divorced in 1944.

In 1938 Cotton joined the short-lived Contemporary Camera Group. She also experimented with fashion photography, working in the commercial section of the Commemorative Salon held by the Photographic Society as part of the Australian 150th anniversary celebrations. During this time Cotton and Dupain moved their Sydney studio to a larger one in Clarence Street.

In 1941, following her divorce, Cotton worked at Frensham School (a progressive girl's school in Mittagong, NSW) where she taught mathematics.

Between 1942-1945 Dupain left Australia to carry out his military service, and Cotton returned to commercial photography and managed his studio. Throughout this period she was extremely busy, receiving many different commissions including the making of wartime propaganda photographs for AWA (a wireless manufacturer), as well as creating a mural for an 'up-to-the-minute house designed by architect Sam Lipson' (Hall 85). The original mural was 182.9 x 76.2 cm, but it was unfortunately destroyed early in the 1980s. The National Gallery of Australia holds a smaller version, which is the only known print available. The brief for the mural was quite fluid, however the client had seen a mural that Max Dupain had created which incorporated dancers and 'had expressed an interest in ballet figures' (Ennis, *Heritage* 132). In discussing the mural, which took her over one hundred hours to complete, Cotton noted that she was not aiming to create a Surrealist work – the emphasis being instead on using techniques that might enable her to capture the image she had in mind. Helen Ennis has provided a detailed account of the processes that Cotton employed to create this work in her entry in *Heritage: The National Women's Art Book*.

Olive Cotton is recognised for her hard-edged minimalist style and tight framing. She used controlled lighting and shadows to capture close up household objects such as flowers, insects, landscapes and people. Like many photographers she referred to her photographic method as 'drawing with light' (Australian Gallery Directors Council 13). Ennis notes that she 'was able to imagine a photograph and, in the photographing of what she "saw," could transform the ordinary into the extraordinary. They are the kind of images that gently impose themselves on you – and that stay with you' (Ennis 2002 PAGE)

Her portraits arguably show an ability to capture something of the inner character and individuality of the sitter. The photograph of her sister *Joyce Cotton* (c.1938) is a perfect example, as is the photograph of Max Dupain titled *Max after Surfing* (c.1939). This photograph arguably captures something of the mood of intimacy that existed between the photographer and her subject at the time the photograph was taken. Geoffrey Batchen, referring to this photograph of Dupain, notes the 'raw sensuality of the naked masculine body. His head obscured by shadows' and he adds, 'Dupain's muscular upper torso is accentuated by the harsh light that falls across it and by the creased clothing in the foreground. Intimate and secretive, refusing to tell us everything, the photograph acts as a prompt for the viewer's imagination, that most potent of sexual organs' (Batchen 33).

During her lifetime, Cotton participated in many exhibitions. These included the 1930s exhibitions organised by the Sydney Camera Club (where she met Harold Cazneaux) as well as others organised by the Photographic Society of NSW, the London Salon of Photography where she exhibited *Tea Cup Ballet* and the Victorian Salon of Photography (International) where she exhibited *Shasta Daisies*.

Her photographs were published in *Sturt* (1946), a book based on the Sturt Craft Workshops at Frensham, as well as in the book by Helen Blaxland entitled *Flower Pieces* (1946), which included her photographs of flower arrangements. Her photographs also appeared in *Bank Notes*, a magazine produced by the Commonwealth Bank.

In 1944 she married Ross McInerney and in 1946 they moved to Koorawatha, a country property near Cowra where they

had two children, a daughter, Sally, born in 1946, and a son Peter, born in 1948. Cotton gave up her work as a professional photographer at this time but twenty years later in 1964 she began taking photographs again, producing hundreds of photographs of children and the surrounding landscape.

During the period 1959-63 Cotton taught mathematics at Cowra High School and in 1964 she set up a small studio in the township of Cowra in 1964 where she worked professionally, focusing mainly on children's portraits, wedding photography and landscapes using a Rolleiflex camera.

It was during the 1980s that her work finally gained recognition. Gael Newton included some of Cotton's photographs in the exhibition she curated entitled *Silver and Grey* (Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1980). Her work also appeared in the 1981-82 traveling exhibition *Australian Women Photographers 1890-1950*, curated by Barbara Hall and Jenni Mather. In 1983 Cotton received a grant from the Visual Arts Board that enabled her to print the photographs that featured in her first solo exhibition *Olive Cotton Photographs 1924-1984*. Many of the negatives for these photographs had been stored in an old sea chest in her family home; this was to be the first time they would be professionally developed. The exhibition was held at the Australia Centre for Photography, opening in November 1985 and afterwards, touring the other Australian states.

During the 1990s interest in her work culminated in a film by Kathryn Millard that documented her life and work. Entitled *Light Years* and released in 1991, it coincided with the appearance of her photograph *Tea Cup Ballet*, on the 1991 Australian postage stamp that commemorated the 150th anniversary of photography in Australia. In 1993 the Australia Council awarded her an Emeritus Fellowship for her work. In the years that followed interest in her work continued, with a wide range of her photographs – not just those from her modernist period – being included in a number of important exhibitions. Today her work is held in both public and private collections.

Olive Cotton died in 2003 at the age of 92.

## Technical

Her first camera was a Box Brownie. She later used a Rolleiflex camera.

## Collections

Art Gallery of New South Wales

Castlemaine Art Gallery and Historical Museum, Victoria

Josef Lebovic Gallery Collection, Sydney

Monash Gallery of Art, Victoria

National Gallery of Australia

National Library of Australia

National Gallery of Victoria

## Events

### 1922 - 1946

Active as professional photographer

### 1964 - 2000

Active as professional photographer

### 1935 - 1935

Olive Cotton's work was included in the London Salon of Photography

### 1937 - 1937

Olive Cotton's work was included in the Victorian Salon of Photography ( International)

### 1937 - 1937

Olive Cotton's work was included in the London Salon of Photography

### 1945 - 1945

Olive Cotton's work was included in the First International Adelaide exhibition organised by the Adelaide Camera Club

### 1981 - 1981

Olive Cotton's work was included in *Australian Women Photographers 1840-1950*

### 1946 - 1989

Olive Cotton's work was included in Exhibitions with Creative Vision

**1984 - 1989**

Olive Cotton's work was included in exhibitions in Canberra and Sydney, and some travelling exhibitions.

**1985 - 1985**

Solo exhibition *Olive Cotton Photographs 1924-1984* a retrospective exhibition of Olive Cotton's photographs.

**1992 - 1992**

Solo exhibition *Olive Cotton*, Australian Girls Own Gallery,

**1993 - 1993**

Awarded Australia Council Visual Arts/Craft Board's Emeritus Fellowship.

**1995 - 1995**

Olive Cotton's work was included in *Beyond the Picket Fence: Australian Women's Art in the National Library Collections*

**1995 - 1995**

Olive Cotton's work was included in *Women Hold Up Half the Sky*

**1995 - 1995**

Olive Cotton's work was included in *In a Certain Light: Clarice Beckett and Olive Cotton*

**1995 - 1995**

Olive Cotton's work was included in *Women and Art*

**1966 - 1999**

Olive Cotton participated in eight important exhibitions in Toowoomba, Canberra, Sydney and Geelong.

**2015 - 2015**

Olive Cotton's work was included in *The Photograph and Australia*

**1996 - 1996**

Olive Cotton's work was included in *The Reflecting Eye: Portraits of Australian Visual Artists*.

**1997 - 1997**

Olive Cotton's work was included in *The Studio of Max Dupain*

**2000 - 2000**

Solo exhibition *Olive Cotton Retrospective*

**2002 - 2002**

Solo exhibition *Cotton Tales*[an exhibition of studio family photographs taken in Cowra.

**2007 - 2007**

Olive Cotton's work was included in *What's in a Face? Aspects of Portrait Photography*

**2012 - 2012**

Olive Cotton's work was included in *What's in a Face? Aspects of Portrait Photography*

**2013 -**

Olive Cotton's work was included in *Flatlands: Photography and Everyday Space*

## Published resources

### Book

- Olive Cotton: Australian Photographer, Cotton, Olive and Josef Lebovic Gallery, 2009
- Olive Cotton, Cotton, Olive and Australian Girls Own Gallery, 1992
- Olive Cotton: Photographer, Cotton, Olive, McInerney, Sally and National Library of Australia, 1995
- Olive Cotton, Ennis, Helen and Cotton, Olive, 1998
- Sturt and the Children's Library, Mittagong, NSW., McInerney, Olive, 1946
- Little Book of Trees, National Library of Australia, 2010
- Still Life 1650-1994: Reworking the Tradition, Queensland Art Gallery and Seear, Lynne, 1997
- Society of Artists Book, 1945-46., Society of Artists (Sydney), 1945
- Society of Artists Book, 1944, Society of Artists ( Sydney), 1944
- Society of Artists Book, Society of Artists (Sydney), 1943
- Australia's Wild Weather, Tredinnick, Mark and National Library of Australia, 2011
- Wings of Tomorrow, Turnbull, Clive and Shaw, Roderick, M., 1945
- Focus on Photography: An Education Kit for the Photography Collection., Art Gallery of New South Wales and Art Gallery of New South Wales , Public Programmes Department, 2004
- Facing Facts: Documentary Photographs, Gallery 11, 6 August to 2 October 1988., Australian National Gallery, 1988
- Olive Cotton Award 2007: For Photographic Portraiture, Beck, Anouk, 2007
- Olive Cotton: 13 May-2 July 2000, Cotton, Olive and Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2000
- Olive Cotton: Photographs 1920s to 1990s, Cotton, Olive, 1995
- Olive Cotton: Photographer, Ennis, Helen, 1995
- The reflecting eye: portraits of Australian visual artists, Ennis, Helen, National Library of Australia and National Portrait Gallery (Australia), 1996,  
<http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/125722/20110309-0156/www.nla.gov.au/pub/ebooks/pdf/the+reflecting+eye.pdf>
- Australian Women Photographers 1840 - 1960, Hall, Barbara and Mather, Jenni, 1986
- In a Certain Light: Clarice Beckett, Olive Cotton, Fenner, Felicity, Cotton, Olive and Ivan Dougherty Gallery, 1995
- Artists in Conversation, Hawley, Janet, 2012
- Back View: A Selection of 20th Century Photographs, Helen Maxwell Gallery, 2000
- Perception: The Daryl Hewson Photographic Collection, Hewson, Daryl, Kirker, Anne, Drew, Marian and Queensland Centre for Photography, 2005
- Family Fragments, McInerney, Sally, Cotton, Olive and Editions+ Artist Book Studio, 2004
- Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza, Rome, 1997, Stephenson, D., 2013

### Resource Section

- Transcript: Tribute to Olive Cotton, Australian Broadcasting Corporation,  
<http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2003/s957104.htm>
- Olive Cotton 1911-2000, Dupain, Max and Associates,  
<http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/131851/20120124-1142/www.mdaa.com.au/People/OliveCotton/tabid/2135/Default.html>
- Olive Cotton,  
<http://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/olive-cotton>
- Olive Cotton,  
<https://www.daa.org.au/bio/olive-cotton/>

**Exhibition Catalogue**

Australian Women Photographers 1840-1950, 1981

Mirror with a memory: photographic portraiture in Australia, Batchen, Geoffrey and Ennis, Helen, 2000

**Newspaper Article**

Beautiful Photos of Long Ago, Raffaele, Garry,  
<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article122405417>

In Recognition of Australian Talent, Raffaele, Gary,  
<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article122363476>

The Lady Behind the Lens,  
<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article17452916>

**Resource**

Beyond the Picket Fence: Australian Women's Art in the National Library's Collection, Carr, Sylvia and National Library of Australia, 1995,  
<http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/36337/20030703-0000/www.nla.gov.au/exhibitions/fence/picket.html>

**Book Section**

Blue Hydrangeas: Four Émigré Photographers, Ennis, Helen, 1997

Olive Cotton, Ennis, Helen, 1995

Australian Pictorialism, Miller, Steven, 2007

**Essay**

Hall of Fame, Olive Cotton: An Appreciation, Ennis, Helen, 2004

**Journal Article**

Partnerships: Helen Ennis on Olive Cotton, Ennis, Helen, 1998

**Thesis**

A Representation of Women in the Arts: A Modern and Postmodern Portrait, Hackett, Sharon, 2004

**Videorecording**

Light Years, Millard, Kathryn, Director, 1991

**Edited Book**

Silver and Grey, Fifty Years of Australian Photography 1900-1950, Newton, Gael, 1980

## Archival resources

### **National Portrait Gallery Research Library**

[Olive Cotton: artist file. / Olive Cotton](#)

### **National Gallery of Australia, Research Library Archive**

[\[Olive Cotton : Australian & New Zealand Art Files\]](#)

### **National Library of Australia, Manuscript Collection**

[Papers of Olive Cotton, approximately 1907-2003](#)

[Papers of Rhyll McMaster, 1960-1987 \[manuscript\]](#)

### **Edmund and Joanna Capon Research Library and Archive, Art Gallery of New South Wales**

[Papers of Olive Cotton \[manuscript\]](#)

### **Ivan Dougherty Gallery**

[Ivan Dougherty Gallery: Australian Gallery File](#)

### **State Library of Victoria**

[\[Olive Cotton : Australian Art and Artists file\]](#)

### **National Gallery of Victoria, Shaw Research Library**

[Olive Cotton](#)

### **NULL**

[Olive Cotton: Artist's File and Slides](#)

### **Author Details**

Anne Maxwell (with Morfia Grondas and Lucy Van)

**Created** 25 October 2016

**Last modified** 26 October 2017