



Meg Stewart, daughter of acclaimed Australian artist Margaret Coen (1909-1993) is the author of Coen's life story *Autobiography of My Mother*, an up-dated version of which has recently been published. Meg is a benefactor of the Norman Lindsay Gallery as were her parents when they were alive. This year Meg has donated to the property a cabinet decorated with water nymphs and a concrete bust of a woman, both of which were specially made for her mother by Norman Lindsay in his later years.

Meg talks candidly to Angela le Sueur about some of the influences which inspired her mother, and what has been revealed of her early relationship with Norman Lindsay.

my mother

My mother's bonding with fellow art students in the 1920s, followed by a youthful love affair and subsequent close friendship with Norman Lindsay, gave her early entrée to Sydney's bohemian set. This was reinforced by her romance with my father, poet Douglas Stewart, whom she married in 1945. After the high jinks of student life and a number of years seriously painting in studios around Circular Quay, my mother would come to spend the rest of her life in the leafy setting of Sydney's North Shore. There, both she and my father drew constant inspiration from the garden they lovingly created at St Ives, as well as from the bush nearby.

My mother met Norman and Rose Lindsay at their Springwood home when she was 20. During that first meeting, Norman painted a

watercolour head of my mother and showed her how to put down a watercolour wash. The floods of pure colour on the white paper coupled with Norman's perfect control of the medium had her spellbound. So right from the start it would seem my mother was as much drawn to Norman's skill as an artist as she was attracted to him personally. And watercolour, of course, became the medium in which she herself so excelled.

My father grew up in the small country town of Eltham, in Taranaki on the west coast of the North Island of New Zealand. His country upbringing nurtured the unique appreciation of the minutiae of nature that frequently found expression in his poetry. Often when he visited the Lindsays at Springwood in the 1940s, as he dashed up and down the bush gullies surrounding the property, by his account, he was 'picking up small nature poems, like wildflowers off the bushes'.

My mother also initially grew up in the country, at Yass in southwestern New South Wales. She, too, had a great love of nature. I think that it was their mutual love of nature as well as a shared passion for literature that really bound my parents together. Added to that was my father's great admiration for my mother as a painter. He was keen to marry her right from the start. But she demurred because she was afraid of tying herself to a domestic life.

My father had arrived in Sydney in 1938 to take up a position on *The Bulletin* and met my mother at the end of that year. Their involvement began as my mother's relationship with Norman changed to a caring friendship. I do find it more than a bit frustrating that she herself never gave any indication of an affair with Norman but it now seems plain that this was the case. The affair appears to have begun in the early 1930s. During its course Norman (temporarily, as it



turned out) left his wife, Rose, and their two young daughters Jane and Helen (Honey) at Springwood to paint in the city. He rented a city studio at 12 Bridge Street and my mother frequently worked there with him. This was where, many, many years later, I would spend almost the first six years of my life.

It was at the studio, too, back in the late 1930s, that my father was introduced to Norman by the poet and novelist Kenneth Mackenzie (who also claimed in a letter to Rose Lindsay to have had an affair with my mother at one stage). If my father knew of Norman's physical relationship with my mother, he certainly never alluded to it. There was no awkwardness in my father's demeanour towards Norman; indeed, he became Norman's best male friend in the space of a few years.

My mother's affair with Norman (of which the first public account was given in Joanna Mendelssohn's book *Letters & Liars*,

published in 1996), although undoubtedly galling to Rose, rescued Norman from a mid-life crisis not only physically but also creatively. A number of his paintings depicting my mother especially vouch for that.

It also led to the extraordinarily long-lasting three-way friendship between my parents and Norman, that somehow encompassed Rose as well. At Springwood in the 1940s, according to my father, he and my mother not only loved the company of Norman and his daughter Jane of whom they were especially fond, but also enjoyed the lively times when other Lindsays – including Rose – and assorted friends were present.

In 1953, my parents bought the house at St Ives. This was the first time my mother had a real home of her own. It gave her stability and, just as importantly, immediate access to the flowers she wanted to paint. Before this she had to rely on florists and friends who had gardens, as well as occasionally –



From left: *Margaret Coen*, by Norman Lindsay c1940 | *Meg Stewart*, photographed by Jessica Hromas | *Camelias with Goddess of Mercy*, 1936 | *Old English*, c1940 | *Rhododendrons* c1935

cultural heritage

my mother

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as artists often do – helping herself to flowers over strangers' fences. The bush at the back of St Ives provided landscape subjects and wildflowers which we unashamedly picked and took home for her to paint.

My last word on my mother, my father, Norman and Rose is, despite how strangely it may read here, when I was growing up everything and everyone in their own somewhat unconventional way seemed quite normal.

Meg Stewart has written both fiction and non-fiction. Her bestselling biography of Margaret Olley, Far From a Still Life, won the Australian Book Industry Award for Australian Biography 2006. It was also shortlisted for the inaugural Westfield/Waverley Library Alex Buzo Prize for authors and the 2007 National Biography Award.

The Flower Paintings of Margaret Coen will be held at Eryldene, 17 McIntosh Street, Gordon, 1-9 September 2007. A Special Lunch Conversation with Meg Stewart and garden journalist, Jennifer Stackhouse, will be held on 5 September. For more information see Events on page 26.



New release from the Norman Lindsay Gallery collection

The NSW National Trust has commissioned the second piece from the Norman Lindsay Gallery Collection at Springwood.

The original vase is one of three made by artist Norman Lindsay, and is on display at the Norman Lindsay Gallery and Museum. The reproduction vase, hand-crafted in porcelain, faithfully reproduces both the quality and the spirit of the original piece. Only 300 vases will be issued for sale. Each one hand numbered and accompanied by a Certificate of Authenticity. Orders are being accepted now.

ORDER FORM – SEA SPRITE VASE

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Address: _____

Collection date is expected by 31 August 2007. Delivery can be arranged at an extra expense if required.

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price: \$685 each

dimensions: 177mm x 205mm

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