



Gordon Walters: the mystery years in Australia

Until now, not much was known about the time Gordon Walters spent in Sydney, Melbourne and Hobart where he met the glamorous life model Dorothy Henry. Sue Gardiner reveals a story of love, loss and art.

Turning the pages of an old photo album belonging to 83-year-old Melbourne-based painter George Johnson, I see a small black and white photo of Gordon Walters, holding a white cockatoo in the Australian sun in 1952. He stands in front of one of the Melbourne studios he shared with Johnson, a fellow New Zealander.

My attempt to follow the scanty trail of information about Gordon Walters' time in Australia had led me to Johnson's Frankston home southeast of Melbourne. The hunt was triggered by a photo of Johnson and Walters together in a Melbourne street, which appears in a monograph on Johnson's work published by Charles Nodrum Gallery. During my journeys to Melbourne and later Hobart, quite a story unfolded – and the hunt also yielded some unusual Walters drawings and a cluster of personal letters.

In various publications, Michael Dunn, Robert Leonard and Francis Pound have mentioned Walters' visits to Sydney and Melbourne where he met artists Charles Blackman, Grace Crowley and Ralph Balson. Pound has also written of Walters' study of Aboriginal rock art sites around Sydney in





Opposite page: George Johnson and Gordon Walters, Collins Street, Melbourne, 1952, (page 227, *George Johnson World View*, Macmillan 2006)

Dorothy Henry at Karnak Temple, Luxor, Egypt, 1960, (verso 'Karnak, Luxor, 1960'). Sent in correspondence to Gordon Walters, in the Collection archives of the Walters Estate, Auckland, New Zealand

Gordon Walters and Cockatoo, Melbourne, Australia, c.1951, from the George Johnson archives, Frankston, Victoria, Australia. Photo: George Johnson

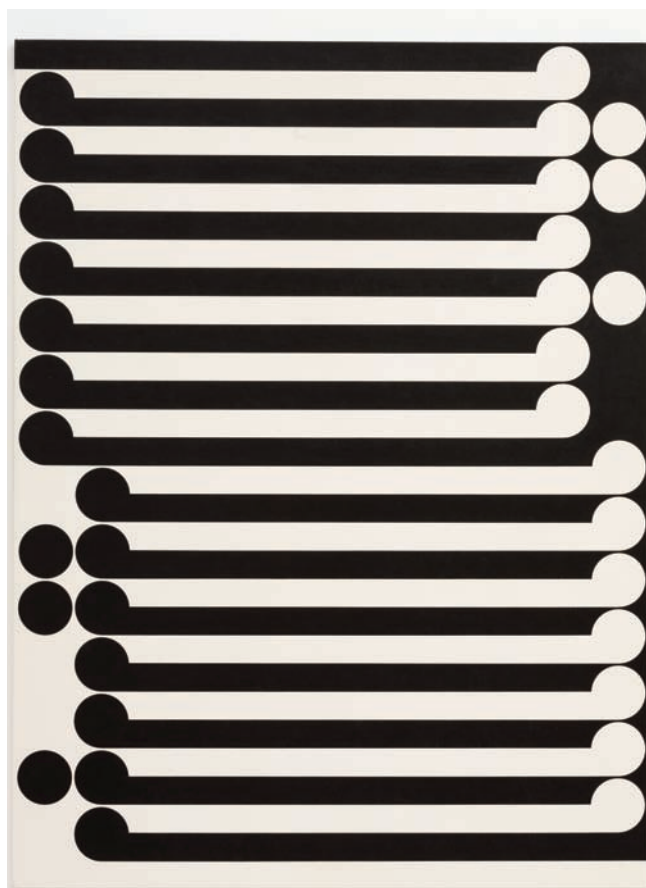
This page: Eileen Brooker, *Portrait of Dorothy Henry*, 1948, oil painting. Helene Chung Collection

Gordon Walters, *Untitled*, 1978, PVA and acrylic on canvas, 1200 x 1500mm. Courtesy of Starkwhite

1949, and several authors have stated that Walters painted his first non-figurative work there. Two small 1952 oil-on-canvas works from the Chartwell Collection and the Auckland Art Gallery Collections are rare examples of such early works. Otherwise the story of his art, friends and life in Australia has remained a mystery.

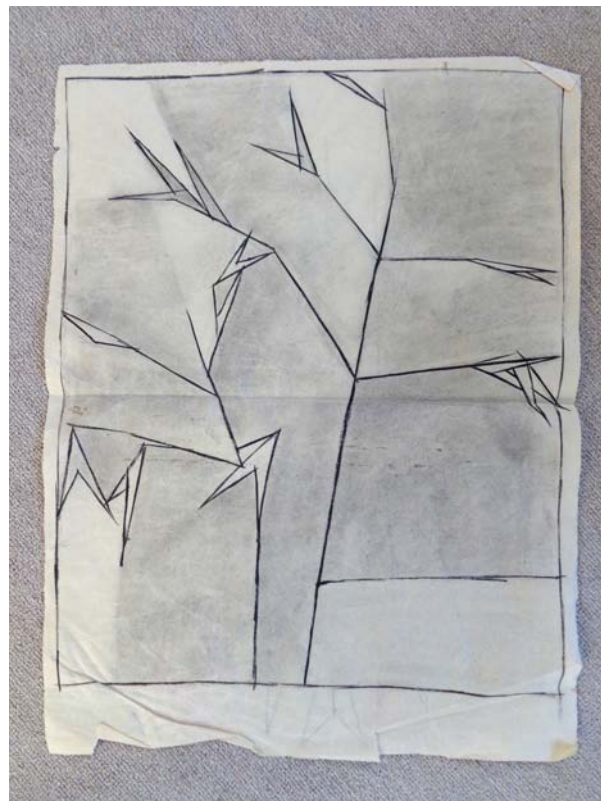
George Johnson, who still paints and exhibits, moved to Melbourne from Wellington in 1951, and met up with Walters there after his trip to Europe the year before. Johnson recalled the time between 1951 and 1953 when he and Walters, seven years his senior, lived in Melbourne: "The studios we shared were two in number," he wrote to me after my first visit. "The one in the photo of Gordon holding the cockie was at 2 Nicholson Street, Footscray. This house, next to the Technical School, was acquired by the Education Department who wanted to extend the school, which eventually became Victoria University. I began to teach there while it was a technical school during the 1950s."

When I visited Nicholson Street the site was occupied by the large university buildings – there was no sign of the house where Walters and Johnson boarded with a local family and worked in a shared studio loft. Johnson continued: "From Nicholson Street, we shifted to the other side of town to the suburb of Elsternwick, where we obtained more space above a piano shop in Glenhuntly Road. We had the whole upstairs which enabled us to spread out. We both worked hard here, and exhibiting was far from our minds; our work dealt totally with abstraction. We used to meet at the Family Pub in Swanston Street and talk about art." Johnson said Walters returned to New Zealand after a relationship break-up and he stayed on. "We were all very restless," he noted. The two artists kept in touch after Walters left Australia.





Gordon Walters' drawing of Helene Chung, c. 1952, pencil on paper. From the Helene Chung Collection



Gordon Walters, untitled drawing, pencil on paper, c. 1952. From the Dorothy Henry Greener Collection

Fellow researcher Melbourne-based Brigid Brock and I were excited to have unearthed all this, but were intrigued by what followed: “Of course,” he said, “when in Australia, Gordon was with Dorothy, a beautiful artist’s model, whom he met in Sydney where they used to visit the Arabian Coffee Shop in Kings Cross.” It was 1947 and The Arabian was the legendary bohemian nightspot run by Russian woman, Ursula Schwalbach, where all the artists and intellectuals met.

“Dorothy who?” we demanded. Unsure of the details, Johnson recalled that she came from a Chinese family of fruit merchants in Hobart and at one stage Gordon lived there too; the pair also spent time together in Melbourne “She was the life class model and admired by many artists taking drawing classes in Sydney and Melbourne,” Johnson remembered.

Who was this mysterious Dorothy? Brigid and I searched on the internet and up popped a reference to Gordon Walters in a 2008 autobiography by Australian broadcaster Helene Chung. Helene, who grew up in Hobart and now lives in Melbourne, was the first woman posted abroad by the ABC, and as its Beijing correspondent between 1983–1986, also filed for NZBC. Her memoir, *Ching Chong China Girl*, contains several mentions of Walters, whom she describes as one of three “foreign devils” her mother Dorothy Henry had lived with. The Hobart *Mercury* boldly headlined its illustrated coverage of the book’s local launch, “Hobart Model Mum’s True Story Laid Bare” (May 23 2008).

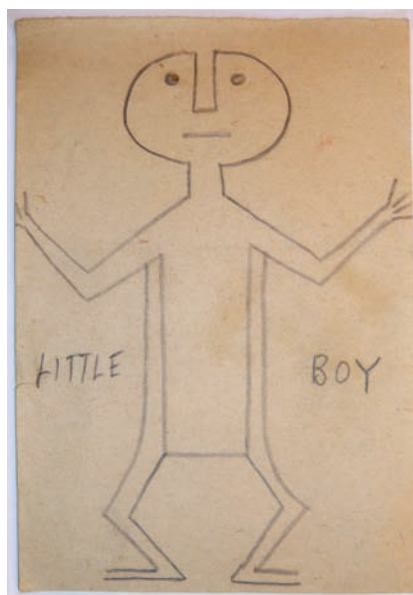
Dorothy Henry, who featured as Miss China in *Mercury* in 1942, came from a Chinese family who settled in Tasmania. Her father landed as a tin miner in 190 and later established Henry & Co., a successful fruit and vegetable business in Hobart. When she was very young Dorothy married Charles

Chung, from another local Chinese family, and had two daughters, Lehene and Helene, who was born in 1945. Charles and Dorothy divorced in 1946 and Dorothy travelled to Sydney to study hairdressing, leaving the young girls in her mother and family’s care while she was away.

According to Helene’s memoir, Dorothy’s life has always been unconventional and when I contacted Helene for more information, she wrote to me: “The only known work by Gordon in Dorothy’s possession is a pencil drawing of me as a sleeping child.” She mentioned another drawing of uncertain origins, and said that if I was in Melbourne I would be welcome to see the two works and meet Dorothy. “I recall Mama talking about the three of them (George, Gordon and Dorothy) living in Footscray.”

So almost a year after we met George Johnson, Brigid and I met Dorothy Henry Greener, now 89, at her daughter’s home in Melbourne. There in the hallway hung a portrait by Eileen Brooker of a youthful Dorothy, a work submitted for the 1948 Tasmanian Travelling Artists award. Suddenly, we saw Dorothy as she was when Walters knew her. And remarkably, since our previous conversation, Helene had found long forgotten drawings and letters by him in an old camphor chest in her mother’s apartment. We settled in to hear more of Dorothy’s astounding story.

On the recommendation of portrait artist Eileen Brooker, who’d first painted Dorothy as a teenager in Hobart, she began working as a life model for drawing classes to supplement her income while studying hairdressing in Sydney. She worked at several art schools, including East Sydney Technical College, Julian Ashton Art School, Antonio Dattilo Rubbo Art School and Thea Proctor’s studio. She also modelled for the exclusive



Above (from left): Gordon Walters, Lehele Chung, pencil on paper, (signed GW & LC), c. 1952, from the Dorothy Henry Greener Collection; Gordon Walters drawing, from the Dorothy Henry Greener Collection; Gordon Walters drawing, from the Dorothy Henry Greener Collection

Right: Both sides of Gordon Walters' letter to Lehele and Helene, c. 1952, from the Lehele Chung Estate and Helene Chung Collection

cashmere retailer Mr Richards who she remembered "used to pay me one guinea for an hour" – triple the usual rate of seven shillings and sixpence an hour. However, it was at the Studio of Realist Art (SORA), founded in 1946 by Hal Missingham, art historian Bernard Smith and a group of artists, including Roy Dalgarno and Herbert McClintock, that the model first encountered Gordon Walters.

In 1947 she was 22. Eleven years later, in a letter written after he moved back to New Zealand, Walters would say he still imagined her as 22 years old, and admired her "remarkable dignity, which I rather envied".

Dorothy's career as a life model continued in Melbourne where Walters moved in 1951. She modelled at the Victorian Artists' Society, for William Dargie's students at the National Gallery Art School, Max Meldrum's classes in Toorak and for Louis Kahan. Back in Tasmania, Dorothy modelled at the Art Society of Tasmania based in the Lady Franklin Museum in the Lenah Valley, while Helene's memoir depicts modelling sessions at their home with the two little girls peeking through a gap in the lounge door. Dorothy later lived with two other "foreign devils" – New Zealand-born radio announcer Rex Walden and author and Egyptologist Leslie Greener – whom she married in 1968, ten years after he first proposed to her.

South African-born Greener spent time in New Zealand in the 1920s and married artist Rhona Haszard in Waihi in 1925. He worked as a journalist in New Zealand and Australia, and studied and taught art and creative writing. Over many decades he was employed as an archaeological artist, first by the University of Chicago in Luxor, later by the University of Pennsylvania in Cairo on the Akhnaton Temple project. During the 1959–60 season Dorothy sometimes accompanied him.

Friday 9th
2 Nicholson St.
Footscray
Melbourne,
Victoria.

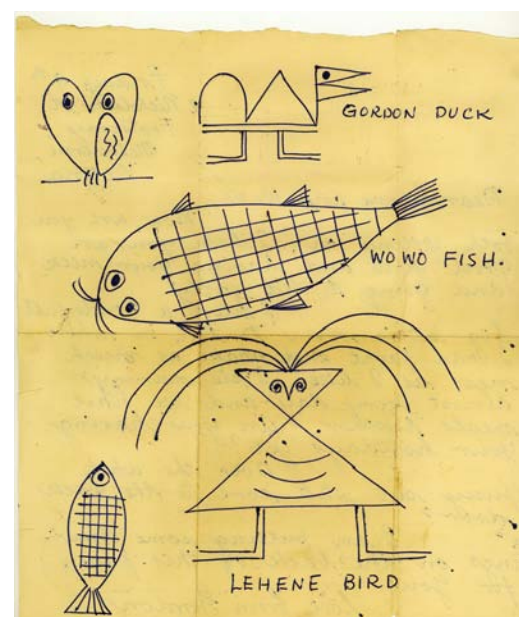
Dear Lehele and WoWo, How are you both getting on. I hope you are good girls and having your milk and going to bed early.

I have a wonderful big attic room to live in where I can paint and make as much mess as I like. I see mummy almost every day and we have meals together. Are you having your holidays yet?

Does the white pussy cat still come to the back door?

I am putting some drawings on the back of this page for you.

Love from Gordon.





Dorothy Henry Greener, 2014, Melbourne, Australia

Pieces of the puzzle fell in place as I recalled a 1960 photograph of Dorothy at Karnak Temple, which she sent to Gordon from Luxor, now held in the Walters Estate archives in Auckland. There are portraits of Leslie and Dorothy in the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery's collection in Hobart. The pair twice met with Walters and his wife Margaret Orbell in Australia before Greener died in 1974.

In her memoir Helene says that Walters worked as a government clerk in Hobart and had his own flat there. He often stayed with Dorothy and the girls when they lived for a while at her brother's newly built house at 7 Edge Avenue, Lenah Valley before Gordon Henry and his bride moved in. Dorothy and the girls then returned to live above the family-fruit shop at 139 Liverpool Street. Dorothy recalled that Walters didn't attend the art classes with local Tasmanian artists. "He sniffed at them and didn't think they were good enough," she said with a smile. But it was in Hobart that the delicate drawing of the young Helene sleeping was done. Walters was close to the girls at the time; called them by their pet names and sent them letters and drawings of birds, fish and funny two-headed dogs on small pieces of paper, which the girls taped up on the wall.

Also in Dorothy's old camphor chest was a letter Walters sent to both girls (Helene's pet name was Wo Wo) from the Footscray house around 1952. He describes the studio and his time there with Dorothy, saying he had a "wonderful big attic room to live in where I can paint and make as much mess as I like". The drawings he included for the girls on the back

of the page are joyful and playful. In 1971 Walters wrote that he enjoyed hearing news, in Dorothy's letters to him, of the two "marvellous kids" growing up.

Dorothy described Walters as a man with grey-green eyes and curly hair; a sensitive, quiet, thoughtful man who worked hard. "I think of all my friends, I loved him most of all." When he was in Melbourne, she would visit from Hobart for six weeks at a time; while working as a model she joined Walters for lunch at a Chinese cafe, the Oriental, on Russell Street. "George and Gordon worked all day in a big garret where they had the whole length of the top floor; they had lots of art books on Picasso, Matisse and Mondrian. Art was everything – they did nothing but talk about art."

In 1953 one visit to Melbourne brought things to an abrupt end for the couple. Dorothy went to a party at the house of well known sculptor Clement Meadmore. She was accompanied by Hobart artist Daryl Harrison, and Walters was there too. The two men had a row over her and a fight ensued. Later that night Walters telephoned her to suggest they meet the next day at Raffles cafe, a popular place for artists. Dorothy said, "no", she would meet Walters the day after that because she intended to see off Daryl, who was leaving for the UK to further his studies. As Helene puts it, his parents packed him off "to separate him from this shocking 'divorced' woman". Then, to complete the story, "When Dorothy arrived at Raffles the day after, Walters wasn't there. When she contacted George Johnson, he told her that Walters had left for New Zealand the previous day."

For Brigid and me, this brought the story of Walters' time in Australia full circle. There are many more questions to answer but it's clear that Walters and Dorothy, aka Miss China 1942, didn't meet again for several years, though they remained friends and correspondents, who shared their thoughts on art and life, for many years.

Now, decades later, Walters' work will be shown for the first time to art collectors in China and elsewhere in Asia. Aiming to introduce this major artist to the international art world, Auckland gallery Starkwhite will take his iconic works to Art Basel Hong Kong 2014. Director John McCormack says, "It will be a first step towards giving Walters the international recognition he so richly deserves. The exhibition is staged as a joint venture with the Walters Estate, and draws on Koru paintings from the 1950s to the late 1990s, including early gouaches and studies and some major paintings."

All of these works have been sourced from the Walters Estate, which holds an extensive collection of the artist's work. The estate is about to create a complete catalogue of works and material held in its archives – a long process but one that is vital in terms of ensuring that Walters is recognised as an artist of international significance.