

Remembering Eva: an arts matriarch

Description



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Helen Bunyon, from The F Project and The Artery, with a portrait of the late Eva Gaspar who, like Helen, devoted her life to helping the local arts scene while also being an artist herself.

By Carol Altmann

There is nothing like a tour of the local cemetery to crystallise the mind about how quickly we can forget trailblazers of their time, like Warrnambool musician, photographer and artist **Eva Gaspar**.

It was during one of family historian **Ray Welsford's** gold-coin tours of the Warrnambool Cemetery that I heard Eva's name raised as one that is slowly vanishing from the landscape since her death in 1978.

Yes, there is a road named in her honour, but perhaps because she was not a sporting hero, never married and never had any children, there are few public memorials to commemorate her enormous – and generous – contribution to developing Warrnambool's cultural scene in the 50s, 60s and 70s.



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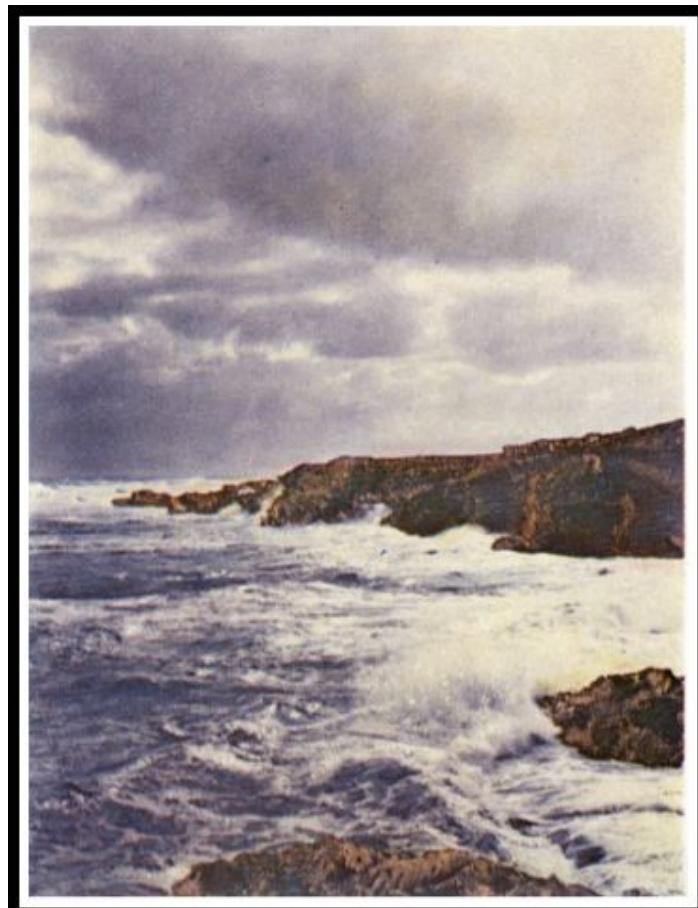
Warrnambool Art Gallery Acting Director Murray Bowes with a hand-tinted photograph, "Wollaston Bridge", taken by Eva Gaspar in 1976 and purchased by the gallery in 1977.

It wasn't always this way.

The original Performing Arts Centre in Warrnambool had the Eva Gaspar Theatre as its centrepiece when it opened in 1983, but the name was dropped when the complex was redeveloped as the Lighthouse Theatre in 2012.

Eva's portrait is still in the building, but you have to walk to the southern wing to find it, alongside some magnificent tapestries and an assortment of other historic photos.

So who was Eva?



“Thunder Point”, photograph coloured with oils, Eva Gaspar. Reproduced from the catalogue “Exhibiton by Eva Gaspar: Drawings, Photography, Warrnambool Art Gallery, April 1977,” with permission from the Warrnambool Art Gallery and National Library, Canberra.

In contemporary terms, apart from her devout Catholicism and serious perm, she is perhaps best described as the equivalent of today's **Helen Bunyon**, from The Artery/F Project: a long-term, tireless and generous volunteer to the arts, who was also an artist herself in music, drawing and photography.

“Eva loved photography – she was part of the very big and very passionate photography scene in Warrnambool in the 1950s and 60s,” recalls photographer **John (“Jack”) Wilkins**.

That scene, as Jack explains, included his own father, **Alex Wilkins** and **Ralph Illidge** who, between them, not only photographed just about every wedding and child born in Warrnambool during that time, but also built an impressive social history archive through photography and film.



A portrait of Eva Gaspar – a copy of which hangs in the Lighthouse Theatre and Mozart Hall.

Eva, Alex and Ralph were all founding members of the City of Warrnambool Camera Club, with Eva holding the presidency from 1954 to 1977, during which time the club hosted the most extraordinary competition of international photography.

“That was in 1964 – it is hard to imagine it now, but they had this whole thing going on in little old

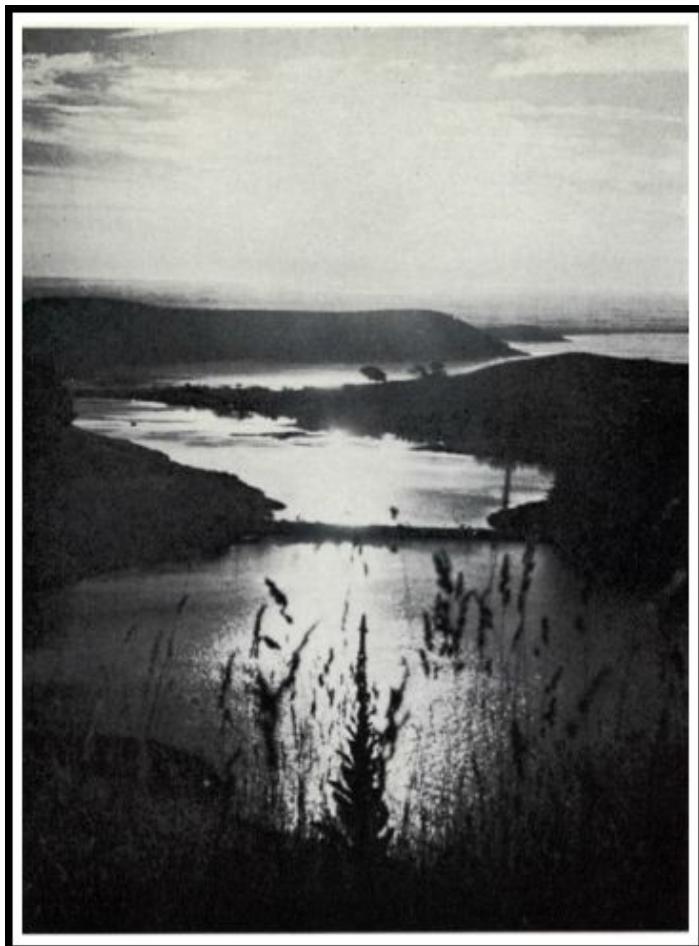
Warrnambool and it attracted entries from around the world," says Jack, in his usual gregarious style.

(Remarkably, some footage from the event is part of the Alex Wilkins' archive which Jack is now slowly converting to digital and uploading to the internet – he has kindly agreed to us including it here. See below.)

Eva, who later became part of Collett, Bain & Gaspar printers, at one stage worked upstairs in Alex Wilkin's photography studio in Liebig St (now the office of local MP Denis Napthine), where she would hand-colour the images.

Like any artist, however, she no doubt aspired to holding her own exhibition and through her close connection to the then director of the Warrnambool Art Gallery, **John ('Jack') Welsh**, she finally did so in 1977 – just a year before her death at the age of 65.

The exhibition catalogue (printed by Collett, Bain & Gaspar) lists 39 photographs "coloured with oils", mostly of local scenes, together with 13 monochromes, again of local scenes, and 10 drawings inspired by religious icons and even Shakespeare.



"Tower Hill", monochrome, Eva Gaspar.

Reproduced from the catalogue "Exhibiton by Eva Gaspar: Drawings, Photography, Warrnambool Art Gallery, April 1977," with permission from the Warrnambool Art Gallery and National Library, Canberra.

Eva was a deeply religious woman from a religious family, with a nun and two priests among her siblings, and she was the organist at the St Joseph's Catholic Church in Warrnambool for almost 30 years.

It is through her music that Eva Gaspar is most recognised.

According to the Warrnambool Historical Society, she formed her own choir and junior orchestra in 1948 to commemorate the birth of Mozart, and this group not only staged elaborate annual performances of Mozart operas, but went on to become the Mozart Choral Society that still operates from Warrnambool's cute Mozart Hall today (where you will find another portrait of Eva).

Somewhere in between all of this activity, Eva still found time to teach music to young people for free.

For more than 40 years she taught music, singing, wind and string instruments to a legion of young musicians for whom a keyboard had nothing to do with a computer.

What a generous, creative soul was Eva Gaspar.



A closer look at the hand-tinted photograph, "Wollaston Bridge" taken by Eva Gaspar in 1976 and purchased by the Warrnambool Art Gallery in 1977.

[box]Bluestone would like to thank Ray Welsford, Jack Wilkins, the Warrnambool Art Gallery and the National Library for their assistance with this story.[/box]



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