

Remembering the art of Robert Ulmann



The late Robert Ulmann was one of Warrnambool's best known artists – and one of the city's great characters – after making the south-west his home in 1969. Image: [Visit Warrnambool](#).

[dropcap style="color: #abccab;"] 0[/dropcap]ur [campaign to restore](#) the **Robert Ulmann** whale mural in Warrnambool has provided an opportunity to remember one of south-west Victoria's most prolific artists, who died 15 years ago this November.

Despite Robert's enormous contribution to the local art scene as a painter and sculptor during the 30 years that he lived in and around Warrnambool, it is quite difficult to find any formal, public recognition of his work, beyond that which he created himself.

This includes his [studio and gallery](#) overlooking the ocean on Hopkins Point Road, Warrnambool, which is still managed by his wife, **Helen** and daughter **Justine**, and was built after their Naringal property (and Robert's studio) was completely destroyed in the devastating Ash Wednesday fires of 1983.

It also includes Robert's contribution to Warrnambool's public artworks, which is arguably greater than any other single artist.

There are four Ulmann sculptures dotted in high-profile locations around Warrnambool and two privately commissioned murals that are also in very public spaces, but [a search of the Warrnambool Art Gallery website](#) reveals very little about the man or his work.

As an aside, do you know where to find the Ulmann sculptures and murals in Warrnambool?

[learn_more caption="Click here to find an Ulmann work:"] 1. Fletcher Jones Gardens, basalt sculpture, Memorial to Sir David Fletcher Jones.

2. Warrnambool breakwater, basalt sculpture, The Breakwater Centenary Sculpture.

3. Flagstaff Hill, lake side, The Lady in the Wind, Mt Gambier stone.

4. Warrnambool Art Gallery, exterior, The Australian Fur Seal, basalt sculpture

5. Bojangles Restaurant, Warrnambool, mural

6. Flaxman St milk bar, Warrnambool, mural [/learn_more]



The Breakwater Centenary Sculpture, Warrnambool, created by Ulmann in 1990.

[dropcap style="color: #abccab;"] R [/dropcap]obert, who was born in Switzerland, was a larger-than-life character who created an impression on all those he met, even if it was one of slight terror at the sight of what has been described as his “fierce” beard which would bob up and down during his highly animated way of talking.

His arrival in south-west Victoria in 1969 made the local news at the time and Warrnambool historian, **Jenny Fawcett**, has kept a copy of the clipping from *The Warrnambool Standard* in which it was reported that “an interesting personality” was visiting the district with his locally born wife, Helen (Goldstraw).

Robert, it said, “has had an adventurous life, painting and drawing his way through 21 countries,” that included Canada, where he first met Helen, who was working as a school teacher at Coppermine in the Canadian Arctic. It was here that

Robert worked closely with the Canadian first peoples, the Inuit.

The Ulmann's spent two years criss-crossing North and South America and then wended their way down through the Pacific Islands before finally reaching Australia. They settled in Naringal in 1972, having first spent a couple of years working in indigenous communities in the Northern Territory.

With all of that experience, and all of that adventure, no wonder Warrnambool – at times – would have struggled to contain a personality as large and dynamic as Robert's, but he came to call the seaside town his home.



The basalt "Memorial to Sir David Fletcher Jones", created by Ulmann in 1978 and part of the Fletcher Jones Gardens in Warrnambool.

[dropcap style="color: #abccab;"] A [/dropcap]uthor **Penny Olsen** dedicated her 2001 book, *Feather and Brush: Three Centuries of Australia Bird Art (2001)*, to Robert Ulmann, who passed away during its production. In it, she describes how

Robert worked “from nature, fast and with gusto”.

Robert loved to capture the energy of both animals and people as he saw them in the moment, not after the fact. It was not unusual to be talking to Robert and find that, halfway through a conversation, he would start sketching a portrait of you.

It was Robert’s passion for Australian wildlife, however, that won the hearts of so many of his followers.

He not only painted, sketched and photographed the beautiful creatures around him, he often invited them into his home which became a refuge for homeless and abandoned birds, mammals and marsupials.

In 1980, *The Age* newspaper ran a page 3 story about the Ulmann’s being the first people in Australia – and most likely the world – to hand-raise a baby echidna that developed a fondness for crawling up Robert’s trouser leg.

When asked why he loved to work on Australian animals, Robert told the reporter in typical style:

“You know why? They’re bloody hard to get hold of, specially the marsupials. They’re all nocturnal. That’s what makes the challenge...and people love furry things – specially the ladies.”

Robert died suddenly at the age of 71 on November 1, 1999.



A portion of the colourful – and cheeky – Mr Bojangles murals in the Bojangles restaurant, Warrnambool, painted by Ulmann in the 1980s.

[box type="bio"] **The Robert Ulmann studio is at 440 Hopkins Point Rd, Warrnambool ph: 03 5565 1444 or email: eubalena@westvic.com.au. Free entry.**[/box]

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