



IF IT SELLS – IT'S ART

Following on with the series on MHA members profiles, Harry Dunbar discloses some revealing intelligence on the Secretary's day job.

Ross Shardlow is a marine artist. That is to say, he paints subjects pertaining to the sea. Ross specialises in traditionally rigged sailing ships - but a marine artist might just as easily, paint beachscapes, pirates, navigation instruments, lighthouses or starfish. So long as the subject has something to do with the sea, it is deemed to be marine art. The common thread that binds this singular art movement is salt! Lakes, rivers and dead marines do not qualify. The admission of salt lakes is less certain. I understand the likes of a Murray River steamer has been allowed but that is probably attributed to our rivers turning saline.

Though born in 1950 in Bentley, Western Australia, and shifting to Mt Pleasant a few years later, Ross's real initiation to saltwater took place at Point Peron where his family had a beach shack overlooking Bird Island. Here he had his own dinghy called *Scrounger*, and frequently went deep sea fishing in the *Platypus*, 'a twenty something foot clinker with one of those cantankerous two pot engines that rarely started unless you belted it with the crank handle. There were memorable times when we had to sail home under gaff rig.' Ross's association with Point Peron and the Rockingham district was not just from messing about in boats. He eventually became caretaker of the RSL Caravan Park at Point Peron and ultimately moved to a real house in Shoalwater. His works are represented at the local council (though he has more in the local pub) and he designed the City of Rockingham's Coat of Arms.

Ross confides, 'I must have been alright at drawing at primary school because I was allowed to skip lessons to draw things on the blackboard - I've often wondered about that.' His blackboard skills must have carried over to high school. With the help and guidance from his art

master, Norm Madigan, Ross left Applecross High School at sixteen to begin a career as a book illustrator with the Education Department's Publication Branch. 'It was brilliant training', he reflects, 'they were a great bunch of skilled artists and good mates. We had to be able to draw everything and anything and we had to be able to do it in good time. My art director, Ron Bocking, offered every encouragement and opportunity to develop my skills. Under his direction, I attended night classes at Claremont Tech to learn how to draw from life.' Night classes were not Ross's only part-time activities. With a keen interest in history, he started painting historic buildings, farmhouses and landscapes. Initially, these were sold through his father's barber shop in Perth and later in local council shows.

It was about this time, over thirty years ago, that Ross met three people that would forever change his life. The first was Vic Fall who lived nearby in Shoalwater. Vic had just finished writing a book that covered the maritime history of Rockingham, *The Sea and the Forest*, and was then writing another book, *Giants in the South*, which he invited Ross to illustrate. Vic had served his time on windjammers and had sailed round Cape Horn on the three masted ship *Monkbarns*. Ross already had an unaccountable interest in sailing ships since earliest childhood, 'but listening to Vic's stories and reading the various seafaring books he lent me, set me on a new course.'

The second person he met, following a local art show at Rockingham, was the indefatigable Poppy Meyers, director of the Colonial Art Centre. Ross had borrowed back some paintings that he had given to his sister, as he didn't have enough work to put into the Rockingham show. Unfortunately, for his sister, the paintings sold and she is still furious about it. His work



came to the attention of a wonderful lady and for reasons which are a complete mystery to me, and which she most certainly regrets at recurring intervals, she took me under her wing as one of her "special artists". Poppy has been promoting me and my work ever since.'

The third person met at this time was a consequence of Ross's quaint passion for muzzle loading firearms - and chocolate cake. It was through these associations that he met Barbara, a librarian with the Education Department. Luring him initially with the chocolate cake, Barbara cast her net by turning up at his gun club and coyly asked if she could have a shot. It had a consummate effect, 'any girl that can fire a bulls-eye, with her first shot, from twenty five yards, with a .36 Navy Colt revolver - is not to be argued with.' With this variation of the shotgun wedding, they were married not long after!

Working thirteen years in a government department as a book illustrator, when his real passion was to be a painter, was driving Ross into a state of nervous collapse. Taking a years leave without pay, Ross and Barbara went overseas travelling about Europe in a Volkswagon beetle called PUTNEY GREEN. Soon after their return they moved from Shoalwater to Victoria Park and Ross handed in his notice. 'Not a few people thought my action imprudent. My poor Dad never came to terms with the notion of quitting a secure government job and forever hoped I would come to my senses.' After five years of freelancing Ross thought it might be time to 'come to his senses' and tentatively made enquiries to see if he could get his old job back. He was mortified to discover that he was now unqualified! He enrolled at Perth Technical College to gain a diploma in graphic design but after his first year he was swamped by another project that would require him to give up all other interests - the persuasive Malcolm Hay asked him to paint an artist's impression of a proposed sail training ship. Working from scanty information, Ross painted the *Leeuwin off Cape Leeuwin*. He was then asked to paint six Aus-

tralian sail training ships, which included the *Leeuwin*, for a promotional calendar. When it came to painting the *Leeuwin*, he was again thwarted by the lack of plans from which to make an accurate drawing. 'I didn't much like the sail plan and there were no running rigging drawings to work from. Malcolm suggested I speak to the riggers, Barry and Robin Hicks, and it turned out they were as confused and frustrated as I was. I produced some new drawings for them to show what I would like to see and Barry exclaimed - that's more like it!' Barry showed the drawings to the project coordinator Mike McKenzie and while Ross was still postulating, they converted his studio into a draughting office and the first of hundreds of construction drawings for the masting and rigging of *Leeuwin* started to flow from his drawing board. 'Those days were madness - I'd wake up screaming. They were building the ship quicker than I could produce the drawings. It was the extraordinary people I was working with that kept the project going - Barry and Robin (Batman and Robin), Ray Miller, Len Randell and Mike ... we're all still great mates. If it weren't for Mike we would only have had Len's beautiful hull. Mike had the gift of smoothing the waters. The greatest treasure I have from those days is a three foot steel rule that Mike bought for me out of despair for the mangled excuse I was using. He engraved it *Ross Shardlow - Underwater Artist* - such is his humour.'

After the ship was launched Ross did not go back to his studies and never did get his diploma. Having accumulated a considerable self-taught knowledge of ships and how they work, he used the *Leeuwin* to launch into a new commitment. Henceforth, he would be a full-time marine artist. The *Leeuwin* had been built as a spectator vessel for the Americas Cup challenge. After the Cup she was refitted for her sail training role. Included in the Cup spectators was a representative from the Mystic Seaport Museum in Connecticut, USA. Ross's agent, Poppy Meyers, recognised an opportunity, 'she rugby tackled the poor fellow and wouldn't let him go until he promised to commission



me for some work.' Mystic Seaport is a prestigious maritime museum and accommodates one of the greatest contemporary marine art collections in the world. Poppy Meyers was indeed successful in gaining a commission for Ross, he ultimately painted four of the principal vessels in the museum's collection with prints being made from the artwork. The print of the *Charles W. Morgan* was used by Heidelberg Press to demonstrate their excellence at the Chicago Graphic Expo in 1987. The original artworks have been placed in Mystic Seaport's permanent collection. Ross and Barbara actually went to Mystic to collect the primary sketches and research material and were put up as artist in residence within the museum precinct until the work was completed. Barb's professional skills as a librarian made for a dynamic partnership. Following the commissioned work, Ross continued to exhibit at the Seaport Gallery. 'Unfortunately, some wag branded me as a "renowned international artist" and I've been trying to live down the *international* stigma ever since.'

The next major work to capture his passion was the *Endeavour* replica project. Initially commissioned to paint an artist's impression of *Endeavour*, he submitted two working sketches for approval, one of the ship at anchor, the other under full sail. Unable to choose one over the other, the project managers John Longley and Vern Reid elected to have both views painted. Again he had the daunting task of anticipating the exact detail of the ship *before* it was constructed. The Shardlows undertook their own "Cook's Tour" of Britain's museums and galleries to conduct their primary research before completing the final artwork for printmaking. As there were no original draughts of the stern, Ross was also asked to design the stern arrangement complete with gallery windows, carvings and lantern. 'I could detect two female figurines on the ship's quarters in an original Parkinson sketch,' related Ross, 'so I dressed Barb up in classical costume, complete with exposed breasts, and got her to model for me. It wasn't an easy pose, particularly as it was

out in the open. I made a mock up of the ship's side and Barb had to lean back and sideways as if she were nailed to the outside of the hull.' He was also asked to design the windlass carrick bits which the original draughts showed as having a bearded and capped seaman's face carved on them. 'For these I got my mate Paul to pose for me and I used him for one side and my own image (with beard) on the other. In this way I am now part of the fabric of the ship, and as the carrick bits face backwards, I can keep an eye on Barb hanging off the stern quarters. I get a real kick when some joker makes a pair of spectacles out of a coat hanger and fixes them to the carrick bitt.' When asked what was the best part of working on *Endeavour* he replied without hesitation, 'the privilege of working with Bill Leonard', the project's master shipwright.

Commissions for Ross's work continued to come in, usually quicker than the work was going out. In 1990, Australia Post commissioned him to paint vessels from the National Collection to commemorate the opening of the National Maritime Museum. The work included four stamps, souvenir envelopes and a print folio. In 1992, he was again commissioned by Australia Post to produce four Australian Warship commemorative stamps for which he won a gold medal in the National Print Awards. The following year he was commissioned by the American publishers ABC Clio to illustrate *Ship to Shore*, a collection of maritime words and phrases that are now in common use in the English language. Written by Peter Jeans, this book later won a Library of Congress literary award.

When Ross and Barbara were travelling overseas visiting numerous maritime museums, they became acutely aware that Fremantle's Victoria Quay was a significant, intact, heritage treasure-trove. When Victoria Quay came under threat of redevelopment, Ross took a side step from his usual work and began campaigning to preserve the maritime heritage of Fremantle's waterfront. He had in years past talked with Graeme Henderson about



forming a Maritime Heritage Association and Graeme now felt the time was right to implement such a group. Graeme and Sally May started the Maritime Heritage Association in 1990. As Vice President, and later President, Ross promoted the concept of a Heritage Precinct for Victoria Quay - not without considerable success. In 1995, the Fremantle Port Authority commissioned Ross to develop concept plans and drawings for the future development of the Victoria Quay Maritime Heritage Precinct. Ross considers 'they haven't implemented all my ideas. They haven't kept the railways, the working blacksmith shop or the A-Shed Café and Art Gallery - and some of the new buildings aren't compatible with the old ones. But saving E-Shed and establishing sites for traditional boatbuilding is something to be pleased about - let alone getting the precinct in the first place.' During this time Ross was also on the Board of Directors for the Maritime Museum. Years of pushing the Victoria Quay proposal at little or no pay took its toll. 'I found myself in deep water more often than not. I'd lost a lot of money - and, perhaps, a few friends. I had also stopped painting. I couldn't even afford to keep my studio and had to let it go. One day, the irrepressible Poppy rang me, and using different words to explain what Barbara had been telling me all along, gave me a right ol' bollicking. It was time to pull out of Victoria Quay, the Museum - everything.'

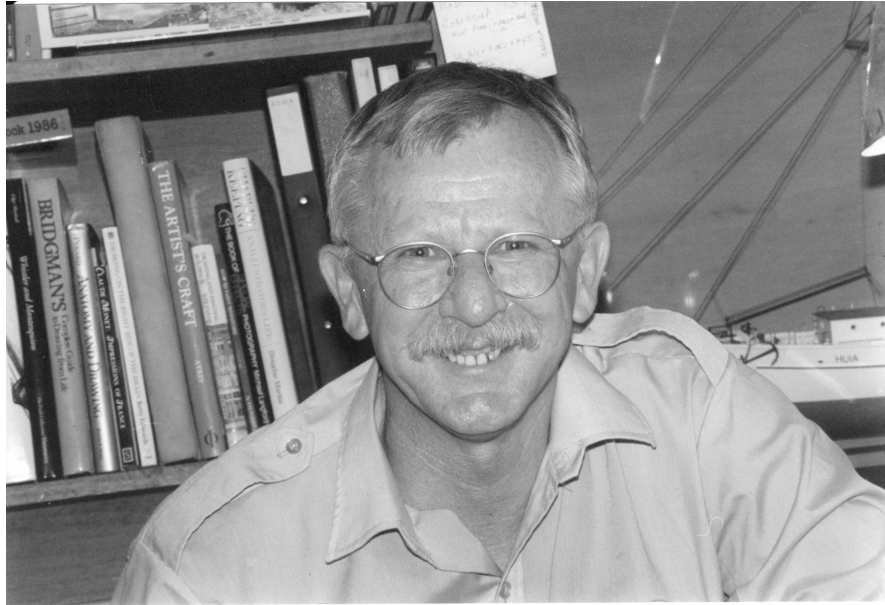
Taking a holiday to sort a few things out, the Shardlows were picnicking on the slopes of Mt Clarence at Albany when, unbeknown to them, the *Leeuwin* was working her way out through the Ataturk Entrance into King George Sound. 'While I was sitting there wondering what the hell I was going to do, the *Leeuwin* suddenly burst into view almost at my feet. It was a breathtaking sight. The wind was on her nose and she spent the best part of the afternoon tacking back and forth across the Sound making for the open sea. I looked at Barb and grinned - if that's not a sign, I'll go he!'

Converting the sleepout at the back of

their house into a studio, Ross resumed his role as artist, producing a series of 9x5 paintings on cigar box lids. The cigar boxes had been generously given to him by Roy McCarter, son of the respected boatbuilder, George McCarter. Coincidentally, it was at this time that Ross was invited to join the newly formed Australian Society of Marine Artists. At the inaugural invitation exhibition in Sydney, he won the President's Medal, the Society's first art award. The subject of the painting he submitted was *Leeuwin Beating out of King George Sound*. The presentation of the award was given at the Fremantle Maritime Museum. He is now State Vice President and last year was made a Fellow of the Society.

Since then there has been a steady output of work. His watercolour of *Batavia* was purchased by the Lelystad Museum in Holland to give to their acclaimed head shipwright, Willem Vos. His *Beagle off Breaksea Island* hangs in the office of Kerry Stokes while *HMS Success* hangs in the wardroom of *HMAS Success*. *Last Salvo* forms the cover of Wesley Olson's estimable book *Bitter Victory - the death of HMAS Sydney* and five Shardlows were on display at the opening of the new Maritime Museum on Victoria Quay. He researched and designed a replica 1850's pilot boat for the Rottneest Island Board. The boat itself was built at Tup Lahiff's venerated Wooden Boat Works on Victoria Quay. He and Barbara have sailed on *Leeuwin* as ship's artist and historian to gain first hand experience and research material for future paintings of *Beagle*, *Geographe* and *Investigator*. They have also walked and driven along the same coast, the last occasion ending dramatically when their four-wheel drive's engine blew up and stranded them off the Investigator Isles.

Ross continues to promote the maritime heritage of Western Australia through his illustrative quality watercolour and oil paintings. Forever seeking the ultimate studio, his Victoria Park rooms are a chaos of nautical books, models and memorabilia. Ross claims 'my studio is a



Portrait of the Artist as a Relatively Young Man

tribute to my mates - Rob's drawing desk and painting trolley; ship models from Brian, Murray and Rod, Ray's draughting curves, Syd's easel, books written by Ron, Rod and Nick - and a complete dinghy from Tup! I am surrounded by their spirit and I take my inspiration from them.' In pride of place is his father's barber's chair, 'from which great ideas emanate', and nearby the

studio cat stretched out on its own couch, reminds us that Ross always includes himself and the ship's cat in his paintings. Asked why he includes himself in his paintings he said, 'so I can truly say I have sailed with Cook, Flinders and FitzRoy - I was there.'



Ross has designed many stamps for Australia Post