Great art picks up where nature ends. – Marc Chagall

introduction

Margaret Olley: A Life in Paint is an intimate one-hour documentary about one of Australia’s best loved painters. A well-known figure from the time she was painted by William Dobell in 1948, Olley’s celebrity status tended to overshadow her life as a painter. This documentary puts Margaret Olley the painter on centre stage. Many believe her last works – those painted in the eighteen months leading up to her death on 26 July 2011 – were amongst her finest.
Synopsis: Margaret Olley, an Australian painter, died in July 2011 aged 88 as she was putting the finishing touches to what would be her final exhibition. She was a remarkable artist and a generous supporter of other artists. This documentary gives viewers an insight into the life and work of this greatly admired Australian painter through the recollections of those who knew her and were familiar with her work. We see Margaret Olley painting and talking about her work and learn about her early life and the artists who influenced her distinctive style. Much of the film, including interviews with her friends and with Olley herself, is shot inside the Paddington house in inner Sydney where she lived and worked for so many years. The house itself is more than just a place to work. It embodies and reflects a great deal about the artist herself.

Curriculum Relevance

Margaret Olley: A Life in Paint would be an excellent film to show to middle, senior and tertiary students working in Studio Arts and Design subjects. For students interested in the history and development of Australian art, the work of Margaret Olley has a special place. The film would also be a valuable resource in teaching Film as Text or in English classes as a biographical study of an artist's life and work.

In this film, Margaret Olley and her friends describe and demonstrate her method in creating her vibrant paintings; we see her working on some of these works in the latter years of her life. As with any study of the work of an artist, background, experiences, influences, surroundings, environment and temperament all contribute to the nature of the work, but with Margaret Olley the place where she worked for so much of her life is integral to the subject matter and style of her paintings.

Unlike many of her contemporaries she followed her own path, not experimenting with or trying out different subjects and styles. This is not to suggest that her output was ever flat or repetitive; rather her paintings are variations and approaches to composing light-filled pictures from many different perspectives and angles. The colour and vibrancy of her work is quite astonishing as is the fact that she was literally putting the finishing touches to pictures for a new exhibition when she died in 2011; in Betty Churcher's words, her 'obsession' to paint 'carried her right the way through'. In the words of artist Ben Quilty: 'her paintings were becoming translucent almost like her skin – there were just layers that were coming through and they became more and more beautiful towards the end'.

Place
Emeritus Curator
Barry Pearce calls the Sydney house in which Margaret lived 'the inner sanctum' and it is the house that is the starting point for the documentary. She bought Duxford Street in 1964. It was a large Paddington terrace with an annex previously used as a hat factory. Between the 'hat factory' and the main house was a kind of transit area with bedsit room and small kitchen and bathroom. The rest was rented out to create an income. That room, first painted blue and then yellow, would become her muse and the subject of what Barry Pearce calls 'her greatest masterpiece'.

Clockwise from top left: Kilim Rug and Pomegranates; Olley kitchen; Olley painting
My earliest recollections of living in Tully, in north Queensland, were the sounds of the rain on Mt Tyson. You could hear the roar as it approached – louder and louder. My mother would have time to run out and take the washing off the line.

My mother Grace had been a nurse and my father, Joseph, he was a farmer. I eventually was old enough to go to school and we had to ride across the Tully River ‘cause when the river was swollen, you’d have to swim the horses across with your little feet above the saddle. I can always remember that. I think I must have fallen off a horse a couple of times.

Then I was sent to boarding school at the age of six, in Townsville. It certainly cuts the umbilical cord and makes you independent. Then we went down to live on the Tweed River. I think that’s when my childhood really began.

And those days, the Depression was on. There was no money. We were living in the country. You made your own amusement. We rode across the river, picked up by the school bus and went to school in Murwillumbah.

I remember the whole of my school week seemed to gravitate round the art class. And when I left school, my mother would have loved me to become a nurse. Can you imagine! I think I would have killed a patient. But she said ‘Send her to art school.’

It was wartime. As soon as I came down to Sydney and discovered what I really wanted to do, I just took off. All I wanted to do was to be involved with painting. Being at Sydney Tech during the war, it was very hard to get models. So, quite often we’d have to take turns at being a model.

The painter William Dobell said he’d like to do a portrait of me. I was about to go up to Brisbane for holidays before I left for overseas. He did a few little drawings, one quick one, then he did a very detailed drawing. I never saw the painting until I came down from Brisbane with news that it had won the Archibald Prize.
Student Activity 1

Being the subject of two Archibald prize-winning paintings

In 1948, William Dobell won the Archibald prize for his portrait of a young Margaret Olley. In 2011, Ben Quilty won the Archibald for his portrait of a much older Margaret Olley.

- What was the critical and public response to the 1948 Dobell portrait?
- How does Margaret Olley describe the effect the publicity had on her as a shy twenty-five year old?
- What do artist Ben Quilty and writer Clive James say about the effect on Margaret Olley of the early celebrity and controversy created by the 1948 Dobell portrait?

‘Just forming my handwriting’
– Margaret Olley

- Who were some of the artists whose work Olley saw when she travelled overseas in 1949?
- What does Barry Pearce suggest was the effect on Olley’s work as an artist when she saw the originals of some of the work of artists she admired?
- In what senses was her stay at Hill End with fellow artist Donald Friend a valuable experience?

‘Greedy eyes’
– Margaret Olley

She was just a completely natural artist … right from her early life she loved drawing and painting and she found everything interesting to look at.
– Cressida Campbell, artist

- What were some of the subjects of Olley’s paintings and drawings in the early years of her development as an artist?
- How is the influence of artists such as Cézanne, Velasquez and Bonnard seen in some of her pictures of urban landscapes and of the Newcastle area?
- Why do you think Margaret Olley believed that a painting was never truly finished and could always be re-worked, rather than abandoned?

Establishing her distinctive style and subject matter

I would gather the flowers and they were in the room that I was in so it was part of the room. People aren’t always at hand.
– Margaret Olley

Unlike many artists today, Margaret Olley mostly painted colourful still life paintings and intimate interiors. She was not captive to the changing fashions and movements of the art world, mostly choosing to paint domestic interiors of her immediate surroundings. Her subjects, including compositions of flowers, fruit, bottles, plates, fabrics, furniture and surfaces, are suffused with colour and light. While perfectly composed, plants and fruit often appear to tumble off the dish on to the canvas or board on which they are painted. This quality of being beautifully jumbled and absolutely alive was also reflected in the spaces where she worked.

- How does Margaret Olley explain how she came to work on her still life paintings – domestic interiors, rooms, flowers, fruit, bottles, plates, fabrics and furniture – for which she is best known?
- ‘There are only a few stories and good writing brings a freshness to the few timeless subjects’. How does this observation shine a light on the infinite variety of Margaret Olley’s work?
- What are some of the very practical advantages in painting what is at hand such as the flowers, fruits, furniture, fabrics and spaces of her house which she captured so beautifully?
- Is this restriction of focus that Olley practised an important element in establishing your own handwriting as an artist?
• Describe her painting technique as it is shown in the film and further elaborated on by Barry Pearce.
• What was the advantage for Olley in painting on hardboard rather than canvas?
• What is meant by the description of Olley ‘living in a basket’ in relation to her peripatetic moving from place to place?
• ‘She adored the light of Newcastle’. How is the importance of light shown to be an absolutely crucial aspect of her work, whether she was working indoors or outside, painting landscapes or still lifes?
• How is the theatrical quality of Olley’s work explained by Barry Pearce?
• What does her use of frames and framing suggest about her sense of the importance of composition?

Place and space – the Yellow Room

Margaret Olley’s obsession with objects and creating a beautiful space to live was all part of her practice and obviously you only needed to walk into her home to see how you could be inspired to make paintings about it – She took up the space. Her studio took up every single bit of where she lived.

– Ben Quilty

I call this painting [The Yellow Room Triptych] the big masterpiece. And I can feel her briskness and energy and her ambition in the last few years of painting very much in this work where she just stretched herself.

– Barry Pearce

‘She loved this place because it gave her control over a vast spectrum of motifs. That’s the most important thing about this house. Always at the forefront of her mind was a new motif for painting, a different position, another window, another shelf somewhere, and as you walk through you can see where she potentially was going to create another composition.’

Barry Pearce.

• What do Olley’s paintings of the yellow room in her Paddington house illustrate about her willingness to embrace challenges and paint spaces and objects from different perspectives and on a different scale to her more close focus still lifes? When did she first begin working on these paintings?
• The Paddington house where Margaret Olley lived and worked from the late 1960s until her death in 2011 was central to her work – studio and living space undifferentiated, the one complementing the other. What does such a working method suggest about the centrality of painting in her life?
• Are you aware of the work of any other artists who were so thoroughly inspired by, and identified with, the place in which they lived and worked?
• How do her paintings of larger, outdoor spaces such as the landscapes of Newcastle and

Clockwise from top left: Poppies in Spanish Jug; Olley altar; Olley yellow room; Olley yellow room
Sydney Harbour embody the dynamic principles of all her paintings, regardless of the subject matter. How would you characterise the central qualities of her work that make it instantly identifiable and distinctively Margaret Olley – her handwriting?

How do the filmmakers tell the story of Margaret Olley's work?

I was one of the many in this country who felt overwhelmed by sadness with the news of Margaret Olley’s death on July 26, 2011. I had been lucky enough to have spent time at her Paddington house. The house was the embodiment of Margaret in every sense – it was a world of beauty and colour and inspiration. It was Margaret’s created world.

And when I heard the news of her passing, it felt like a light had gone out in the part of Sydney where she lived. I felt we had lost one of the most spirited women I have ever met. And one of the most generous.

She supported younger artists like Ben Quilty and Nicholas Harding (and many others) and would harangue gallery directors into buying work of younger artists she believed in. Or if they didn’t buy the work, she would buy it and then present it to the gallery. She could be very persuasive!

Catherine Hunter
Director of Margaret Olley: A Life in Paint

• In what ways is film an ideal medium for presenting information about a visual artist?
• How does Catherine Hunter, the director of the film, manage to keep the focus on Olley’s work rather than on the celebrity artist and character she had become in the public imagination?
• Were you conscious of the presence of the filmmakers at any points of the film?

How will Margaret Olley be remembered in Australian art history?

I am like an old tree dying and setting forth flowers as quickly as it can before it dies.  
– Margaret Olley

Artists are best remembered through their work. What they have written and spoken about can offer insights into their approach to their work but it is the work itself that speaks most clearly.

In the case of artists who lived and worked in the time before photography, film and sound recordings, apart from the work itself, we are dependent on written sources to understand more about their life and work.

- How do we know about Van Gogh, apart from through his paintings?
- How do we know about Mozart or Beethoven, apart from through their music?
- How do we know about Shakespeare, apart from through his plays and poems?

With all these artists, where the person was famous during their lifetime, there are sometimes letters and diaries as well as contemporary accounts of their life and work. But the primary evidence for appreciating the nature, quality and development of their work is through their creative output — the work they left behind.

- Is this how it should be, i.e. should an artist’s work be the main source for our understanding and appreciation?
- How does having additional material from creative artists, such as filmed material of them talking about their life and work, enrich our understanding and enjoyment of their art?
- What extant written, oral and visual material about Margaret Olley is available that offers
insights into her artwork?

- Margaret Olley is represented at the National Gallery of Australia, the Art Gallery of NSW, the Art Gallery of Western Australia, the National Gallery of Victoria, the Queensland Art Gallery, and the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. Her work also appears at regional galleries including Lismore, Maitland, the Gold Coast, and Wollongong as well as tertiary and municipal collections. Her work is also owned by many private collectors.
- What role do state and national galleries have in preserving and displaying the work of artists?

Legacy

During the film Barry Pearce speculates on Margaret Olley’s place in the history of Australian art. He says:

She didn’t make the mainstream. She wasn’t included in big surveys like the Bicentennial show – but she fits in the pantheon of Australian painting. And she shared it with all the great artists whom she adored and loved and she was part of a tradition that will carry through time. She was a genuine honest practitioner of a time-honoured craft and I think time will be very good to her.

- What criteria would you apply to deciding the place of an artist in Australia’s history? What qualities should the work demonstrate?
- Philip Bacon, Margaret Olley’s art dealer and friend since 1975, curated her final exhibition and sold many of her pictures to galleries and private collectors. To what extent do we make assessments of the work of an artist based on the popularity of their work?

Margaret Olley was a generous supporter of other artists including Ben Quilty and Nicholas Harding, persuading galleries to purchase the work of young artists. She gave a million dollar bequest to the Tweed River Art Gallery at Murwillumbah; the letter of offer from the Margaret Olley Art Trust stipulates that the gallery will honour ‘the express wish of the late Margaret Olley that her studio and elements of her home and collection will be recreated in a suitable venue’.

- What would be some of the difficulties of archiving and recreating the Olley house, dismantling it and reconstructing it so that it embodies the essential elements of Olley’s art and life?
- Is it important that the places where an artist worked are preserved in some form for future generations? Why might this matter?

Artists whose work Olley admired

- Pierre Bonnard
- Jean Baptiste Simeon Chardin
- Paul Cezanne
- Henri Matisse
- Johannes Vermeer
- Edouard Vuillard
- Giorgio Morandi
- Diego Velasquez

- Investigate the work of some of these painters and assess how their influence is reflected in Margaret Olley’s work. Was it subject matter, brushwork, composition, colour or focus and attention to light or something less tangible and more mysterious that drew her to their work?

Student Activity 2

Discussion points

- How does the film reflect the artist and her work?

It’s for the love of doing and if you knew you could do it, I suppose you wouldn’t do it. It is something to do with the challenge.

- Margaret Olley

Ends and beginnings

- The film opens with a radio voiceover reading tributes flowing for Margaret Olley on the day she died. How do the opening visuals suggest both a death in winter (a bleakness) and the iconic and joyous qualities of her life and art, as though she had just gone out?
- How is the ‘luminously colourful’ quality of her paintings immediately established and echoed through the visual images of the natural world and colour throughout the film?
- How does Emeritus curator Barry Pearce, one of her many friends and regular visitors, describe the essentially domestic operation of her house and workspaces?
• As Betty Churcher and Barry Pearce talk about Margaret Olley’s life as a young girl, what are some of the recurring images and archival footage used to illustrate this early period of her life?
• Identify some of the stories Margaret tells us about her interests as a student that give some indication of the independent woman she became?
• ‘It was simple and basic but so rich. You had a bed to sleep in and the fire to cook on which was all you really needed in a way; it was like domestic bliss, the two of us being there’. Who was the artist, described as one of her earliest artistic soul mates that Margaret Olley spent time with at Hill End in the 1940s after she left Art School?

About Margaret Olley, the artist

• Describe Olley’s approach to painting as shown in the film.
• When did she consider a painting to be finished?
• In what sense was process more important to her than product?
• Approximately what size are many of her pictures? Identify any notable exceptions to this.
• What do you think are the most striking aspects of Margaret Olley’s pictures – composition, colour, brushwork, application of paint?
• What impressed you about Margaret Olley as a person?
• Does her long and vigorous creative life and energy have anything to tell us about the importance of pursuing what you love doing for as long as possible?

About the Documentary

• Who is the audience for this documentary? What do you think younger artists would make of Margaret Olley’s output?
• The film, while covering many areas of Olley’s life and work, has a particular focus on her paintings. How is this interest presented visually?
• How do Margaret Olley’s friends and fellow artists shed further light on her approach to her work?
• What are some of the stories they tell that indicate something of her determination to run her own race and live her life for the pleasure of creating?
• The narrative of the film moves quite seamlessly between people, place, finished work and art in progress. Which members of the film crew are mainly responsible for this fluency?
• What technical considerations are involved in filming the artworks?
• What would have been some of the difficulties involved in filming in the Paddington house?
• In the director’s statement (see page 4 of this guide) what does Catherine Hunter suggest is at the heart of this documentary?
• Comment on the title of the film.
• How does music work in this film as background and in creating mood?
• Write a brief outline of the documentary to be published in a television preview guide. What qualities of the documentary will you emphasise to encourage general viewers to watch the film?
• This film offers an intimate and affectionate tribute to an artist with a big personality, many loyal friends and an extraordinary artistic output. What do you think Margaret Olley would have to say about this portrait of an artist?

References and Resources

Barry Pearce, Margaret Olley, Beagle Press, 2012.
A large format book with numerous colour reproductions of many of Olley’s paintings as well as essays by those who admired her work
Meg Stewart, Margaret Olley: Far From A Still Life, Knopf Australia, 2005.

Article from The Australian newspaper magazine from 25 February 2012 about the final days of her life. This article is written by Meg Stewart and is an excerpt from her updated biography of Margaret Olley, <http://www.theful.au/news/features/margaret-olley-she-was-racing -against-time/story-e6frg8h6-1226277243616>.


Margaret Olley’s artworks can also be viewed at these websites
» Savill Galleries: Margaret Olley
» Eva Breuer Art Dealer: Margaret Olley
» Philip Bacon Galleries: Margaret Olley
» Art Equity: Margaret Olley

Biography and reviews
» Margaret Olley biographical notes – Philip Bacon Galleries
» Margaret Olley review 1998 – Grafico Arts
» Olley reveals her secrets – 7:30 Report, ABC
» Margaret Olley – Berkeley Editions
» Portrait of Margaret Olley, 1991 – National Library of Australia
» Tributes flow for Margaret Olley – ABC News

Endnote
1 http://www.abc.net.au/talkingheads/text/s2091658.htm
Photographs of Margaret Olley’s house courtesy Mark Callanan.
Title photograph of Margaret Olley courtesy Hugh Stewart.

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