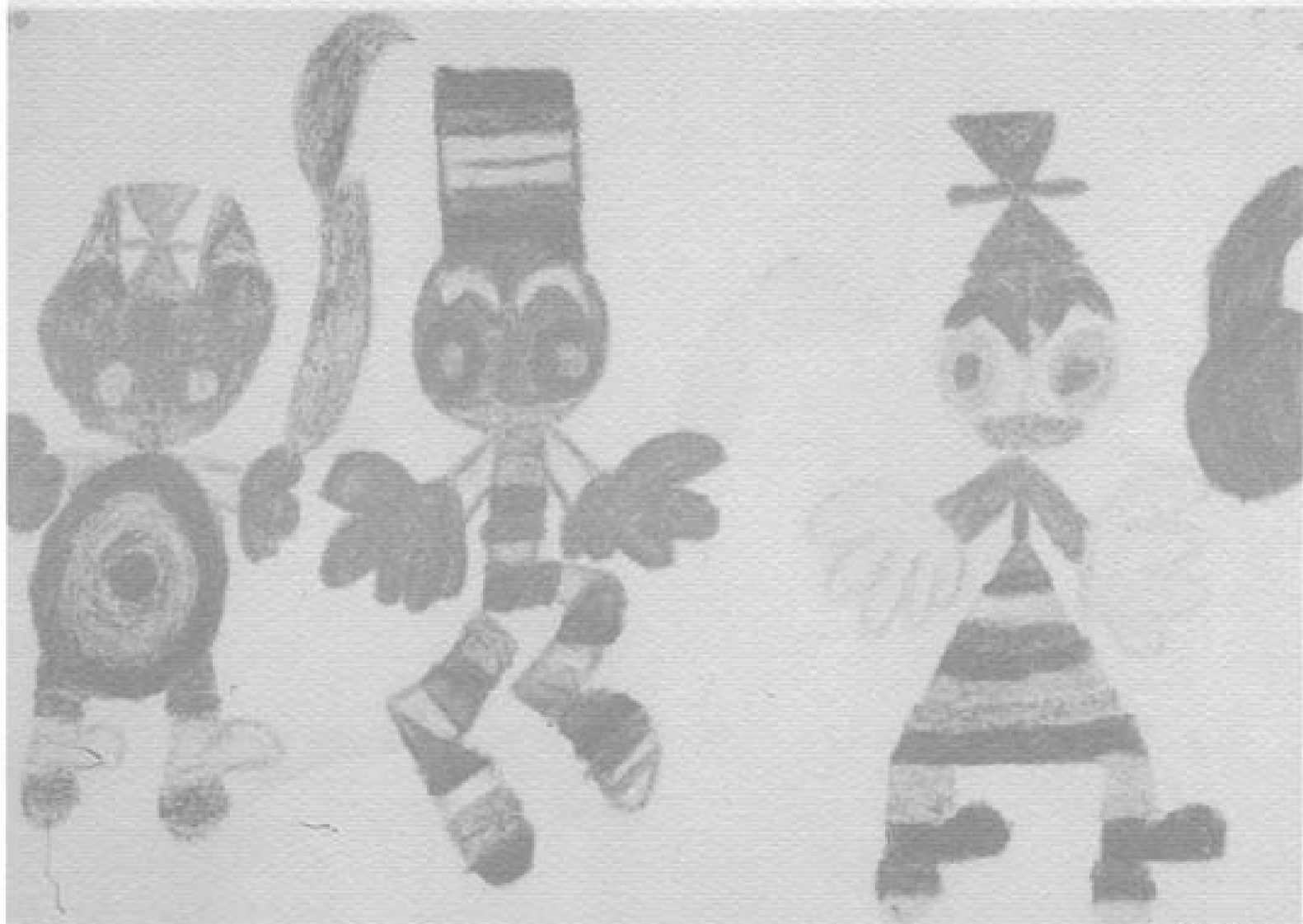


# THE SIDNEY MYER FUND PERMANENT COLLECTION

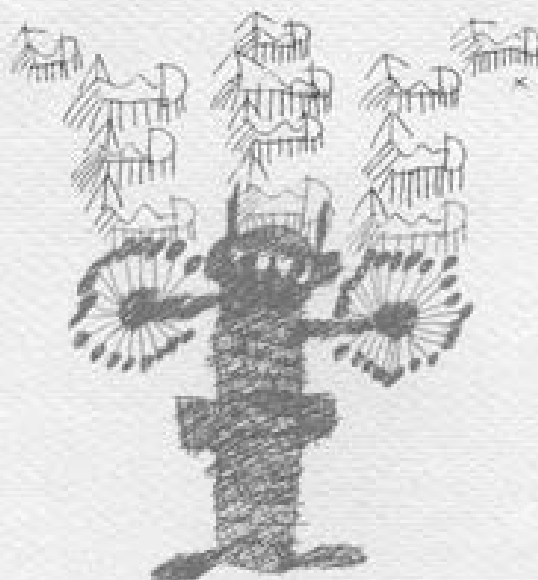


Shirley Wauke

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Arts Project Australia is grateful for the confidence shown in its work by the Sidney Myer Fund in providing financial support for the establishment of a permanent collection of paintings and drawings by people with intellectual disabilities. The art of this group of people has still to receive appropriate recognition from the community. As a group they are the least able to command attention for themselves and they must accept what the community sees fit to allow them, so this opportunity to make a permanent collection of the early efforts of the Arts Project to assemble work of these artists is of great importance - it lays the foundation for the assessment and appreciation of their contribution to the field of human expression.

If one were to ask thoughtful people who work in the field of social welfare, "What is the meaning or purpose of all you have done for society?", the most likely response might be that they are concerned with social justice. This would reflect the fact that they see their place in society as being the givers of benefits, not the receivers. The gap between those who give and those who receive these benefits is no greater than when it is between so-called normal people and people with an intellectual disability. The emphasis in the relationship for the givers is on the therapeutic level; it is not a mutual "give and take", of mutual adaptation, of a recognition that each may have something to give. There have, however, been considerable changes of attitudes developing over recent years and the gap between givers and receivers is no longer so great.



The Arts Project for the Mentally Retarded, as it was first known, grew out of the movement in the early seventies coming mainly from parents of people with intellectual disabilities to find ways of creating a better life for their children. As an artist, who is also a parent of an intellectually disabled daughter, I came to recognise the importance of painting and drawing as a means of expression and communication for my child who, like most people so disabled, has severe problems with speech and literacy. I was asked by STAR, the association working in Victoria in the field of mental retardation, to try and assemble art work to be exhibited in public areas during a national conference. When these paintings and drawings were collected from training centres all over Victoria, the impact of so many fresh, original and highly expressive works was so startling, it was apparent that they deserved much more consideration.

Here in these works were clear, sensitive and often powerful personal statements in colour and line from a group of people whose relations with society had always been negative - they were always the receivers of charity or therapy, of imposed structures - never the givers. Their ability to communicate effectively in our very verbal dependent world was almost nil.

Excited by the challenge, a group, comprised of mainly friends, parents and artists, formed "the Arts Project for the Mentally Retarded" in 1974. This resulted in 1975 in the "Minus/Plus Exhibition" at Georges Gallery in Collins Street, Melbourne, funded by the Ministry for the Arts under the patronage of Lady Hamer. The name derived from a massive fund-raising exercise at the time instigated by "The Herald" newspaper, called "The Minus Children".



David Coles

The exhibition created a great deal of interest and was well received by the art critics of the Melbourne daily newspapers, and it went on to tour the Regional Galleries of Victoria. It also reflected the social attitudes of the period, in that it was not possible to use the full names of the artists in the catalogues, as it might offend relatives to see advertised in public that they had a disabled member of the family; the social stigma of disability still demanded that they remain anonymous, just "Tom" or "Bob", "Shirley" or "Jane". None of the artists were present at the opening, quite a large social occasion, and no work was for sale. Most of the work was carried out with the cheapest of materials, on newsprint that became brittle and yellow, in paints that would fade. The need to preserve them therefore became increasingly obvious.

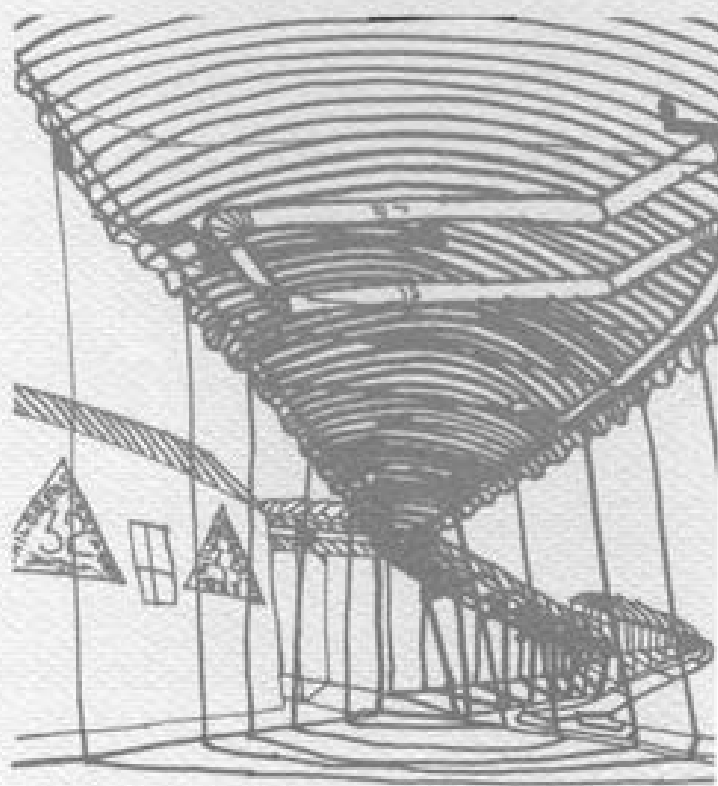
A later exhibition, "Tommy's World", funded by the federal Department of Social Security in 1980, opened at Melville Hall, the Australian National University, Canberra, and travelled the eastern state's capitals, and many smaller exhibitions have been shown in all states and New Zealand, with some works also represented internationally.

These, then, are the works that form the basis of the Sidney Myer Fund Permanent Collection. Their conservation, cataloguing and storage has been made possible by the generous funding received; they have become a resource for future study and for exhibition as long as their fragile quality lasts, and they remain the foundation upon which the now Arts Project Australia Incorporated is based. There are now classes conducted by professional artists using artists' quality materials. The artists themselves are fully acknowledged, with no reference to their disability. They attend the openings of exhibitions, and their works are widely sold for prices at least equivalent to those of mainstream artists.

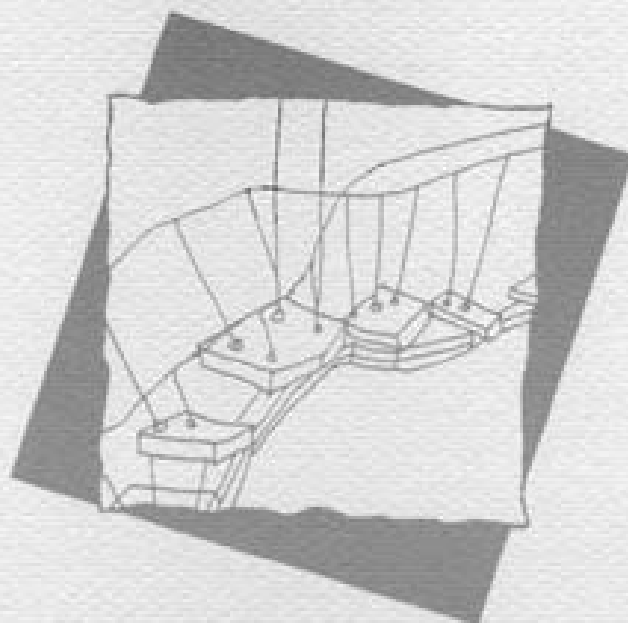
This is the first collection of its kind that we know of which specifically contains the work of people with intellectual disabilities. There are well known collections of the art of mentally ill people, of naive and primitive art, of Art Brut and Outsider Art, but we believe the art of people with intellectual disabilities does not fit easily into any of these categories. Arts Project does not view the work from a therapeutic or diagnostic perspective. The work is simply to be seen and appreciated as art. Here, the disabled people are truly givers. The Sidney Myer Fund Collection exists to honour the artists for their contribution to the whole body of human expression, for their uninhibited, joyous and suffering original statements on their human condition that we all share.

**Myra Hilgendorf (Mrs.) O.A.M.**  
President, Arts Project Australia Inc.

March 1991



Tommy Risler



We would like to acknowledge those who had the understanding and the vision to encourage and support the tentative early moves made by the founding members of the Arts Project, enabling this collection to be established.

Among those we remember with gratitude are Essie Wicks, from the Victorian Ministry for the Arts; Gordon Thomson, former Director of the National Gallery of Victoria; Patrick McCaughey, former Professor of Fine Arts, Monash University; the late Alan Forbes, Managing Director of Georges of Collins Street; the Artists Erica McGilchrist and Susan Norrie; Marie Coleman, Commonwealth Department of Social Security; James Mollison, former Director of Australian National Gallery; Students of the Graphic Design Studios, Swinburne College of Technology Ltd; Thomas McCullough, Director of the Mildura Art Centre and "Pitspace" at Phillip Institute of Technology, and Roma McCullough, Art Teacher at the W.J. Christie Centre, Mildura; the Danks Foundation; and Lady Hamer, who became our first Patron.