

The unknown painter who shaped the Australian arts scene



The streets of inner city Melbourne and Sydney were the studio of Danila Ivanovich Vassilieff. "Valerie and Betty", painted in 1937.

by **Richard Moore**

Danila Ivanovich Vassilieff burst on to the Australian art scene in the early 1930s. He was a former lieutenant colonel in the White Russian army, who had blown up bridges and stopped runaway trains, who'd fought against the Bolsheviks and the Germans, crawled through the snow to escape prison camp and joined other White Russian emigres in London – where he had his first painting lessons. His teacher Vladimir Polunin, a friend of Picasso and Diaghilev, told him "Never forget Danila – colour and the iconic style."

As set out in my new documentary, *The Wolf in Australian Art*, Vassilieff never did forget – he always remained a child of folk art and a true colourist. He arrived in Australia in the mid-1930s as an exile, an outsider, exotic, charismatic and supremely confident. At the time Australia was still recovering from the Depression. They were grey days for young artists; an art world dominated by academic approaches and nationalistic paintings of activities like sheep shearing. But Vassilieff painted from the hip and the heart; wherever he went his eye captured the immediate neighbourhood and real life. The streets and back lanes in Melbourne and Sydney's inner suburbs were his studio.

What he lacked in material possessions Vassilieff made up for in human qualities: warmth, intuition, love of people (children especially), friendship and wild stories. All these were highly valued by the artists who met him. And as a painter he liberated some of those very same young artists – among them Albert Tucker, Arthur Boyd, Charles Blackman, Joy Hester – to reproduce their own original visions. One artist in particular, Sidney Nolan, was so taken with Vassilieff's work that he "borrowed" directly from a piece long hidden in the bowels of the National Gallery of Australia collection, the *Expulsion from Paradise* screen, to create his iconic Ned Kelly series. Nolan directly acknowledged Vassilieff as the trigger for his art during his lifetime but always remained elusive about the direct source – an issue the film tackles head on.



"Fitzroy Girls" 1937

Ironically, despite the fact that Vassilieff gained considerable critical acclaim at the time, his importance in the pantheon of Australian art is little known – partly because he was hard to pin down; he changed styles constantly, defying easy definitions. And then there was his widow, Elizabeth Sutton Hamill, who did much to stop independent research and thus control his story. Threats of legal action and actual defamation suits against publishers, "curating" poorly selected

exhibitions, sending bullying letters to figures in the art world and to art bookshops and galleries, making wrongful claims to owning copyright – all of these tactics contributed to emptying the critical field and obscuring his reputation. But, following Hamill's death a few years ago, Vassilieff's story can now be told and the ledger corrected.

The film is based on 40 years of research by Felicity St John Moore (my mother), who has devoted a large part of her professional waking life to restoring Vassilieff to his rightful place. Several exhibitions, numerous lectures, essays, two editions of the book *Vassilieff and His Art* later, our family had no choice but to lend their professional talents to the production. Tim Moore (my brother and an exhibition designer) and Lisa Moore (my sister and a concert pianist) joined the credit list as willing participants.

It's too late to bring Vassilieff fame and fortune (after 20 years he had earned only 52 guineas in the marketplace) but we can leave a tale for future generations and a deeper understanding of this man who lived his life for, as he put it, "creation and not destruction". His contribution to the cultural life of this country was remarked upon by Albert Tucker in the eulogy he gave for Danila ... "The only other alien eye that matched the acuity of his perception of the Australian scene was DH Lawrence ..."

The Wolf in Australian Art – the life and art of Danila Vassilieff 1897-1958, is co-written by Felicity St John Moore and Richard Moore who also produced the film. It will be launched at the Art Gallery of New South Wales on July 30. Richard Moore is an independent film maker, a former director of the Melbourne International Film Festival and a former executive producer of ABC TV Arts.



Danila Vassiliev, aged 34, in Bristol in 1931, not long before he headed to Australia



Danila Vassiliev, "Woman in a Red Dress", 1946.



"Mildura Mother and Child", 1954. Vassiliev's teacher Vladimir Polunin told him, "Never forget Danila – colour and the iconic style."