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## The life and work of R. W. Sturgess

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*The Life and Work of*  
R. W. STURGES



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*The Life and Work*  
*of*  
R. W. STURGESS

*with a Foreword by*  
ROBERT HENDERSON CROLL



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# R. W. STURGESS

*by Robert Henderson Croll*

**H**is full name was Reginald Ward Sturgess, but he could never be persuaded to use it. He preferred "R. W. Sturgess" and invariably signed that way. The "Ward" was his mother's name—she was Emily Ward before marriage—and the father occasionally tried to induce the artist son to sign R. Ward Sturgess but he held without variation to the initials. That small matter suggests something of the character of the man. He disliked "show"; he avoided publicity, so much indeed that he was scarcely known in person, even to the frequenters of the world of art. Tall (he was over six feet) and spare of body, he looked delicate but was really active and healthy, if not actually robust, and his final illness, which began at the early age of 40, was apparently due to no congenital weakness but derived from an accident of some four years earlier.

His parents hailed from the Shakespeare country in England. The father, Edward Richard Sturgess, was a cabinet-maker. With their four children the Sturgesses emigrated to Victoria in the eighties of last century and settled in Williamstown, where, on the 18th of June, 1890, R. W., the only child born to them in Australia, first saw the light. A sister, Mrs. Hansen now residing in Hobart, Tasmania, is to-day the sole survivor of that group of five children.

R. W. attended the local State School but showed no outstanding ability there except a talent for drawing. It was assuredly the situation of his home town that gave the lad his leaning towards boats and shipping. His exercise books were full of his school-boy drawings of craft of every sort. Williamstown, built on one of the horns of Hobson's Bay, stood for long as Melbourne's principal port.

With a pronounced bent towards pictorial art he joined the National Gallery Art school when he was only fifteen years of age. It is understood that special permission had to be obtained for the admission of so young a pupil. Bernard Hall was Director at the time, and in charge of the painting class, while genial Frederick McCubbin was the drawing master. Sturgess found at least two other young pupils there who were to make names for themselves in Australian art. They were Louis McCubbin, the present Director of the South Australian National Gallery, and the late Penleigh Boyd, whose tragic death removed one of the most interesting painters of the day.

Within R.W.'s period too were W. Beckwith McInnes, A. E. Newbury, Percy Leason, Charles Wheeler, Napier Waller, the brothers John and Will Rowell, and many another of more than ordinary ability. Percy Leason was a very close friend; they spent many week ends together.

Mr. Newbury recalls Sturgess as too retiring to enter into the social life of the Gallery students. Out walking together, as they sometimes were, the quieter the walk, the more it was to Sturgess' liking. He would tramp along, on occasions, for an hour or more without uttering a word. On camping trips his strong feeling for music was evident, for he frequently took along a gramophone and some good records. He was a recognised authority on shipping; the local fishermen declared that he knew every boat that passed Williamstown, and what line it belonged to. Yet he was never a realist in his presentation of them; the romantic colored all his vision.

Mr. Louis McCubbin endorsed all that Mr. Newbury said. He found R.W. sensitive beyond belief—"When he left the Gallery he left Melbourne" and was hardly ever seen again by the members of the Art world. Sturgess senior wrote to Mr. Fred. McCubbin, when asking admission to the school for so young a lad, and declared his belief that the boy had genius. The open air was Sturgess' favorite studio. At the Gallery school he won a prize for still-life and another for landscape, but he was not particularly happy in his Gallery association. He worked prodigiously, when out in the fields, to secure the material, sketches, and color notes, which he would work into the perfected picture at home.

Art students of the period no doubt hold pleasant memories of certain camps in which social intercourse was as much in evidence as the study of art. One of these was held in the McCubbin's old home at Macedon, and another took possession of the flour mill of Mr. H. A. Ellis at Malmsbury. Mr. Ellis was an uncle of one of the students, Miss Meta Townsend. These picnics ripened the friendship between Sturgess and Miss Townsend, a friendship which was to culminate in marriage.

But some time was to elapse before that important event took place. R.W. left the Gallery about 1914 and began what was at first a lucrative business in the production of lamp shades. He selected beautifully tinted gum-leaves and arranged them in artistic patterns on the shades, an attractive effect being produced when the lamp was lighted. He had a constant market for these until the outbreak of war destroyed the demand.

He did not readily enlarge the circle of his friends, but a few intimates he bound very close to him. Closest of all was the musician Frank W. Homewood. They were David and Jonathan, Damon and Pythias, for some twenty years, each at least three times a week (sometimes three times a day) in the house of the other, their lives intimately entwined. Sturgess had a passion for good music: Homewood would sometimes play for him for an hour at a time, then they would wander out and walk and talk till midnight. During Sturgess'

last illness his friend was also ill. They died within a few weeks of each other. In 1916 the father died and R.W. took over the business. Next year he married Miss Townsend, herself a prize winner while at the Gallery school.

Although now fully occupied in business he did not relax his art efforts. He very seldom attempted oils but held steadily to his chosen medium, water color, at which he practised every night, sitting up till late to secure fluency with washes and intimate acquaintance with colors. His friend Homewood was constantly urging him to hold a show of work but the reply was always - "I am not ready yet." Homewood took a couple of pictures to the Conservatorium, where he was a teacher, and sold them; took two more and sold them also. Then Sturgess joined the Victorian Artists' Society.

Elizabeth, R.W.'s only child, was born in 1919. Shortly afterwards the diffident artist took courage to submit some examples of his watercolors to the "the Vics" for one of its exhibitions. They were hung and attracted some attention.

About this time a Melbourne art dealer, in the capacity of artists' representative, sold a few of R.W.'s pictures and sent a group to an agent in Sydney. Mrs. Sturgess recalls that never in the history of the family has there been such excitement as when an offer came from the Sydney agent of ten guineas for four pictures! It was recognition; it was success! The money was sadly needed, for their circumstances were not good, but the delighted couple put aside that ten guineas and labored hard to add to it so that a one-man show could be assured.

The show was held in due course-but it was not a one-man show. A fellow student of the Gallery days, Granville Dunstan, went through the sketches and insisted that the time had fully arrived for their display. He proposed a joint exhibition, and September 1921 saw it opened in the Athenaeum Gallery, Collins Street. Dunstan showed portraits, nudes, subject compositions, and landscapes, all in oils, while Sturgess, confining himself to water-colors, presented landscapes, ships, figure subjects, and studies of birds and animals. The critiques may be described as pleasant but cautious. The inevitable comparison between Sturgess and Hilder was drawn by one journal; another said more justly: "Sturgess has been carelessly likened to Hilder, but neither in his methods nor in his achievements is he a reflection of the departed genius. Both are poets in their attitude to Beauty, but whereas Hilder was most expressive in the twilight mood, Sturgess loves more daylight in his compositions. In fact the Victorian more recalls the Englishman Lee Hankey who has a European reputation for his clean, sweet color."

The exhibition was a marked success. It convinced the artist that his work was acceptable artistically and that he had gained the public recognition which would justify further efforts. In the water-color section of the Victorian Artists Autumn exhibition the following year (1922) he and Harold Herbert were picked out as contributing the most notable work. Two months later (July 1922) he ventured again to take the Athenaeum Gallery, this time

alone. He showed 84 pictures and sold 54. He was extremely modest in his prices, the highest in his catalogue being 15 guineas. The sum received marked a definite change in his fortunes. The critics were now taking him seriously into account as a rising star in the artistic heavens. The views of one, regarding this first one-man show of the young artist, make interesting reading to-day:

“Art critics in Melbourne are considerably interested in the rising importance as a water-colorist of Mr. R.W. Sturgess. Opinion as to the value of his work cannot easily be formed on what he has so far exhibited. The most that can be said is that he has already an arresting style, and is working on a method that is novel and refreshing. The new exhibition of Mr. Sturgess’ work that will be opened at the Athenaeum Hall to-day shows considerable technical advance, but not any great ambitious effort. Mr. Sturgess can turn out pretty pictures with great cunning and slickness. But it would be doing him grave wrong to suggest that his work is cheap and trivial. It is generally a complete and sincere presentation of a very slight impression. The gifts that Mr. Sturgess appears to possess in addition to an individual technique, are a love of color and a natural appreciation of tone values.”

Greatly encouraged, Sturgess tried Adelaide in November 1926. The result was a demonstration probably unequalled in the history of art in Australia. The press combined to laud the work, showering praise sometimes of the most extravagant kind. “No lover of the best in art should miss the opportunity of seeing such beautiful pictures. Mr. Sturgess is recognised as one of the leading water-colorists of Australia. His paintings are characterized by freshness, an accurate color sense, perfect drawing, and amazing versatility. One is reminded of Corot, of Hilder and of Turner, but the individuality and force of Sturgess shine through it.” That fairly represents the general tone of the critiques.

He sold remarkably well, as might be surmised from such press notices, and the next year (in August 1927) he returned to the scene of his triumph. This time he hung forty-eight pictures, seven of them lent for the exhibition by His Excellency the Governor (Sir Thomas Bridges) and other patrons. “Enchanting,” “admirable,” “unusual,” were some of the press headings, and the critics again vied with each other in consistent praise. At the opening by Mrs. H. H. Dutton, Mr. W. J. Cowell expressed his belief that the artist would prove one of the greatest of water-colorists. He spoke of his friendship with Sturgess who, he said was a very interesting personality - cultured, retiring and very modest about his work.

Prices had risen, a couple were as high as 40 guineas each. The result showed another striking financial success, the sales totalling £845. The National Gallery of South Australia, which had already purchased two examples, added another to its collection from this 1927 display.

A show predicted for Sydney was opened in Farmer’s Gallery in August 1928. It was well received and twenty-two pictures were sold. The critic of the Evening News, after declaring it strange that a craftsman of such undoubted ability had so long remained unknown north

of the Murray, remarked that "Sturges is one of the few artists with an absolute command over his medium." Another's comment was that "Sturges has achieved the feat of being realistic and idealistic at the same time. His 'Foggy Beach' is a marvel of pale tints, misty distances, and 'the light that never was on sea or land,' yet one can almost hear the lap of the little yeasty wavelets on the flat beach, while the few human figures and the outline of buildings on a promontory have reality, in spite of the dreamy haze in which they have their being." The review in the Sydney Morning Herald gives perhaps the fairest summary of that capital's response to its first view of Sturges:

"Mr. R. W. Sturges, who is exhibiting 50 water colors in Farmer's Hall, is a Melbourne artist, and his work has not previously come before the public here. These works will convince Sydney art lovers that he is a painter of distinction, not only as regards the outward qualities of technique and value, but from an ideal imaginative point of view as well. Mr. Sturges does not cling steadfastly to any one style, nor slavishly copy any other painter's methods. As opposed to his 'Hilderesque' phases, one finds studies of gum-trees which in their clear-cut radiance make one think of the work of Elioth Gruner. In certain subjects, even, there is a noble simplicity of conception that recalls the great Frenchman, Millet. Such a one is 'Ploughing on the Uplands.' With extreme sensitiveness, the artist has adapted the lines and proportions of his group of two horses, driver, and plough to the size of the composition as a whole, so that the eye bathes in a fine spaciousness that is very restful. Again and again, this economy in design makes itself felt, reposeful and uplifting. It appears in 'Evening Light' No. 15 (one of the Gruner-like examples). It appears again in 'The Kite,' giving a delightful impression of wind-swept distance with its wide-flung curves.

"Another feature in Mr. Sturges' work is the beautiful quality of the color. There is no patchiness, no appearance of hesitation. The beholder has the feeling that everything in a picture has been dashed off masterfully at a single sitting. The skilful realisation of values and exquisite gradations of perspective bear no traces of labor about them. They are free and spontaneous. It is the pure, deep quality of the tints that makes some of these pictures seem so subtle and laden with thought. In 'From My Studio Window' for instance, one's gaze seems to be drawn ever deeper and deeper into the mist, seeking to penetrate what lies behind, and the imagination is stimulated rather than baffled by the vagueness. 'Evening-Malmsbury' is like a glimpse of some romantic, fairy country, so transfigured is the landscape by mist and evening light."

Meanwhile the National Gallery of Victoria had become the owner of four fine impressions and later added a fifth to its collection. This last, which Blamire Young called "that most successful water-color," was titled "From the Tower Top, Government House." It was selected from the Alfred Felton Centenary Exhibition organized by the Fine Arts Society in 1931.

There is no need to list in detail the several further exhibitions in his short lifetime. One with forty-four items held in Sydney in October 1929 may be mentioned because it was out of the State; the rest were in the Fine Arts Society's Galleries, Melbourne, from time to time. It should perhaps be recorded, as evidence of the artist's sustained popularity, that one of these Melbourne shows returned £833. Reference to two memorial collections (1933 and 1935) will be found in the appendix.

Private buyers were numerous and distinguished. Lady Stonehaven, wife of the Governor General, was both a purchaser and a sound friend, writing encouragingly, visiting the studio, and introducing many notable personages. Lord Somers, when Governor of Victoria, was also a discriminating patron and purchaser.

Sturgess' life has been referred to as a short one. In 1926 he suffered a motor accident in which, amongst other injuries, his jaw was broken. He recovered, but in 1930 a mysterious sickness attacked him. His sight would fade until he could not see at all. It would return with just as little apparent reason for the change. Many doctors were consulted, but none achieved a cure. He would try to paint but could not satisfy himself and one day he showed his wife the paints and brushes finally put away. His spirits were good, he was cheerful and bright and his whistling of snatches of Beethoven sonatas, of which he was very fond, made a pleasant note in the house. It must not be thought, by the way, that his mood throughout life was commonly sombre. In lighter moments he could be whimsical and humorous to a degree.

His wife read much to him during these two inactive years, years in which he could not work. One night he asked for Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar." She read it and hastened to follow with something more cheerful. He asked to have the poem read again before going to sleep and she read it once more. That was very near the end. A specialist was summoned next day but was not helpful. Sturgess died on 2nd July, 1932, just 42 years of age. It is believed that the cause of death was a tumour on the brain, a legacy of the motor accident.

Mr. W. H. Gill of the Fine Arts Society, who knew him well, and appreciated to the full this shy, retiring genius, has handed me the following notes. They convey a just estimate of the character of his departed friend:

"During the last months of my visiting R. W. Sturgess I noticed that his mind dwelt upon religion a good deal and reflected an introspective view of life, as if he felt within himself that his ultimate end was close at hand, and the mystery of life and death was ever before him.

It was not a question of fear or regrets but more a probing of what the future was to bring to him, with a resignation and calmness to face the inevitable end. During his working hours his concentration upon the subject his mind was occupied with (for all his subjects were almost entirely creative) he brooked no interference. Any interruption, no matter how small or trivial caused him to become irritable and upset so that he found it difficult and irksome to bring the rhythm of the subject, and the harmony of color he was weaving, back again.

Sturgess and Hilder were, without question, the only two romantic pictorial artists born to Australia, for both possessed minds capable of creating from the simplest forms and objects exquisite pictures full of romance and beauty.

Nature in all her moods, the fogs and mists of early mornings, the ancient crafts and fishing-boats just looming out of the sea-mists, eventide with the golden glow of sunsets, all appealed to his artistic nature, and from these he composed the lyric poems in colors which formed his life's work, part of which is illustrated in this memorial book.

To those who knew him, R.W. Sturgess was one of Nature's gentlemen, kindly, courteous, and simple in his way of living, and one who would do no hurt to any living thing. He was at all times charitable and kind to those he knew required aid—to these he gave freely.

Again like Hilder, his untimely death was a loss to all. His monument to posterity remains in the pictures he produced, which as time goes on will steadily be sought for and increase in interest and value."

The illustrations in this Memorial volume have been chosen with a view to suggesting the variety of Sturgess' production in the final phase of his work, and to display its sensitive quality. The pictures may fairly claim to represent the highest stage of his development. Sincere thanks are tendered to those patrons who have so kindly lent the works for reproduction.



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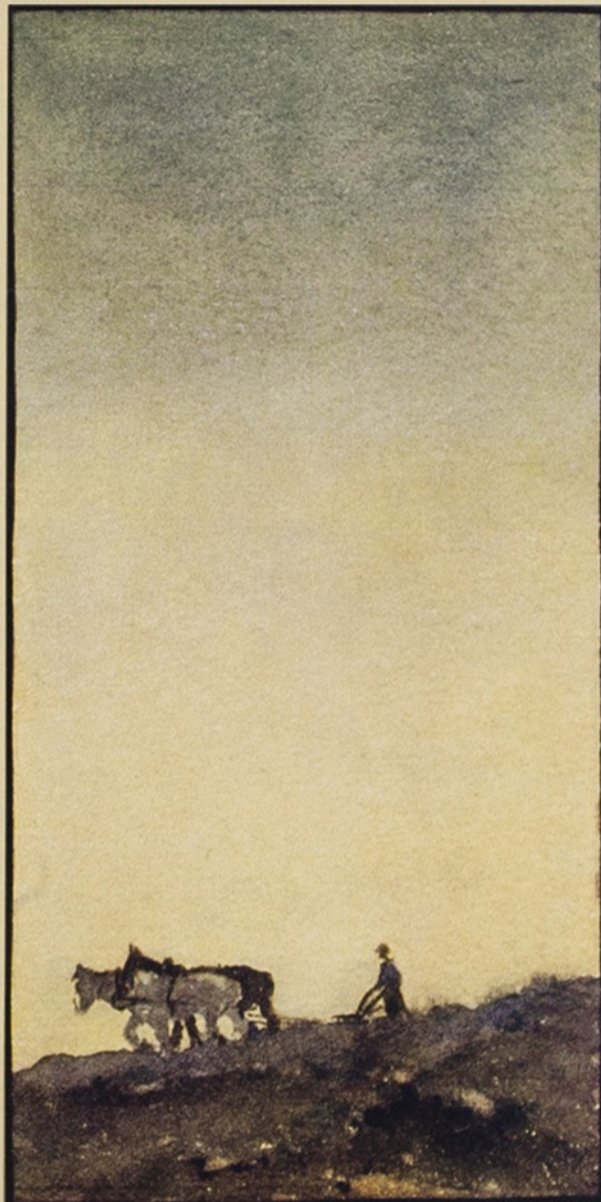
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IMPRESSIONS -  
R. W. STURGESS.



*Plate No. 1*

**THE TIP CART**

*In the possession of Roy R. Treloar, Esq.*



*Plate No. 2*

THE TWO STACKS

*In the possession of E. L. Brown, Esq.*



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LOW TIDE

*In the possession of W. G. McBeath, Esq.*



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*In the possession of Roy R. Treloar, Esq.*



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*In the possession of Roy R. Treloar, Esq.*



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*In the possession of W. A. Reid, Esq.*



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*In the possession of Mrs. Sturgess*



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*In the possession of W. J. Corwell, Esq.*



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*In the possession of Dr. G. Egerton Hill*



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*In the possession of Mrs. Sturges*



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**EBBTIDE**

*In the possession of Mrs. Fred. Lawrence*



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THE HILLTOP

*In the possession of Mrs. Sturges*



*Plate No. 15*

MOONRISE

*In the possession of Mrs. Sturgess*



*Plate No. 16*

ARID HILLS

*In the possession of Dr. and Mrs. John F. Williams*

EXHIBITED 1929

*An Appreciation from the Catalogue of the 1929 Exhibition*

The only Australian in whose work there is a trace of anything analogous to that of R. W. Sturges is the late J. J. Hilder, and, curiously enough the analogy was noted and remarked upon two years before Sturges had even seen a single picture of the earlier painter. Like Hilder, he feels and expresses nature from the lyric rather than from the literal point of view - yet his poetic tendency does not lend him to the mistaken conclusion that it may be used as a cloak to artistic inaccuracies. Rather is it a sane and deliberate observance of nature - the strivings to combine idealism with realism. For obvious reasons one should not think of taking nature always just as she is. Nature is always spontaneous, never fatigued - beyond her simplest mood lies the maturity of ages. So should art be revealing a higher quality than just a mere surface imitation. Constant observance of nature, constant work, resulting, if possible, in a technique so assured as to appear effortless, and non-evident is his chief aim. Great art is more a state of mind than an outward evidence of technique.

Though Mr. Sturges does not come directly under the influence of any other painter, he is by no means lacking in admiration and appreciation for their work, and is quite conscious that a judicious study of the earlier men - English, Dutch, Continental - is distinctly helpful. His attitude generally is a critical one, but mostly as regards himself, and, far from being satisfied with his present state, is eager to make everything he does a step towards a higher level of achievement.

Pictures in the present exhibition which reveal the growing maturity of this artist are "Ploughing on the Uplands," in which he conveys the feeling of spaciousness and movement with economy of design, "Arid Hills," with its feeling of austere dignity, and "Old Piles" and "Ebb Tide," in which benevolent nature is apparent.

Mr. Sturges has held a number of Exhibitions in Melbourne, always with great success, two Exhibitions in Adelaide which were generally considered the most successful ever held there, and one in Sydney last year which almost sold out.

Each Exhibition has proved a record of progress, not only from the financial aspect, but also as a demonstration of the steady advance the artist is making as an interpreter of the more subtle phenomena of light and colour.

F. A. S.



*Plate No. 17*

OLD MILL RUINS

*In the possession of Lord Somers*

EXHIBITED 1933

*A Great Colorist—Foreword to the Catalogue of the 1933 Exhibition*

It was always in the past a vivid experience to attend an exhibition of the water colors of R. W. Sturgess - the recluse of the foreshore of Williamstown. There was a remarkable sense of refinement in the colors he used - a somewhat restricted scale in many ways but a choice that belonged to him individually, and which marked him as a painter with strong personal tastes.

It was this predilection for rich unusual colors which gave him his great value as an Australian artist. In fact, it furnished him with his most valuable characteristic - his rarity.

His range of subjects was as restricted as his palette, but they served very well to convey his message and to provide him with the opportunity to exploit the textures in which he was so deeply interested.

Sturgess was essentially a decorator, but unfortunately for all of us he was never given a commission to decorate anything, so we have to estimate his capacity from the water colors he was able to complete during his short life. These have always been of great interest to collectors, and were much valued by Lady Stonehaven. It was her interest in him which led to the painting of Melbourne from the tower of Government House, that most successful water color, which now hangs in the Stawell Gallery.

The present exhibition contains a selection from the limited number of works he left in his studio when he died, and which he was preparing for a one-man show. From it we are able to gather a good idea of his most unusual gifts.

—BLAMIRE YOUNG



*Plate No. 18*

THE SCHOONER

*In the possession of Miss Elizabeth Sturgess*

EXHIBITED 1935

*An Appreciation—Foreword to the Catalogue of the 1935 Exhibition*

R. W. Sturgess, the one artist trained in the National Art Gallery School of Painting under the late Mr. Bernard Hall to show a lasting promise of becoming one of our most emotional and romantic painters, passed away all too early in life in the winter of 1932.

He possessed a mind poetical, keenly sensitive to the beauties of Nature in all her manifold moods, alive at all times to create from the simplest subjects exquisite pictures, and along with the late J. J. Hilder of Sydney, gave to us passionate poems in colors of a character distinctly his own, and always lyrical in feeling and possessing great beauty.

Mr. Sturgess had an intense reverence for the Classics in Music, the works of the Great Masters reflecting themselves in his compositions just as if he composed his pictures in sympathy with the theme and grandeur of the Master he had in his mind at the time.

He was essentially a painter in water colors and as he progressed developed his own personal technique. Almost from the time he left the Gallery School of Painting he resolved against painting in oils. During the later period of his life he became more critical of his work, discarding and destroying freely pictures that did not satisfy his personal judgment.

Prior to his long illness he left but a very limited number of finished works which have now mainly become possessed by discriminating collectors who have wisely foreseen a steady and permanent increase in the values of his pictures.

Examples of his works have been acquired by the National Art Galleries of Melbourne and Adelaide and the Ballarat Art Gallery.

This Exhibition, which may be the last of his personal ones, contains a choice selection of the pictures remaining in his studio, and represents the art of R. W. Sturgess at its best.

—W. H. GILL



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