

Margaret Cilento

Biography

Margaret Cilento grew up in Brisbane in a lively and cultured family as the eldest daughter of Sir Raphael and Lady Cilento. While both of her parents were prominent doctors, policy makers and authors and four siblings also studied medicine, Margaret and her sister, actor and director Diane, followed artistic paths.

"I can't remember a time when I was not grasping a pencil in one hand and drawing, from my kindergarten days up to the present," says Cilento. She began her formal art training when she was 13 years old with Caroline Barker at Somerville House and also began life drawing, studying with F.J. Martin Roberts.

After completing her schooling, Cilento moved to Sydney to attend the East Sydney Technical College with friend and fellow student Margaret Olley. Cilento won the Wattle League Travelling Scholarship in 1947 and made a decisive move to New York. She began studying with printmaker S.W Hayter at Atelier 17 in Greenwich Village and painting with Mexican artist Rufino Tamayo at the Brooklyn Museum Art School. She won the Village Voice Art Competition for her etching the "Bathers".

Attending the glamorous "The Subjects of the Artists School" established by New York's abstract expressionist painters, Cilento became part of the avant-garde movement that included artists such as Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman and Robert Motherwell. "Studying the human figure with Bill Dobell in Sydney was very different from the soul-searching abstract expressionism I found in New York with painters like Rothko and Motherwell," she says.

Cilento is the only Queensland artist whose work has been directly influenced by the New York school at the height of its development.

After several years in New York, Cilento won a French government scholarship to study engraving. The classical inflection in European modernism influenced Cilento's work and she is considered one of Australia's most distinguished practitioners.

In 1954, Cilento went to London to study at the Central School of Art, Goldsmith's College as well as constructivism with Kenneth Martin. Based in London, she worked and exhibited in Europe for more than 16 years before returning to Australia. She has since had a wide range of individual and group exhibitions including a retrospective at the Queensland University Museum Art Gallery. Cilento's works are represented in major Australian and international collections.