



“ He will be sadly missed by all Australians for the richness and vibrancy he brought to the cultural scene ”

Prime Minister John Howard

Images clockwise from top: Pro in one of his studio's; Pro's gallery c1980; Pro and Peter Allen swap roles for a laugh



Pro Hart, the larrikin lad from Broken Hill, rose to become one of the greatest artists in Australian history. Now, nearly a year and half since his death, Nicole Partridge discovers why the legend lives on.

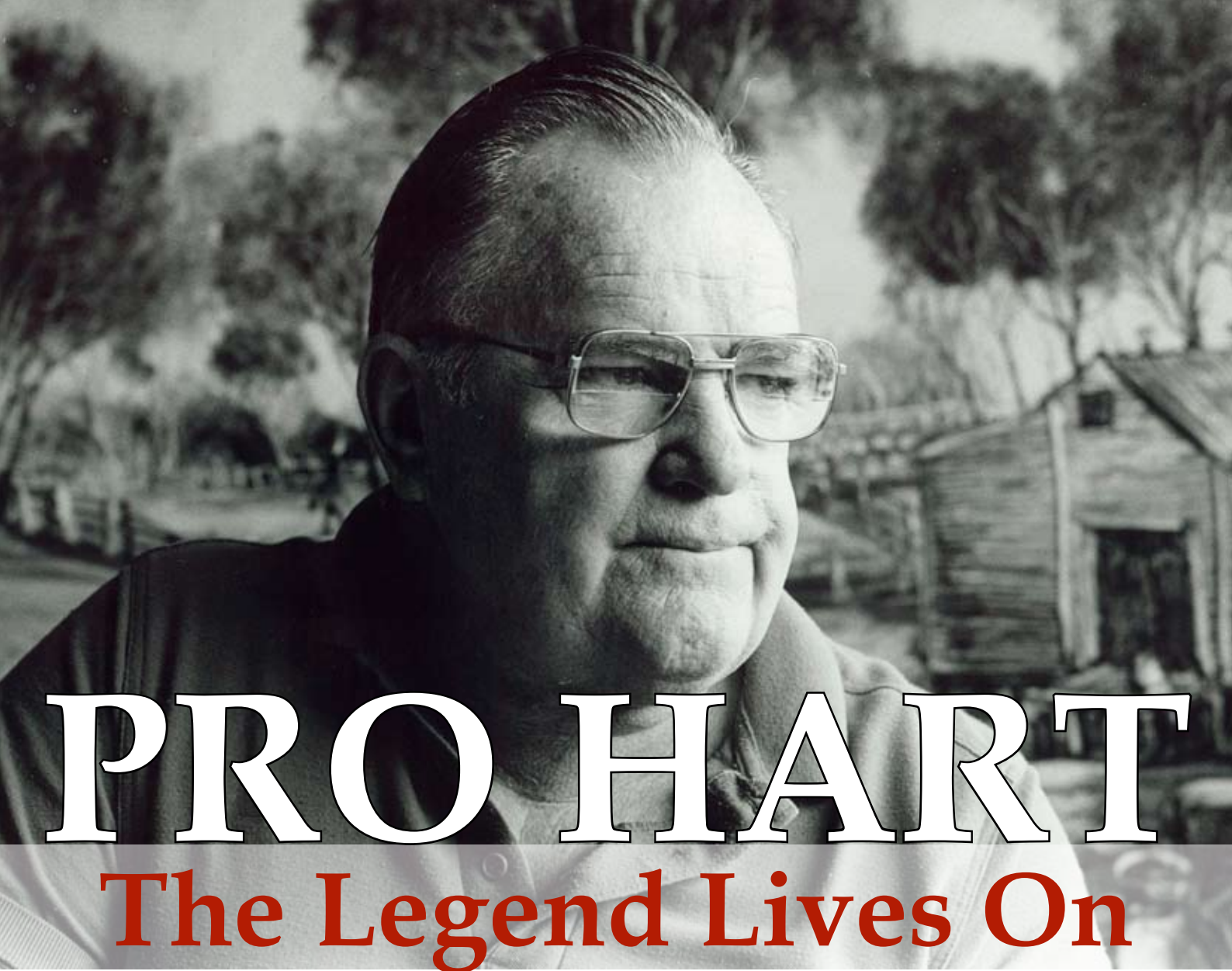
If you were to venture into a mineshaft in Broken Hill and shine a miner's torch on the walls, you might see comical sketches and paintings, depicting life in the mines. Or if you were to meander through the lavish gilded passageways of Buckingham Palace, you could stumble across a masterpiece in oil – life in outback Australia. As you stroll down the main street of Broken Hill, you may spot his famous 1971 hand painted Rolls Royce, located outside his world class gallery.

The 'brushman of the bush', as he was affectionately known - one of our most prolific Australian artists, is not with us anymore, but the legend and the work of Pro Hart lives on, immortalised on canvases, in sculptures and in books from Broken Hill to the White House.

The celebrated Aussie icon, Pro Hart, who died at age 77 on March 28, 2006 after battling motor neuron disease, not only left an indelible imprint on canvas, but on the hearts of ordinary Australians. It was these ordinary Aussies, politicians and celebrities who turned up to pay tribute to Pro at a state funeral conducted in his own home town of Broken Hill.

On Tuesday April 6, 2006, more than a thousand people crammed into the Broken Hill Civic Centre to pay homage to the man dubbed the 'loveable larrikin'.

"Walking into the centre on the day of dad's funeral was surreal," says his son, David Hart. "There were camera crews and radio broadcasters from major networks in one corner of the room; dignitaries, politicians and evangelists on the front row and a room full of people who had in one way or another been



PRO HART

The Legend Lives On

touched by Pro's life—I was astounded by how many people wanted to honour my dad."

Outside, the crowds were even larger, with thousands filling the streets to get a glimpse of the funeral cortège of vintage cars, including two of Pro's Rolls Royce cars. Draped over Pro's coffin was the Australian flag, Pro's M.B.E. medallion and the Order of St John. Perched on top—a miner's helmet and lamp; a tribute to his 20 year career in the mines.

As the procession solemnly made its way down the main street of Broken Hill, more than twenty charities and church groups, recipients of Pro's generosity, formed guards of honour. Children held up tributes; men and women saluted. "There was even one woman who held up a Pro Hart painting with one hand; the other hand was on her heart," recalls David. Almost the entire city of Broken Hill had come to a standstill as people lined the footpaths to honour and farewell an Aussie legend. Even in parliament, a minute's silence was observed.

In a statement issued by the Prime Minister's office, John Howard described Pro as a great artist, whose portraits of the outback were instantly recognisable. "He will be sadly missed by all Australians for the richness and vibrancy he brought to the cultural scene," said Mr Howard. "He also loved his fellow Australians and his generosity of spirit towards them is legendary."

"It was this generosity of spirit that saw Pro give away millions of dollars worth of art to charities," David proudly says. Recipients of his generosity have included The Heart Foundation,

World Vision, the Wheelchair Association and churches, just to name a few.

"He gave in time too, spending countless hours painting murals on just about anything to raise money: cars, buses, helicopters, fridges and motorbikes," David went on to explain. Even a 20 tonne Komatsu excavator was painted and floated on a barge in Darling Harbour, raising over \$300,000 for charity. In addition to his charity work, Pro gave everyone who visited his Broken Hill Gallery a hand painted Gideon's Bible—a tradition that saw hundreds of people come to know the Lord.

"Dad had a strong and contagious faith," explains David. "Anyone who came to visit Dad at his gallery would not only be given a private tour of his studio, but would hear about his passion for Christ." No-one ever got offended; in fact, they liked hearing Dad's opinions. There were times when Dad would have up to 20 visitors a day, from actors and politicians, to tourists. Dad made everyone he met feel like they were his friend. The good, the bad, the rich or poor; they were all important and worth listening to. And if any of the visitors were in his kitchen at lunchtime, Pro would chop up the garlic, slice the coon and serve 'cheese and garlic toasties'.

"I think that's why they all kept coming back," David laughs. "Dad was rough and ready: what you saw was what you got."

What the world saw was an irrepressible larrikin who confounded the art establishment with his unusual and sometimes unconventional methods and his ability to re-invent himself through a diverse array of painting styles and mediums.



Images clockwise from top: Pro and his beloved wife Raylee; Pro teaches Chloe to paint; Opposite page: Pro and Smokey Dawson



and as a joke he told viewers he was going to dive bomb Ayers Rock with bags full of paint dropped from a Cessna aircraft. He said it would give the rock a more artistic feel. For laughs, they filmed a model of Ayers rock being hit with paint, which was actually being squeezed out of an eye dropper. The prank looked so believable, it caused an almighty uproar.”

Jane Scott, Director of the Monash Gallery of Art and Curator for the travelling exhibition, *Pro Hart: a Retrospective*, said of the maestro, “Pro’s fondness for inventing different techniques for applying paint was perhaps best demonstrated through his performance pieces titled *Happenings*, in which he used canons and shanghais to fire paint at canvas, a technique he created in 1970.”

And when he wasn’t firing paint balls at canvases or dropping paint from dizzying heights out of airships and hot air balloons, he was hurling spaghetti, canned tomatoes and jam at luxurious woolen carpet, captured in the now-infamous TV commercial that horrified viewers and turned Pro Hart into a household name. The, “Oh Mr Hart, what a mess” catchphrase is remembered to this day.

“He could never be boxed,” David states. “One thing that set Pro apart was his ability to paint any subject and style you could imagine. From realism to abstraction, he could do it all. He definitely didn’t fit the mould.”

Breaking the mould several times, Hart stirred controversy throughout his life with his larrikin antics. “Pro was always looking for crazy and innovative ways of expressing himself,” David maintains.

“I remember one time Pro did a show for ABC television

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“Creating a mess was what he loved to do,” David remembers. “At any one time, he would have up to 20 paintings on the go. His studios always look disorganised and chaotic. He had junk everywhere—but God help anyone who tried to clean it up.”

When Pro wasn’t painting, sculpting or making some mad cap invention—a past time that earned him the nickname the ‘Mad Professor’, or ‘Pro’ for short – he’d be working out in his gym, tinkering on one of his vintage motorbikes or sharing his faith with visiting tourists.

On any given day you could find the slightly eccentric Pro in one of his three studios, wearing a paint splattered t-shirt, stubbies (shorts) and thongs; layering, scratching, scrumbling or brushing his way to another masterpiece. When asked about his incredible talent by visiting media, he’d simply say in his gruff Aussie accent, “I just chucked the paint on.”

During Pro’s 42 year career, he ‘chucked the paint on’ thousands of oils and enamels, built hundreds of sculptures and illustrated many great Australian books containing the poems of Henry Lawson and Banjo Patterson.

“Pro was so creative in so many mediums,” David says, “however painting was probably his first love. Dad was so passionate about art; he began collecting the works of his favourite artist like Sir William Dobell, George Whinnen and Sydney Nolan back in 1960. At last count, there were 3,000 individual pieces of art and sculpture in his collection, which is now on display at the Pro Hart gallery in Broken Hill. Dad never got tired of collecting or creating. His art was more than a passion or a job, but rather a God given calling; one that began when Pro was only seven.”

Pro’s early life and family

Born on 30th of May, 1928, Kevin Charles Hart was the fourth child of Authur Edward and Mary Hart. The family lived on a sheep and cattle station, 100 km south of Broken Hill. His father, a shearer and staunch catholic, was described by Pro as a, ‘tough old bloke’ who did his best to provide for his family, minus the trappings. Growing up was hard for Pro, living on a remote station, attending school by correspondence and never having any money to buy toys or books – an unnecessary luxury, according to his father.

It was during his childhood that Pro’s love for drawing developed. He immersed himself in sketching to relieve the boredom of station life; gaining inspiration from clear light, expansive landscapes, vivid colours and colourful caricatures – inspiration that would enable him to create his signature pieces.

Encouraged by his mother; herself a naïve painter and his teacher, Pro continued to develop his gift, attending a few art classes along the way. He left school in year eight, took a number of odd jobs and then joined the mines in 1947 at the age of 19, a move that would eventually be the turning point for his career.

“It wasn’t until he was working in the mines that he began to paint with oils and quickly developed a passion for his new found

medium,” said David. “Even on his crib break underground, he would sketch and paint.”

Today you would still find the mines full of Pro Hart’s comical painting and sketches. It was low light conditions that inspired him to paint his *Light out of the dark* series.

Meeting his God

In 1960 Pro married his sweetheart: June Raylee Tonkin, a local girl who would share Pro’s passion for art. It was during his time at the mines that Pro discovered another passion that would change his life forever.

“Dad was down in the mines one day when he got a revelation about God being a ‘now’ God,” says David. “After checking with the local Priest, Pro was shown a verse in Mathew 6:25, ‘Don’t worry about tomorrow, because tomorrow has enough worries of its own.’”

Incredibly, just a few days later, as Dad was playing tennis, a piece of paper blew onto his leg. It was a section of the Bible – the same verse in Mathew 6:25. Believing this to be a sign from God, Pro and Raylee sought guidance from a visiting evangelist, who, in Pro’s own words, led them to ‘The big bloke up top.’ This was a decision, according to Pro, that would cement his destiny.

Inspiration and success

Now, drawing his inspiration from his new-found faith, the mines and artists such as Dobell, Moet and Rembrandt, Pro began to take his craft more seriously. Slowly Hart honed this gift, using every spare moment of his time to paint. Encouraged by a friend and art teacher, Pro entered and won local competitions. But it wasn’t until he secured a showing of his works at the prestigious Boynton Galleries in North Adelaide that his big break finally came.

The show was a sellout and the world had discovered ‘Pro Hart’. It was time to hang up the miner’s hat and take on a more serious approach to his now full time career. Paradoxically, it wasn’t the seriousness of the craft that appealed to most Australians, but his ability to illustrate everyday people doing everyday things and his visual sense of humour that was becoming strongly recognisable.

In 1962, Pro sold his first painting, which was an adaptation of the last supper called *Judas and Kite*. “Dad painted this picture of Judas looking through a window at Jesus with his disciples. Typically, Dad had to add some colour to the picture, so he put a kite in Judas’s hand,” David says laughingly.

Soon, the unstoppable Pro was showing his works at more than five or six exhibitions per year in various capital cities, his technique constantly being perfected through his study of the greats such as Rembrandt, Nolan, Monet and others.

By 1973, Hart had established himself as one of Australia’s leading artists, a reputation that would take him to galleries all over the world and see his work represented in renowned collections



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Images clockwise from top: Pro in his studio c1980's; David Hart; A young David and Pro

Pro Hart was known for his novel techniques including Canon Painting and Balloon Painting and in 2002 was using his own DNA as a mark of authenticity in his paintings. Retrospective application of a DNA mark is available for older Pro Hart paintings.

His work has been exhibited all over the world: in Australia, London, Dusseldorf, Los Angeles, New York, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Singapore, Israel, Cairo and Manila, in the finest of galleries and venues, with many of his exhibitions being sell-outs. His paintings are represented in collections owned by the likes of Harold Mertz, Lyndon Johnson, Prince Phillip, Qantas Airways, Margaret Carnegie, the Canberra War Memorial, the University of NSW and Adelaide, the Bonython Collection, the Warsaw National Collection of Poland and Cathay Pacific Airways.

Pro succumbs to Motor Neurone Disease

In 2005, at the age of 75, after struggling with health issues and some business setbacks, Pro was diagnosed with Motor Neurone Disease, a progressive, degenerative disorder that affects nerves in the upper or lower parts of the body.

Just weeks before he died, Pro's family organised a tribute exhibition in his own gallery in Broken Hill, showcasing 24 paintings representing the span of his career.

"I'll never forget wheeling him into the gallery the night before the opening to see the exhibition hanging on the walls. You could tell Dad was so proud. I really believe this was the highlight of his career," David points out.

It was soon after this exhibition that Pro succumbed to the disease, losing the use of his arms and legs. At 2.30am on March 28, the family kissed goodbye their beloved Dad as he took his last breath on this earth.

But the larrikin lad from Broken Hill had left his mark: a lifetime of achievements, a rich inheritance for his children who are all accomplished artists and thousands of lives changed by his generosity and faith. There are sculptures and masterpieces retained in galleries around the world and a legacy of some of the most recognisable pieces in Australia's cultural history.

The legend himself lives on—'up top with the big bloke'. "He is probably painting the Australian outback from a completely new perspective," says David with a smile. **(A)**

Nicole Partridge
Freelance Writer

owned by Prince Phillip, Qantas, Cathy Pacific and the White House. In 1976 he was awarded an MBE for his services to art in Australia. In 1982 Pro was awarded an honorary life member of the Society of International Artistic for outstanding artistic achievement, a prestigious award only granted to one artist per continent. Then in 1988 Pro was awarded the Citizen of the Year award.

Unchanged by his success, Pro continued to live and work in his own hometown of Broken Hill, preferring the peace and tranquility of the dusty outback to the 'big smoke'.

"By the middle of his career, Pro Hart was a household name," David maintains. "He had met Presidents and royalty and was represented in some of the world's most exclusive galleries. Amazingly, he did it all from Broken Hill.

"Dad's businesses and his life's beliefs were so simple and childlike, but they worked. He just believed that God had given him this gift and that the 'big bloke up top' had a plan for his life, which neither the critics nor the remoteness of Broken Hill could stop. He also lived by the very scripture he discovered back in those early days and that was not to worry about tomorrow. If you asked him about his success, he would simply say, "I trusted in God."