

# FLOWER ARRANGEMENTS, THE ACADEMY OF SCIENCE AND IKEBANA

## Flower arrangements and arrangements of dried materials

These remarks on Rosalie's interest in flower arranging, the Academy of Science installations and ikebana extend the discussion on these topics in the Biographical Note and should be read with those remarks in mind (see pp. 32–33, 36–40 and 44–45).

Rosalie's interest in flowers and gardening was a product of her childhood in a household of like-minded women. It was an interest she took with her to Mount Stromlo, where she quickly established flowerbeds close to the house, gradually spreading further afield as her interest grew and time allowed. She liked to have fresh flowers in the house — things to feed the eye — and throughout her married life there was rarely a time when she did not have an informal arrangement of flowers at hand: flowers from her garden, that is, not purchased, although in winter she would sometimes buy a potted cyclamen to brighten the dining table or sitting room. In 1953 a neighbour on the mountain persuaded Rosalie to enter flower arrangements in the Horticultural Society of Canberra's Spring Flower Show and she won a second prize with a bowl of home-grown polyanthus. Rosalie continued to enter the society's competitions on a fairly regular basis for the next ten years, with a growing measure of success, and sometimes she participated in similar shows run by others, making quite a name for herself.

There are very few photographs of Rosalie's early flower arrangements, although the competition results for the Horticultural Society of Canberra's exhibitions give an indication — albeit incomplete — of her interests. Initially, for reasons of taste as well as the limited variety of flowers in her garden, she favoured modest arrangements, such as her simple arrangements for the bedside and breakfast tables. Gardening on Mount Stromlo was challenging — the soil was poor and it wasn't easy to escape the elements on the exposed mountainside. So it wasn't a big step for Rosalie to start using in her arrangements the material that she brought

The photograph of Rosalie at Anstey Street taken to illustrate an article on ikebana in Australia published in the Japanese press in 1969

Image courtesy of the National Archives of Australia (A1501, A9510)

home from her walks on the mountain, in the paddocks and by the river. She taught herself how to preserve the grasses and leaf forms that attracted her, and by the late 1950s she was using bold mixtures of flowers, grasses, driftwood and other materials in her arrangements for the flower shows, as well as making arrangements just with dried materials, which attracted a lot of interest at the time. In September and November 1958 she had her first wins with 'a modern arrangement with driftwood' (first and second place in November). Her September arrangement was the outstanding exhibit in the decorative section.<sup>1</sup>

One of Rosalie's great strengths was in sections calling for more imaginative arrangements, rather than the more traditional sections such as 'arrangement for a hallway'. In about 1958 she showed a work (at a Country Women's Association show) called 'Cotter Road': named after the road that went past the foot of Mount Stromlo to the Cotter River, the work was made with rocks, dried grasses and an animal skull on a sheet of copper and it had a blue denim background. Her work 'Small arrangement of contrasts' (April 1961) included a sheep's skull with roses (its theme was life and death); her piece 'Representing a manufacturing industry' (no details) was champion exhibit November 1961; a year later, and in the same section, her 'Blue metal industry' won second prize (to 'Perfume'). Her works on the themes of 'A touch of Midas' (March 1962) and 'Forest fire' (champion exhibit March 1964) were both winners. She also had success in sections calling for an 'Oriental influence' (second place September 1961), and her 'Farewell to winter Oriental style' was declared champion exhibit in September 1964. That was Rosalie's last competition.

Her success on the show bench and skills as a lecturer led to many invitations to give demonstrations for women's groups and charitable organisations running fundraising events, duly reported in the local press. In 1960 she was making dried arrangements for sale by the Pan Pacific and South East Asian Women's Association. When the YWCA ran a course in flower arranging in 1962, Rosalie was invited to do a session on 'Party pieces', which included 'a sophisticated arrangement made of plastic flowers, dried leaves and seed pods sprayed in gold'. She gave Dame Patti Menzies private lessons in dried arrangements, and for many years the panelled private dining room at University House housed one of her large arrangements. Another decorated the lobby of the nurses' home at Canberra Hospital.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The archives of the Horticultural Society of Canberra (see Bibliography) contain show schedules and reports of the results. Show results were published in the *Canberra Times* until the mid-1960s.

<sup>2</sup> *Canberra Times* 11 Oct 1962, p. 5. The gold spray echoes Rosalie's use of kurrajong seed pods which she painted yellow and used to decorate her wartime Christmas trees. They also owed something to the English arranger, Constance Spry: Rosalie had read about her use of gold-painted material in arrangements done for the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953.

## Flower arrangements



Modern arrangement with driftwood, September 1960. 'Mrs. Gascoigne's modern arrangement with driftwood was the outstanding exhibit in the decorative section. It was an excellent arrangement, simple in form but with a definite line. The driftwood was well chosen and pebbles were selected carefully for colour, and arranged to form the base of the whole design' (*Canberra Times* 29 Sep 1960)

Image from author's archive



Small arrangement of contrasts, 'Life and death', exhibited 22 April 1961. Rosalie sent a photo of the work to her mother, inscribed 'Can you bear this. Study of contrasts. Light-Dark, Rough-Smooth etc. Mine was Life-Death. Pink rose, mignonette and white & pink viburnum on very pretty grey stone. Skull nice & clean & white — if that makes it more palatable!'

Image from author's archive



Arrangement with grasses and unidentified flowers, 1962. The label indicates that the arrangement was by Rosalie Gascoigne of the Canberra Garden Club (formed earlier that year, with Rosalie one of the committee members) (*Canberra Times* 2 Aug 1962)

Image from author's archive



Arrangement c. 1960–62, with a copper sheet as base and incorporating a river stone, weathered wood, wisteria tendril, a few daisy-like flowers, a rusty cog wheel and some metal chain. The tall plant material is dried seed heads of verbascum

Image from author's archive



Arrangement with wood, leaves and pomegranates, c. 1962

Image from author's archive



'Forest fire' 1964. Champion exhibit at the Autumn Flower Show, which was illustrated in the *Canberra Times* 16 March 1964, p. 10. Note the use of a pair of triangular ikebana vases to contain the arrangement

Image from author's archive

## Dried arrangements

The first three images are noteworthy as early examples of Rosalie arranging a single material, found in the paddocks, in such a way as to highlight its shape and texture — bringing an innate sculptural sensibility to the otherwise very domestic tradition of flower arranging. As discussed in the Biographical Note, artists and sculptors of the period, including Margo Hinder, had also looked at and taken on board the natural world in their own endeavours. Ten years later, Rosalie's focus on the visual qualities of her materials would become a notable feature of her late ikebana practice and a key driver of her art, which would include the use of the thistles she first used in the late 1950s and early 1960s.



Rosalie with arrangement of blue devil (Carl Plate watercolour on wall), c. 1960  
Image from author's archive



Arrangement with thistle heads, c. 1961  
Image from author's archive



Arrangement of saffron thistle heads, c. 1961; photograph inscribed 'golden'  
Image from author's archive



Dried arrangement, 1961. The photograph is inscribed verso 'BIG The lot' because of the great variety of dried material incorporated in the arrangement. It was grand pieces such as this that Rosalie installed at the nurses' home and in University House  
Image from author's archive



Dried arrangement, 1961. The inscription on this photograph says it was done for a Horticultural Society show and also exhibited in the Academy of Science. The arrangement includes dried artichoke seed heads, onion seed heads, kangaroo grass, variegated thistle seed heads, verbascum seed heads and dried acanthus flowers arranged in a copper casserole dish  
Image from author's archive

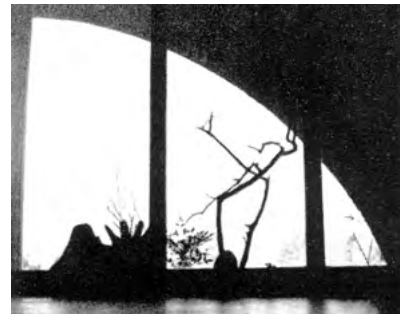
## Academy of Science installations

Rosalie's involvement with the Australian Academy of Science, documented in the Biographical Note (pp. 36–37), began in 1959 and lasted until the early 1970s. Although Rosalie did not renew her original contract with the academy in 1962, she continued to provide installations of found objects, large dried arrangements, ikebana and more sculptural works on an occasional basis until 1974. Arrangements included a 'six-foot arrangement of thistle stalks' in 1970 (26 Oct 1970 RG to TG) and her tall bone piece *Last stand* 1972. She enjoyed the challenge of working with the large spaces and the muted contemporary interiors, which provided a sympathetic environment for her works.



Two c. 1961 installations in the west stair hall of the Australian Academy of Science: (left) installation with a large agave seed head and river stones, and (right) installation with old branches and other materials (photograph by Ken Nash)

Images courtesy of the Australian Academy of Science, Canberra



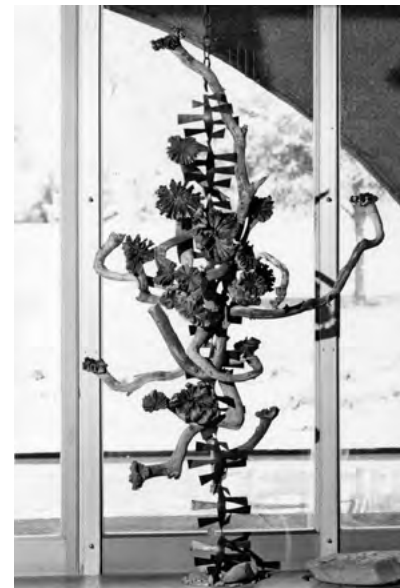
Ikebana arrangement with wood, everlasting daisies and dried material in the Fellows Room, Australian Academy of Science, November 1967

Image from author's archive



Ikebana of long-lasting materials in Academy of Science, c. 1969

Photograph by Ted Richards from author's archive



Long-lasting ikebana sculpture with rusted metal and mistletoe heads, reminiscent of Margel Hinder's four-metre-high, floor-to-ceiling *Abstract sculpture in steel and bronze* (later titled *Growth forms*) illustrated in Lenton Parr's *The arts in Australia: Sculpture* Longmans, Melbourne, 1961

Photograph by Ted Richards from author's archive

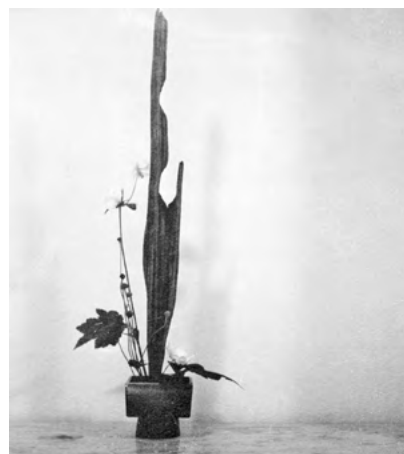


Ikebana sculpture c. 1969, made with four pieces of wood, some of which Rosalie burnt with a blow lamp, taking her lead from sculptures by the Japanese sculptor and ikebana master, Sofu Teshigahara

Photograph by Ted Richards from author's archive

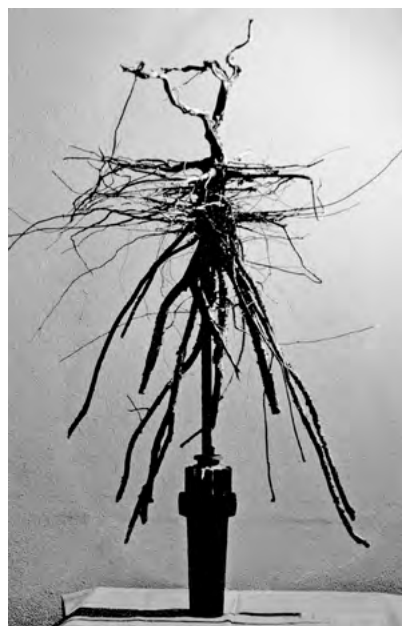
## Ikebana

Rosalie took ikebana lessons with Sydney-based teacher Norman Sparnon between 1962 and the end of 1971 (documented in the Biographical Note (pp. 37–39, 44–45)). Ikebana immediately influenced her entries in the Horticultural Society of Canberra floral art competitions, but she stopped competing in 1964 as ikebana took over. It also opened her eyes to the possibilities of using rusted metal and wire, which she incorporated in her pieces from the mid-1960s on (although she once used rusted metal in an earlier flower arrangement). Rosalie was awarded her ikebana teacher's certificate in November 1965 and gave lessons from 1966 to 1969 while still attending Sparnon's classes. She was also much in demand as a popular lecturer on ikebana for charity events, much as she had been earlier for her dried and decorative flower arrangements. As her ikebana career progressed she was commissioned to do large arrangements by the Japanese Embassy and by influential designers for events such as the opening of the National Library of Australia and the awards dinner of the Industrial Design Council of Australia, but she stopped accepting commissions when she decided to concentrate on her assemblages. By this time (1971–72) her ikebana had moved beyond capturing the feel of the natural world and taken on a much more abstract, sculptural look where she sought to emphasise the aesthetic qualities of her materials, as she would in her assemblages and sculptures, so much so that the boundary between the two types of work becomes indistinct at this time.



An early ikebana arrangement with Japanese anemones, exhibited as a 'Modern decoration' at the Horticultural Society of Canberra Autumn Flower Show on 24 March 1962. Rosalie had begun classes with Norman Sparnon in February 1962. She was not happy with the photograph, which she sent to her mother with the inscription: 'Ghastly. Stick not straight while anemone was close to stick. Won first prize as Modern Decoration. Stick was a bit of Lake George fence post.' The Lake George district was to be a very important source of inspiration and materials for Rosalie's art

Image from author's archive



An arrangement of dried branches and a rusted metal base, 1966–68. The label describes it as a work of the Sogetsu school

Image from author's archive



Modern arrangement c. 1968. This piece was included in an engagement book of ikebana published in c. 1968. It was described as 'a modern nageire arrangement of dried garlic heads grouped to form an abstract pattern over a cluster of dried grasses and small zinnias'. Attributed to Mrs. S. C. Gascoigne Canberra, ACT

Image from author's archive



Arrangement with two white roses, pine and branch of dried mistletoe, November 1968. An image was published in the *Canberra Times* 13 November 1968

Image from author's archive

The next two items both involve the use of rusted wire found on building sites or farm dumps. The wire mesh in particular is a good example of the sort of thing Rosalie was talking about when she described how ikebana sharpened her eye to the sculptural possibilities of the things she saw in the paddocks and would previously have ignored. 'I remember once walking over a piece of rusty, ordinary fencing wire and [thinking] oh, that's only old wire ... And so I came back and I picked it up, humbly — a bit of humility doesn't hurt anybody — because it was a good shape. I should have picked it up in the first place' (1982 North). She had several pieces of the metal mesh, and as a sculptor in the mid-1970s used a piece of wire mesh as a metaphor for the air at a windy country picnic (*Jim's picnic* 1975). Both items attracted Norman Sparnon's eye, but his handling of them upset Rosalie and sowed a seed of dissatisfaction with his approach to ikebana.



An arrangement using blue devil and rusted construction metal, exhibited in Sydney c. 1965. Norman Sparnon painted the rusted metal black, which upset Rosalie considerably. She spoke about the work with Ian North in 1982: 'I saw this piece of that squared off reinforcing iron that had been twisted. And it stood there, explicit, ... so I went and got it and it had lovely spaces and lovely closed bits and lovely wild spaces and it strained. And that blue devil thing that was growing ... that prickly weed that grows out in the paddock ... So I put that [with the mesh] and [Sparnon] said he'd like to show that in Sydney ... I will take it and put it up for you. And after it had been put up in the Blaxland Galleries I thought I'd go down and have a look. To my horror, in an alcove with my name on it is this damn thing, beautiful rusted [iron] sprayed a matt black. It was nothing ... and ... a nail in a coffin of my association with him. There it was. He said you can't just put a rusty piece of iron ... And I thought well, if he can make that, he is too scared ...' (1982 North). She made another arrangement using similar wire mesh with yellow everlasting daisies

Image from author's archive



A rusty scrap metal container made by Rosalie with an axle and a spring, with an arrangement by Norman Sparnon who failed to credit her when the photograph was published in his book *The magic of camellias: Creative ideas for Japanese flower arrangement*. Rosalie remembered: 'Norman Sparnon I think used me a lot ... when I was [putting] up these farm iron things and seeing the shape ... I had one down at the class once and he was writing his book on camellias ... and he said, "Can I borrow that container?" Sure. He put it in his book. There's no credit. And he credits others — people who have lent him flowers and things — and I thought that is a Japanese way of thinking anyway. You feed everything into the Master and you remain nothing. No dice on the Australian scene as far as I'm concerned' (1982 North, similar account in 1996 Davidson)

Norman Sparnon and EG Waterhouse *The magic of camellias: Creative ideas for Japanese flower arrangement* Ure Smith, Sydney, 1968, p. 42



## Three ikebana for grand occasions



Arrangement with camellias for the inauguration of Japan Airlines flights to Australia, 1969. This was a big piece, about six feet (1.8 metres) high. In 1997 Ben recalled that Rosalie thought this was about the best she ever did

Photograph by Ted Richards from author's archive



Another big, semi-permanent arrangement, this one made with old wood stumps and branches from the country with wild everlasting daisies, for the opening of the Japanese Embassy's new chancellery in Yarralumla in August 1970 (illustrated in the *Canberra News* 24 Aug 1970). Rosalie was also commissioned by the embassy to do a large arrangement for the ambassador's dinner in honour of the Crown Prince and Princess of Japan in 1973, coming out of retirement to do so

Photograph by the *Canberra News* from author's archive



Sculptural arrangement for Industrial Design Council of Australia awards dinner at University House, 8 September 1971

Image from author's archive

## Late sculptural ikebana

In October 1971 Rosalie helped arrange a large exhibition in Canberra of work by Norman Sparnon and his local students. It was the last time Rosalie participated in an ikebana exhibition. 'I did a large arrangement on floor with huge gum branch that mistletoe had grown on (wooden rose look). Some daft woman fell into it on last day' (19 Oct 1971 RG to TG). Her interest had been turning away from more naturalistic arrangements to works that were increasingly sculptural, so much so that in retrospect, and as discussed in the Biographical Note, it is hard to know where the ikebana ended and the sculpture started. Rosalie thought enough of these last pieces to have them photographed professionally (photographer unknown). She formally withdrew from Sparnon's classes in February 1972 and stopped giving talks and demonstrations. Thereafter she concentrated on her assemblage art.





Rosalie's arrangements for an exhibition by Norman Sparron and Canberra ikebana practitioners, October 1971. If the large piece on the right represents the end of an era, the small piece with cut thistle stalks on a stand represents the start of a new one. A photograph showing a detail of this piece was included in Fay Bottrell's *The artist craftsman in Australia* (1972, p. 38) as an example of Rosalie's assemblage work. There was no mention of its ikebana origins

Image from author's archive



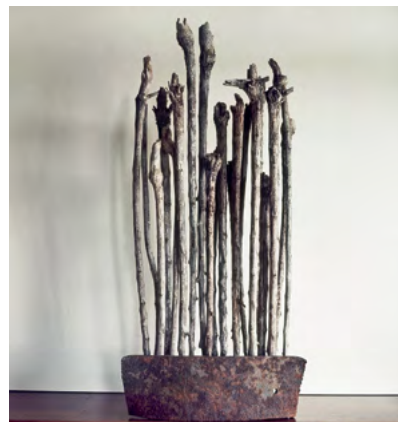
The source of the image used in Fay Bottrell's book. The caption read: 'Dried stems considered as forces in equilibrium' (not Rosalie's words). The same cut thistles were used in a sculpture, *Twig tidy* c. 1972–73, exhibited in 1974

Image from author's archive



Sculptural arrangement using dried salsify heads, c. 1965–70. In another arrangement in the same vase she used tall blond grass. Rosalie used dried salsify seed heads in several of her assemblages, including *Standing piece* 1973/74, where the heads were placed in chicken wire in a vertical corrugated iron container, *Crop [1]* 1976 where the seed heads and stems were placed in chicken wire on top of a sheet of galvanised iron, and *Landscape [2]* 1976–77, where she filled a pair of milk separator bowls with the seed heads, much as in this arrangement

Image from author's archive



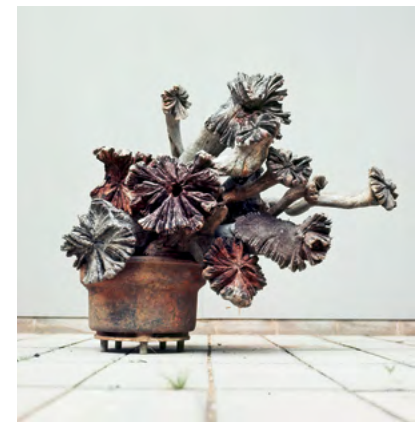
Arrangement with thistle stalks, 1971. In an earlier version, Rosalie made a very similar arrangement in the same bowl using long stems of the thistle's dried flowers

Image from author's archive



Arrangement with thistle stalks, 1971

Image from author's archive



Arrangement with mistletoe heads, 1971

Image from author's archive

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