

Nora Heysen

Nora Heysen, daughter of renowned German–Australian landscape artist Hans Heysen, was the first female official war artist appointed during the Second World War.

From a young age, Heysen was fascinated by the world around her and the people in it. In the same way she could see the intricate and subtle beauties in nature, she could perceive an individual's emotional and psychological intricacies in their face. In 1938 she became the first woman to be awarded the Archibald Prize for portraiture.

Not surprisingly, on 18 October 1943, Heysen was commissioned to paint six portraits of those in charge of different women's auxiliary services. One of these paintings was of Matron Annie Sage, Matron-in-Chief, AANS. Sage saw service in the Middle East, the Pacific, New Guinea and Singapore, and was viewed with respect and affection by the nurses in her care. When the Japanese surrendered in 1945, she flew to Singapore, then to Sumatra to meet and ensure the welfare of the sisters who had been prisoners of war before arranging for their repatriation to Australia.

Nora Heysen, *Matron Annie Sage* (1944, oil on canvas, 76.6 x 56.4 cm, [ART22218](#))



In her portrait, Heysen captures Sage's competence and status in the detailed depiction of her uniform, including the pips and chocolate cuffs which distinguish her rank. Meanwhile, Sage's calm and gentle nature is demonstrated in her features, her tilted head and her thoughtful introspective gaze.

Heysen's portraits were well received, and in April 1944 she was posted to New Guinea and given another assignment – to make a record of the nurses at work. Although Heysen was excited by this opportunity and the chance to travel, she soon tired of her new task. Always a fun and curious soul, she preferred to draw the nurses and soldiers during their rare and much needed moments of leisure and to focus on the new and beautiful faces of the New Guinean people.

Nora Heysen, *Sister M. Russell nursing a native* (1944, oil on hardboard, 45.5 x 60.8 cm, [ART23715](#))



This, however, was not her brief. Heysen soon began to feel lonely and frustrated by the restrictions on her which left her unable to move into the forward areas with the male artists. As her sadness grew, the colours in her paintings grew darker.

In her painting *Sister M. Russell nursing a native*, Heysen attempted to reconcile the details of her brief with her own interests in the local population. What results is a visual depiction of her growing despair.

After seven unhappy months in New Guinea, Heysen returned to Sydney with dermatitis. Here she worked, capturing the activities of the army medical units at Sydney Hospital, before going to Queensland to paint RAAF nursing sisters serving on medical evacuation flights.

Heysen completed over 170 works as official war artist; while working in Queensland, she met Captain Robert Black, a doctor whom she later married.