



1: Spotted Floral 2: Floral 300 3: Egrets  
4: Japanese Floral by Florence Broadhurst  
Courtesy: Signature Prints

# Local Artist - FLORENCE BROADHURST

## The Florence Enigma



### FLORENCE MAUD

Broadhurst was born at Mungy (pronounced Mun-guy) Station, approximately 30 kilometres west of Mt Perry, on 28 July 1899. Florence had a typical start to life for a girl in those days. However, she soon rose to fame, first as a singer and dancer in Asia, then as a couturier in London, and finally as a wallpaper designer in Sydney.

These reinventions, along with her use of different names, led to her gaining a reputation as enigmatic and chameleon-like. Her life was destined to end in even more notoriety as she was brutally murdered in her own studio in 1977. The killer has never been found.

Florence was a larger-than-life character and she lived her life as she wanted, not necessarily as society saw fit. She seemed to yearn for the life of a high-society miss/matron and was aggressive and tenacious in doing everything in her power to insinuate herself into elite society. Florence succeeded in her goal.



Florence Broadhurst, late teens.  
Courtesy: Thelma Wallace

## THE ORIGINAL FLORENCE

Her first incarnation was as a Mt Perry girl growing up on her family's property with her parents Bill and Margaret and her three siblings. Although born at Mungy, Florence and her family moved in 1904 to their own property, The Oakes, at Drummers Creek, 5 kilometres on the Bundaberg side of Mt Perry.

Florence had an older brother Fassifern, an older sister May, and a younger sister Cilla. Now living closer to town, all four siblings had plenty of opportunity to take advantage of the bustling and lively mining town and all the entertainment it had to offer. This is bound to have had an influence on the young Florence and on her outlook and ambitions.





**Top Left:** Drummers Creek School. Courtesy: Thelma Wallace **Bottom Left:** Mungy Station, Florence's birthplace. Courtesy: Daniel McLennan Collection **Right:** School Photo, Florence seated front row, 3<sup>rd</sup> from left. Courtesy: Duncan Wise

## THE ENTERTAINER

“One unassailable fact is that Florence Broadhurst delighted in making a scene.”<sup>1</sup> This began when she was still young. The Broadhurst sisters were given piano lessons by Mrs Annie Dale, the local chemist's wife. Florence demonstrated her skill in this art quite early, and also showed a strong contralto voice. She was able to develop her voice with personal singing lessons every Saturday morning in Bundaberg. Soon Florence was performing for family and friends, realising and relishing the thrill

Some of the members of this troupe nicknamed her ‘Bobby’ and she went by the name ‘Bobby Broadhurst’ for a number of years. This is apparently when she also first decided to tell everyone she was British. According to society she should have been looking for a husband to settle down with. Instead, she had remodeled herself as an independent, forthright 1920s ‘flapper’.

## THE BROADHURST ACADEMY

The next incarnation for Florence was as the owner of the Broadhurst Academy. It

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of an audience. This need for an audience was apparent in Florence until her death. It is surely an integral reason for her character manifestations.

## ‘BOBBY’ BROADHURST

Florence performed in many eisteddfods and fundraisers in Bundaberg, but later, because her solo career was not taking off, auditioned for a touring theatre troupe known as the *Smart Set Diggers*. She went on to join them in about early 1922. The *Diggers* re-named themselves the *Globe Trotters* and embarked on a 15 month tour of Asia which ended in March 1924.

was common knowledge that money was to be made in Shanghai and it was to here that Florence headed once the *Globe Trotters’* run came to an end. She performed in a couple of other troupes before branching out into running her own business.

Shanghai had a large and monied expatriate community. Florence envisaged that the expats wanted their daughters to learn the finer things in life, and that she, Florence, would be the best teacher. The Broadhurst Academy, billed as an exclusive finishing school, opened in February 1926 with Florence as Principal, and with the letters A.T.C.L. added mysteriously and



cunningly after her name. Everything from voice, banjolele, journalism, dance, and weight loss were taught by Florence and the teachers she recruited.

### MADAME PELLIER

On 19 October 1927 Florence set sail on the six-week journey to London. Within two years Florence had met and married her



Florence became an expert in self-promotion and publicity using newspapers, radio, social columnists, Chinese-language media, and membership in various Associations to promote her new endeavour. Her Academy was quite successful, but was not to last.

In 1927 Shanghai was descending into civil war and Florence returned to Mt Perry for a brief period. This period also marked the beginning of her shedding the 'Bobby' name and persona.

### CAR CRASH

Ever the publicity-conscious, Florence granted an interview to a *Bundaberg Daily Times* journalist as soon as she stepped off the train at Bundaberg station. She unhesitatingly gave her opinions on the politics of the region from which she had just returned.

Not long back in Mt Perry, Florence went out drinking with two friends. She decided to take her friends for a ride in her father's new Studebaker, but taking a corner too fast Florence rolled the car and sustained severe injuries. Her two passengers were shocked but unhurt while Florence suffered a fractured skull and spent several weeks in the local hospital recovering.

**Left:** Grand Hotel, Mt Perry, owned by the Broadhursts. Courtesy: Pat Smith **Right:** Florence's Father's Studebaker which she crashed in 1927. Courtesy: Pat Smith

future husband, Percy Kann, a 34-year-old stockbroker.

Before her marriage to Percy, Florence had worked for several fashion houses in London and in the early 1930s she opened her own couturier business in London's Mayfair. She called this business Pellier Ltd and presented herself as Madame Pellier, the French head of the fashion house.

Although, as always with Florence, the business was tirelessly promoted, it was, according to O'Neill, doomed to fail. Pellier Ltd was involved in a long-running legal dispute with another fashion house, and economic depression and war-time rationing also hit hard. By the mid-1930s the changing times placed pressure on the business and on her marriage to Percy.

In 1935, aged 36, she met 23-year-old fruit merchant Leonard Lewis at her fashion salon and she and Percy divorced soon after. Florence and Leonard would be together for the next 26 years although they never actually married, and had their only child





**Left:** Florence on right, Cilla on left.  
Courtesy: Pat Smith

**Right:** Tennis group. Florence  
middle-right holding racket.  
Courtesy: Thelma Wallace

Robert, in 1938. They stayed in London during the war but Florence decided the family would return to Australia, to Sydney, in 1949. This was presumably to prevent Leonard from continuing with an affair he was having, but ultimately their relationship ended in 1961 when Leonard left Florence for a younger woman.

## FLORENCE BROADHURST WALLPAPERS

Florence was then to undergo her most well-known, most successful, and final incarnation. She became a wallpaper designer. John Lang, a young man from Melbourne, was renting space behind Florence's trucking yard for a screen-

***Florence created so much mystery herself about her life it is difficult to separate fact from fiction.***

## PAINTER, FUNDRAISER, BUSINESSWOMAN

For the first ten years after her return to Australia Florence traveled the country painting scenes of the landscape and told everyone she was an aristocratic Englishwoman. She claimed she wanted to paint in order to show those back 'home' in England how beautiful Australia was. Bizarrely, she also claimed publicly that she wanted to be 'ambassador' of Australia, and launched a competition to try and establish an Australian national dress.

During these years, Florence insinuated herself gradually into Sydney high society, and created an identity for herself as a charity fundraiser.

printing business. Florence soon stepped in, originally out of curiosity and to help Lang pay the rent he owed her, and was running his business within two years. Australian (Hand Printed) Wallpapers Pty Ltd was registered in 1959.

Florence declared Australia was afraid of colour, and set about changing this mindset with her designs. She was adamant that machines would not be used in the manufacture of her wallpapers. Everything was to be hand printed, stylish and unique for purchase by top-end clients with discerning taste.

She also combated the lack of colour she saw in Australians with her own personal style, dressing in colourful fashions and wearing heavy make up, with bright red hair.





Her appearance had much to do with the perception of her as flamboyant and unique.

Florence's designs reflected her life experiences. Her travels through Asia and Europe can be seen in many of her designs with bamboo, peacocks, cranes, florals, and geometrics featuring heavily. Many people disputed that Florence actually created all of the designs herself, and believed they were the work of her staff because her eyesight was so poor she could barely read a page. There is also some indication that many of her designs are strongly reminiscent of work by wallpaper designers such as Albert Van Luit and William Morris.

Florence created so much mystery herself about her life it is difficult to separate fact from fiction. Whoever was responsible, and whether completely original or not, Broadhurst wallpaper designs were popular and prolific. Success was so great that in 1969, and now called Florence Broadhurst Wallpapers, the business moved into larger and more upmarket premises in Sydney's Paddington.

**Left:** *Solar* by Florence Broadhurst.  
Courtesy: Signature Prints

**Right:** *Arabian Gardens* by Florence Broadhurst.  
Courtesy: Signature Prints

## MURDER

By the 1970s Florence had moved into her seventies and her body, if not her mind, was showing signs of this age. Florence was given hearing aids, and her eyesight continued to worsen. This likely proved a great disadvantage in the tragedy that was to follow.

On 15 October 1977, Florence was brutally murdered by someone who had entered her Paddington studio and found her in its small kitchen. Some of her valuable jewellery was taken. Several motives and several suspects have been mentioned over the years, including a disgruntled former employee, and 'Granny Killer' John Glover. However, no one has ever been proven as the killer and no one has ever been charged with the crime.





### FLORENCE BROADHURST DESIGNS NOW

The Florence Broadhurst designs are now with Signature Prints, a Sydney company which took over the Broadhurst premises and discovered the prints stored in the building. Since the collection has been archived and restored, several prints have been used in the collections of fashion designers Akira Isogawa and Zimmerman, in furniture design, and in accessories such as handbags. Florence's work has been rediscovered and re-popularised.

■ The movie *Unfolding Florence* begins at the Moncrieff Theatre on December 7th.

■ The Bundaberg Arts Centre will be partnering with fellow public galleries in our region to develop a national traveling exhibition over the next two years, of designer objects inspired by Florence Broadhurst's designs.

**Left:** *Solar* by Florence Broadhurst.  
Courtesy: Signature Prints

**Right:** *Fingers* by Florence Broadhurst.  
Courtesy: Signature Prints

*Many thanks to Pat Smith for sharing her knowledge of Florence, and for supplying photographs. Many thanks also to Signature Prints for supplying images of Florence's work.*

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**Peta Kinch**

—Bundaberg Library