

ROBERT GRIFFITHS HODGINS (1920–2010)

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Robert Griffiths Hodgins, painter, printmaker, lecturer and journalist was born in Dulwich, London, on 27 June 1920. As the illegitimate son of a single mother 'who was one of the working poor', Hodgins always spoke candidly of his humble beginnings, much of which was spent in various foster homes. Yet, he also credited his circumstances for acquiring an early interest in art through visits to galleries after school, which he said he made 'to keep warm, and because they were free of charge!' Hodgins spoke of the works of Van Gogh, El Greco and Lucien Freud as being among the first to impress him.

Hodgins was always naturally curious and showed an aptitude for learning. He was a devoted reader and lifelong student of the classics, art and culture and was able to quote great poetry and literature with accuracy and understanding. Indeed, Hodgins always remembered one of his English teachers, a Miss Lock, fondly for introducing him to Shakespeare. He showed much promise in his school education, even winning an English essay competition, but was removed from school at the age of 14 – as the law then allowed – and was sent to work. Good fortune led him to take up a newspaper sales job through a Soho bookstore, which afforded him access to the books he craved.



Source: photo taken by Jan Neethling
Robert Hodgins sitting in his garden in Midrand, Gauteng

He emigrated to South Africa seeking opportunity in 1938, with his ship's passage having been paid for by a great uncle who was living in Cape Town. Soon afterward, he began working as an insurance clerk and was sent to night school by his uncle to improve his education. Late in 1940, he volunteered for active service in the army and, after a brief training period, was posted to North Africa. There he served in the South African Army vehicle park in Alexandria, Egypt and was promoted to Staff Sergeant. Ironically, during wartime, he met many well educated and privileged people in Alexandria and acknowledged that this period of his life led to a wider exposure to, and interest in, music, art and literature.

Hodgins was transferred to England in 1944, where he again took up visiting the London galleries and museums. The return to England afforded him the opportunity to take advantage of a subsidy for former servicemen, which he utilised to attain a 1-year teacher's diploma. Once he had commenced teaching as a junior master, Hodgins entered Goldsmiths College at the University of London to pursue part-time studies in Art and English, where his special interest in the arts led to his being awarded an Arts and Crafts Certificate in 1951, by which time he was studying full-time again.

Among his younger classmates at Goldsmiths, already a formidable arts institution, were the gifted and later world-renowned Bridget Riley and future doyenne of artistic design, Mary Quant. Nearing the age of 30, Robert Hodgins was taking extra classes in art history and spending all the free time he could in the Tate Gallery. He completed his National Diploma in Design (Painting Major) in 1953 and returned to South Africa, taking up his first teaching post at the Pretoria College of Art (then part of the Technical College) in 1954. He first exhibited his work at the Lidchi Gallery in Johannesburg in 1956 and 1958, at the suggestion of the artist Bettie Cilliers-Barnard. Hodgins was a respected and enthusiastic teacher, but also found that oil painting increasingly gave him some freedom of expression – the ability 'to build up something of my own' without having to set out with defined concepts, or copying from the classics. This spurred his creative energy and enquiries and founded the lifelong love of painting that was to energise him throughout his eighties.

Nevertheless, by the early 1960s, he found himself bored with both his teaching and painting – 'not disinterested, you understand, just frustrated at the lack of new direction', he once said. In 1962, he began a stint as a journalist and critic with Otto Krause's *News/Check* magazine, into which Hodgins threw his energy to such a degree that he abandoned painting for a time. In 1966, Professor Heather Martienssen offered him a part-time lectureship in drawing at the University of the Witwatersrand, through which his exposure to serious 4th-year students and their artistic ambitions helped him to rediscover his excitement for his own work. By 1968 he had given up journalism to lecture full-time and found, as he had hoped, that this move allowed him more time to devote to his own work.

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Interestingly, Hodgins never took to the new intellectual school of thought in abstract and conceptual concerns and abandoned the master's degree in fine art he had begun part-time while teaching at the University of the Witwatersrand. His colleague, Elizabeth Rankin, wrote that he simply could not identify with this way of painting, and 'could not shake off the conviction that good painting must be founded on intellectual endeavour.' Thus, it was only while travelling in Europe in the latter 1970s on university leave, and again by looking at great works in museum galleries, that was he able to

reaffirm his belief in the process of painting as a valid mode of making art, challenging the intellectual construction of the university. In particular ... the works of Van Gogh, Matisse and the late painting of Monet ... reinforced the concept of painting as the encounter of mark against mark, produced in the certainty that the early stages of a painting would of themselves establish what it was ultimately going to be.

Many of his former students remember Hodgins as a powerful influence, a beloved mentor and a keen teacher. His commitment to teaching was clearly strong, but he gradually found that his discovery of the need for his own constant re-education in the very act of painting, took over. In 1983, after a spell as Acting Head of Department, he retired to paint full-time. And so it was that someone so frequently written about as one of South Africa's greatest painters found himself, at 63, finally able to devote his time entirely to his own painting, drawing and printmaking. He had, to date, extended his technical range and expertise to watercolour, tempera painting, screenprinting and lithography, as well as oils on canvas and now began an astonishingly prolific career that was more adventurous, intense and experimental than ever before.

Critics and fellow academics admired his unflinching ability to use ugliness in painting to reveal the more grotesque elements of human society, while remaining true to a painterly ideal of beauty. By his death on 15 March 2010, Hodgins was, in the art world of South Africa, a national treasure – a towering talent and an important influence on generations of students and followers of the fine arts, a respected mentor, a massive positive force of energy and inspiration and someone who is regarded by many as South Africa's greatest contemporary painter. His exhibitions and collaborations at the Goodman Gallery with fellow artists Deborah Bell and William Kentridge won both critical and popular acclaim for 25 years.

Possessing a lively wit and a mischievous and curious eye with which he critically evaluated the doings of humankind, the sensitivity to include himself in his impressions of our species, as well as a healthy cynicism, Hodgins was, above all, the keenest observer of life one could meet. Painting constantly taught him more about life and the process of producing images itself. He approached his canvas or paper with feeling *and* intellect and found the act of painting exciting and amusing, but also an intelligent means to understand and examine life, in all its splendour and grossness at once.

At the end of Hodgins's long and successful life, he found being ill 'just too tedious!' and was, at the end, 'quite ready to depart this mortal coil if I cannot paint!' He was involved in the 'great human drama' right to his last day and left a legacy of compelling work, which is displayed in our museums, academic and other public collections and continues to enrich South Africa's cultural heritage. ■