

An Estonian Artist in Australia - Gunnar Neeme

The exhibition is a reduced version of our previous art and archival materials exhibition “In an Enchanting Circle. An Estonian Artist under the Southern Cross. Gunnar Neeme 100” at the Estonian Cultural History Archive of the Estonian Literary Museum. This exhibition was a sister exhibition to the art exhibition “Under the Southern Cross. Gunnar Neeme – the Estonian Artist in Australia” at the Estonian Art Museum in Tallinn (2018).

Gunnar Neeme’s works of art and his archive was a gift to Estonia by his family in Australia. By using authentic archival materials, this exhibition visualises a fraction of the story of the fate of post-WWII Estonian refugees and marks the 100th anniversary of Gunnar Neeme, the Estonian artist and writer in Australia. This is an insight into the rich archive of the artist that arrived to the Estonian Literary Museum from Melbourne, Australia, in February 2017, containing paintings, works of graphic art, sculptures, manuscripts, books and small prints designed by Neeme,

GUNNAR NEEME (1918–2005) was born in Tartu. He started to study art at the Tartu Higher Art School Pallas in 1937–1943. He left Estonia in 1944, spent a few years in a DP camp in Germany and in 1949, arrived, together with his family, in Australia where he spent the rest of his life. He continued his art studies in Germany and in Australia and was able to adapt very quickly to the artistic life in Australia. He participated in art exhibitions in Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Canada, USA, Peru, and Japan and in all states of Australia.

In Melbourne, Neeme worked for decades as an art teacher and a graphic artist and book designer. Neeme took an active part in the cultural and social life of the Estonian exile society in Australia – he gave presentations, wrote reviews, organised exhibitions and literary events; he participated in the work of exile Estonian organisations, and was among the organisers of ESTO ’88 in Melbourne. He is the author of almost all of the large murals on the walls of the Estonian Houses in Australia and his paintings can be found in many homes of Australian Estonians.

Gunnar Neeme has made more than 200 drawings based on Estonian national epic *The Kalevipoeg* (1861). He was attracted by the mythological substratum of the epic – the ancient folk tale about a young hero who became the king of Estonia. These drawings are not the illustrations in the direct meaning, but the artist tried to picture the verses of the epic in the language of images.

Gunnar Neeme was a member of the international PEN Club: he has published two Estonian-language and three English-language collections of poetry. His poems in prose are philosophical contemplations on the wandering human soul, the homeland and the exile. He is the author of three theatre plays for the Estonian refugee theatres in Melbourne and Toronto.

The exhibition is a result of the project “Formal and Informal Networks of Literature based on Cultural Sources” founded by the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research & Compatriots’ Scholarships in collaboration with the Estonian Cultural History Archives of the Estonian Literary Museum & the Estonian Art Museum.

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