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**NEVER MIND** how she died – we'll get to that soon – it was how she lived that caused such a stir. The flaming red lacquered hair and facelifts, the miniskirts and muu-muus, the black leather boots and swimming caps she wore well into her 60s. The affairs with men half her age, even when she was in her 70s. The stellar careers on three continents. The dodgy business dealings and rumoured underworld connections. The half-truths and shameless self-promotion. The mercurial, unforgettable personality that so divided people:

*She was a superstar.*

*No, she was a con artist.*

*She was a delightful, flamboyant woman.*

*No, she was a tyrant.*

*She was English.*

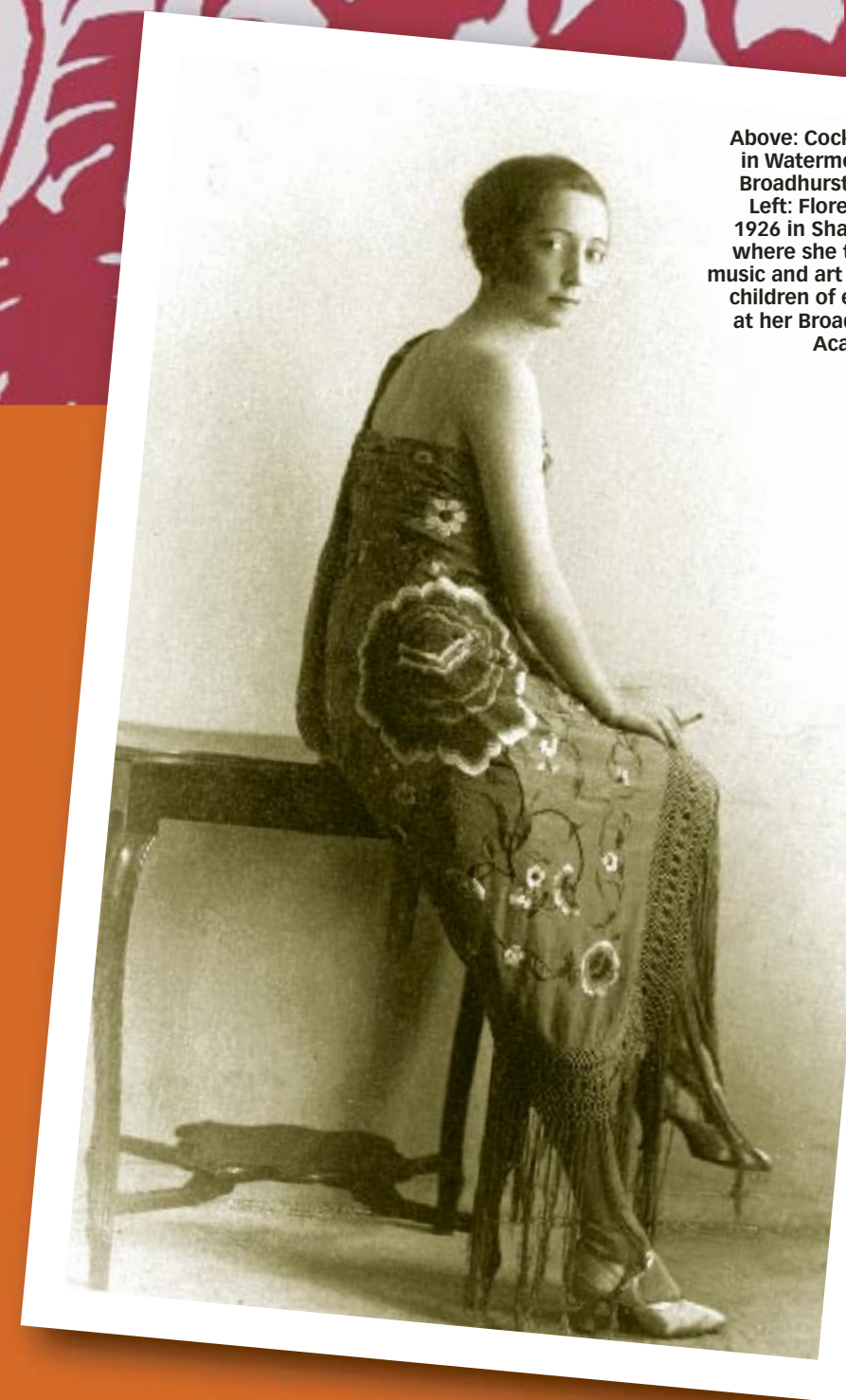
*No, she was Australian.*

Indeed she was – Australian, that is – although you could have been forgiven for not knowing, such was the woman's prodigious talent for re-invention. She was, after all, Florence Broadhurst, the daughter of a Queensland cattleman, who, as "Bobby Broadhurst", the vaudeville performer, toured Asia during the Roaring Twenties. That was until she turned back into Florence Broadhurst, the businesswoman, who in 1926 had the imagination – and lofty self-assurance – to set up the Broadhurst Academy in Shanghai, where she taught music, art, elocution and journalism to the children of English expatriates. All this at a time when many Australians still thought travelling to Brisbane was exotic.

Yet that was only the start of it. During the 1930s, Florence Broadhurst was to become Madame Pellier, the London-based French couturier for the city's well-heeled. In the 1940s, she downsized to a pawnbroker and manager of a passenger steam boat. In the 1950s, she went bohemian, returning to Australia as an "English painter" and holding exhibitions at places such as Anthony Horderns and David Jones department stores. Somehow, she also found time to start a trucking business with her partner, Leonard Lewis, 13 years her junior and the father of her only child.

Then, in the 1960s and early '70s, she transformed herself once more, this >>>

Above: Cockatoos in Watermelon, a Broadhurst print.  
Left: Florence in 1926 in Shanghai, where she taught music and art to the children of expats at her Broadhurst Academy.



# the life and death of florence broadhurst

Thirty years after her vicious and still unsolved murder, an enigmatic Australian has become an international trendsetter. **David Leser** looks at the fascinating and colourful life of wallpaper designer Florence Broadhurst.

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“Florence took no prisoners. There was only Florence Broadhurst. Anybody else was either a copier or a vagabond.”

Left: Florence in her showroom in Sydney's Paddington with Peacocks on its walls. Clockwise from right: Broadhurst's Nagoya wallpaper. A model wears a design by Akira Isogawa in 2000 featuring Broadhurst fabric; a laptop bag in Sun Orange on Cream imperial brocade.



geometric shapes, Japanese florals, abstracts, '60s-era psychedelia, Asian-inspired exotica, Australian rock art, all bursting with colours of lurid green, luminous yellow, reds, purples and sapphire blues, and of a size and range that were simply breathtaking.

As a wallpaper man, David's instincts told him he'd acquired something unique. His sense of irony was also tickled. Back in the 1970s, he'd met Florence on a business trip from New Zealand after arriving at her studio unannounced one day. In typical fashion, Florence had told him to get lost.

“We were bringing a wallpaper product to Australia and I decided to go and introduce myself to her,” David recalls. “So I walked up the stairs to her [Paddington] studio and I introduced myself. She said, ‘We have nothing to say to each other. Would you please leave?’ Florence took no prisoners. There was only Florence Broadhurst. Anybody else was either a copier or a vagabond.”

Having spent three years in the late 1990s cataloguing Florence's collection, David then started showing people what



“This is Australia's chance to create something as iconic as all the high-fashion labels in the world,” says David Lennie, head of Signature Prints in Sydney and home to the Florence Broadhurst Design Library. “It's our chance to create a name such as Gucci, something that could become as top end as that. It has the story and the romance, and there's something quite sexy about Australian product [overseas], which we are unashamedly riding.”

And why wouldn't you? Especially if you held – as David Lennie and his wife, Helen, do – the international commercial licence to reproduce 530 of Florence's designs; and especially if you'd been largely responsible for resurrecting the Broadhurst name around the world, as the Lennies have.

David Lennie is a self-confessed former “car shark” from Auckland, who went into the furnishings and wallpaper business during the 1970s. In 1989, he was part of a consortium that bought Signature Prints, the company that owned the Florence Broadhurst library. (Signature Prints had been sold the Florence Broadhurst collection in 1980 by Florence's son, Robert Lloyd Lewis, three years after his mother's death.)

For more than a decade, with Florence's memory fading and wallpaper no longer fashionable, the boxes of film positives and wooden silk screen frames had mostly gathered dust. In 1999, though, David Lennie acquired Signature Prints outright, giving him joint control – together with the Florence Broadhurst Family Trust – of hundreds of Florence's exquisite designs: >>>

time into the most successful wallpaper designer Australia had ever produced. Oh, and in between all this, she presented herself variously as a public speaker (sometimes true), a British singer (a blatant falsehood), a wealthy cattle heiress (a bold invention) and a friend of the Queen Mother (a complete whopper).

Intrigued? Well, wait for it. In 1977, at the height of her fame, at the very time when she was on commissions from companies such as Estée Lauder and Qantas, when chains of hotels in Saudi Arabia were asking for her designs, when rich clientele from Paris, London and New York were decorating their living rooms with her wallpapers, when the good ladies of Sydney and Melbourne were furnishing their homes with her signature designs, the 78-year-old dynamo was murdered in her studio in Paddington in Sydney.

It was a Saturday afternoon and she was king-hit nine times in the face, head, throat and sternum with a piece of wood taken from the back of the studio, before being thrown against the bathroom wall. Police believe she knew her attacker, partly because she appeared to be making two cups of tea at the time, one presumably for her assailant, the other for herself.

After being beaten to death, her limp frame was then carefully placed around the toilet and her face and cardigan shoved down the bowl. Her hearing aids – which she'd always managed to conceal with a bluff of red hair – lay on the floor, while two expensive rings, one diamond, the other emerald-encrusted diamond, were removed from her broken fingers. About \$8000 had been taken from her handbag.

To this day, the crime remains unsolved, although a book published

this year (*Florence Broadhurst: Her Secret & Extraordinary Lives* by Helen O'Neill, Hardie Grant) makes a strong claim for the murderer being John Glover, the so-called “Granny Killer” of the 1980s.

Not only was Florence's body displayed in a way grotesquely similar to Glover's other victims, but perhaps just as chillingly, Florence happened to know Glover. She'd met him at a wedding, where they'd spent most of the night talking and, afterwards, Glover had been to her studio to choose wallpaper patterns for his house.

John Glover hanged himself in prison in September 2005, aged 72.

“You just can't go past Glover [as the murderer],” author Helen O'Neill told *The Weekly*. “She was battered to death and her body then posed in post mortem in a very degrading way. This is what leads people to think it was Glover ... [although] there is no [hard] evidence.”

Katherine Thompson, the acclaimed playwright, takes a different view. She, too, has researched Florence's life – in this case, for a new documentary directed by Gillian Armstrong – and doesn't for one moment think Glover was the killer. “It seems very far-fetched to me,” she says. “And too convenient. I have about five different notions [of who killed Florence] and I was a bit sad I didn't get a confession out of someone before work on the documentary closed. But I'm still intrigued, and 'still making inquiries', as the police might say.”

In the new documentary, one of Florence's friends, Diana Richardson, speaks of a trip she and Florence took to the Philippines in 1977 with 12 other people, including the Sydney psychic, Diana Shaw.

Diana Richardson recalled for the cameras a moment on that trip she will never forget: “One day while we were there, some of the group found a Chinese fortune teller. Florence came out, having spent 10 minutes with this man, very shaken. ‘I can't believe it,’ [she said]. ‘He told me that within four months I would suffer the most shocking death’.”

Within four months, of course, this terrible prediction had been fulfilled. On the day after the murder – October 16, 1977 – Diana Shaw telephoned Diana Richardson to tell her she had communed with Florence the previous night. Diana Shaw said Florence had described how a man had come into the back of the factory and then through a louvre door. Her description of Florence's studio space was accurate, even though she – Diana Shaw – had never been there.

Diana Shaw then told Diana Richardson that Florence had described the murder to her and asked her to relay a message to Diana [Richardson]. “I can't get through to Diana [Richardson],” Florence told the spirit-raiser. “She's too thick [to receive messages], so you must tell her to tell all my friends and loved ones I felt no pain. I did not suffer. The first blow stunned me and the second blow felled me.”

**I**T IS NOT OFTEN an Australian woman becomes an international fashion trendsetter, especially when she's been dead for nearly 30 years. Yet that's what Florence Broadhurst appears to be doing now – conjuring from the grave a new role for herself on the world stage.

From Copenhagen, three Danish tycoons have recently ordered 74 rolls

LEFT: PHOTO SUPPLIED BY ROBERT LLOYD LEWIS. RIGHT: SUPPLIED BY SIGNATURE PRINTS. ZEPPELIN/HEADPRESS.

“Florence’s body was displayed in a way grotesquely similar to Glover’s other victims.”



Above: “Granny Killer” John Glover (far left) in 1993. Author Helen O’Neill makes a strong claim that he murdered Florence.

**K**ATHERINE THOMPSON is a multi-award-winning playwright and screenwriter whose television writing credits include some of Australia’s most gripping dramas – *Blackjack*, *All Saints*, *McLeod’s Daughters*, *Wildside* and *Halifax f.p.* – to name but a few. She knows a good story when she sees one, especially a good detective story.

In 2004, Gillian Armstrong, the highly regarded film director, approached her about collaborating on a documentary about the long-dead wallpaper designer, Florence Broadhurst.

Katherine had a problem. She was already stretched to the limit with four other writing projects, she didn’t like wallpaper much and she had absolutely no interest in writing what she called a “promo doco for a wallpaper manufacturer”.

However, when Film Australia gave Gillian and Katherine the green light to make the film of their choice, Katherine began researching Florence’s life in earnest. She was fascinated by how little there was on her. “There was virtually no information,” she tells *The Weekly* now. “A couple of boxes in the Mitchell Library [in Sydney] ... and that was about it.”

She began pursuing leads and leads-within-leads, tracking down former employees, old friends, family members and, in one case, a boutique brothel-keeper on Sydney’s Parramatta Road, who’d inherited from her mother various papers and letters belonging to Florence, as well as a pink canopy and bedhead she was now putting to good use!

(Shortly after Florence’s death in 1977, the brothel-keeper’s mother, Sherdene Rose, a former variety dancer in Alaska, had bought Florence’s Darling Point apartment and, within days of moving in, became

convinced – as had the Sydney psychic, Diana Shaw, before her – that Florence was trying to communicate with her.)

Katherine Thompson was intrigued by the ever-changing shape of this woman emerging from the shadows. Florence had been born under a tin roof in 1899 on a cattle station near Mt Perry in Queensland and had fled her origins as quickly – and imaginatively – as possible.

Although barely out of her teens, she’d swept through India, Java, occupied Manchuria, Japan, Siam and Burma during the 1920s with a musical comedy troupe, playing the role of singer and banjolele player. In 1926, she’d become a businesswoman in Shanghai at the height of the city’s flirtation with jazz age decadence. (This is, presumably, when she learned the various arts of pleasure herself.)

She’d ridden camels in Egypt, trekked through Afghanistan, spent a year in India studying Hindu philosophy, visited opium dens in China, and returned to Australia in 1927, where she’d promptly lost her singing voice in a car accident and become engaged to a man she appears to have had no intention of ever marrying.

Immediately after the engagement, she hocked her engagement ring and sailed for London, where she soon married a rich stockbroker, opened a dress salon on New Bond Street, left her husband for a 23-year-old – she was 36 – and then had her only child, Robert. During that time, she went from Florence Broadhurst to Florence Kahn to Mrs Leonard Lewis and back to Florence Broadhurst again.

Her next incarnation was to become a pawnbroker, sell her jewellery to buy a passenger boat, return to Australia to become a painter and then, at the age of 60, take over a wallpaper business in Sydney’s Crows Nest, behind a trucking

yard she and Leonard Lewis had bought.

And having declared Australians to be “afraid of colour”, she set about introducing her countrymen and women to a range of visually sumptuous designs that seemed to cover every colour in the spectrum. On a personal level, she also established herself as one of Sydney society’s most eccentric characters, spinning tall tales about her life and age, and transforming herself with stunning regularity – one day capes and a pillbox, another day trumpet skirts and pearls, yet another beehives and miniskirts – and forever fortified by a new set of false eyelashes or a fresh dusting of her eyelids with wallpaper paint. You name it, Florence flaunted it.

Becoming a wallpaper designer seemed to Katherine Thompson, therefore, an entirely apt vocation for such a woman. “I wasn’t interested in wallpaper ... but I was interested in a woman who kept on re-inventing herself ... and wallpaper was all about what it covered over, how it spruced things up and changed things. It was a metaphor for her life.”

There are still questions surrounding this life. Among them is whether she actually designed any of the patterns herself – especially given how poor her eyesight was for much of her working life.

Peter Travis, the Speedo swimming costume designer, has called Florence an “opportunist” and “confidence trickster” who was able to capitalise on the brilliance of others to advance her own career. He singles out Phyllis Shillito, the founder of one of Sydney’s early design schools, and John Lang, the young artist who first started the screenprinting business behind Florence’s truck yard in the late 1950s, as authentic designers. By contrast, Florence was mainly the talker, the schemer, the self-promoter. >>>



“My mother had a tongue that could cut grown men to pieces ... I’m sure she had people who loved and hated her.”

Florence’s only son, Robert Lloyd Lewis, 67, with a portrait of his mother.

Anne-Marie Van de Ven, curator of Decorative Arts and Design at Sydney’s Powerhouse Museum, takes a less harsh view. “I don’t know anyone else who says she never designed anything,” she tells *The Weekly*. “I’ve interviewed a lot of her [former staff] and I think, as in any design studio, there’s an overriding person ... an art director. I don’t think anything would have come out of there without her input.”

**F**OR NEARLY 30 YEARS, Robert Lloyd Lewis has been haunted by his mother’s brutal slaying and the possibility that her murderer might still be at large. This has made an already tragedy-filled life sometimes much more difficult to bear.

In 1964, Robert and his first wife, Marlene, lost their four-and-a-half-month-old twin boys to cot death. Two years later, their nine-month-old son, Morgan, died after a car accident in which Marlene was the driver. Marlene then fell into depression and became addicted to over-the-counter drugs before dying from renal failure 13 months after her son’s death.

In a state of despair and self-laceration, Robert turned to the bottle. Only his mother managed to extract it from him. “She was the one who told me that I had to call upon all my strengths,” he tells *The Weekly*. “That I had a nine-year-old child and a 10-year-old who still needed me. She said, ‘You have to go on for them.’”

Robert’s relationship with his mother had been strained for most of his life, a result of the keen sense of abandonment he felt as a boy.

“I was born in England in 1938 and the moment I was old enough – five and three-quarters – I was sent off to boarding school. I spent my life in boarding schools, so basically, my mother and I had a love-hate relationship. She always said she was

sending me to boarding school because it would be the best for me. I never really believed it. When we came to Australia, I was 10 and I was sent to boarding school again. I didn’t come home from Christmas to Christmas and she would only come and see me once a term. If I wasn’t at boarding school, I would be sent to my grandfather’s or uncle’s place. Maybe it prepared me for losing three children and a wife.”

Florence’s strength of character was able to reveal itself positively to Robert when he was older, but there were still times when he – together with many others – was forced to bear the brunt of her verbal assaults. “My mother had a tongue that could cut grown men to pieces,” he says. “I’ve seen men in tears and so I’m sure she had people who loved and hated her.”

Not long after Florence’s death, Robert was named one of the suspects in her murder, as was his father, Leonard Lewis, with whom Florence had parted some years earlier. Several of Florence’s employees also fell under suspicion.

Robert freely admits to *The Weekly* having had an argument with his mother the day before her death and that this deterred him from going to see her the next day. “I chose to play golf instead,” he says. “And yes, there were three other blokes with me at the time. Police also questioned the secretary of the golf club.”

For years, Robert has chosen not to speak publicly about his famous mother, preferring to deal privately with the many challenges her life and death presented to him. (Today, he lives with his third wife, Annie, and son David in north Queensland, and has three other children and seven grandchildren.)

All the renewed interest in Florence, however, has given him cause for hope – that the police might now be able to nail the killer and thereby explain the reasons

for her death. He shares writer Katherine Thompson’s conviction that John Glover, the “Granny Killer”, was not responsible.

“I think Katherine is a lot closer to the mark than a lot of people think,” he says.

Recently, Robert was given a new lead, after speaking to a Melbourne psychic who was flown to Sydney to meet him, courtesy of Becker Entertainment, the makers of the Florence Broadhurst documentary.

Sue Clothier, the documentary’s co-producer, had met the psychic on another film project and decided to show her a photograph of Florence. The psychic began talking about Florence in a way that left the producer in no doubt that further conversations were warranted. She and her colleague, Charles Hannah, decided to fly her to Sydney to meet Robert, even though work on the documentary had finished. It was a measure of their respect and affection for this 67-year-old man.

“We wanted to help him fulfill his lifelong ambition of solving the murder,” Charles Hannah told *The Weekly*. “Robert has had a pretty tough old life. He had lost a wife and three children, as well as a mother in brutal circumstances. And this psychic had started talking about Florence in a way that was quite extraordinary. So we flew her up as a favour to Robert.”

On January 12 this year, the psychic and Robert met at a beachside suburb in Sydney’s north. “We met at my sister-in-law’s place,” says Robert, “and we sat in the dining area with two tape recorders running, hers and mine. She said that, in her opinion, two people, a male and a female, had committed the crime and that we were lucky that we had a body to bury, because their idea had been to put it in the boot of their car and take it somewhere.

“She said the man was now dead, but the woman was still alive and had scrapbooks and everything that had ever been written on my mother ... and that she was still fixated with her. She said someone will remember this woman and the scrapbook, and that this will help solve the murder mystery. And she said, ‘Then, Robert, you’ll be able to die peacefully.’”

Robert Lloyd Lewis aches for nothing more, and his mother – he believes – is fully aware of this. Three weeks before he met the psychic, he spent an entire night awake in bed at home talking to his mother. It was the first time in 15 years they had communed. She told him not to worry, to trust that the answers to her murder would soon come.

“She said every bit of publicity would help – including this story – in finding out who the perpetrator was and why.” ■

Unfolding Florence: The Many Lives of Florence Broadhurst screens at Dendy cinemas around Australia from mid-August.