



# Unfolding Florence

The many lives of Florence Broadhurst

A **STUDYGUIDE** BY MARGUERITE O'HARA



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## Synopsis >

'Almost everyone thinks they know who I was and, of course, everyone thinks they know who killed me ...'.

But what acclaimed director Gillian Armstrong reveals in this spirited and highly original documentary is that almost nothing about Florence Broadhurst was as it seemed.

When she was found murdered in her studio in 1977, few guessed her age, let alone her origins. For invention and reinvention were the keys to this flamboyant design pioneer, whose signature use of colour and pattern has captured the world's imagination.

Born into a farming family in outback Australia in 1899, by her mid-twenties she was a singer and dancer in Shanghai, setting up her own performing arts academy. By the 1930s, she ran a fashion boutique in London's Mayfair under the name Madame Pellier, before sweeping into Sydney society with a whole new persona – as a painter and charity queen, with a husband (her second) and a son.

But it was in her last incarnation that she really made her mark, shaking up conservative Australia with her bold, exotic wallpapers.

Now, more than 100 years after her birth, her work has been rediscovered by the world's leading fashion, interior and homeware designers and her prints are in huge demand internationally.

This is a celebration of the many lives of one larger-than-life woman – gutsy, head-strong, imposing, complicated, and almost impossibly glamorous. Told in a style that's vibrant and unconventional, with more than a touch of humour and irreverence. A lot like Florence herself.

'I'd always been told that I was born before my time. Oh, surely to God, the times can just catch up.'

The interview set from the documentary *Unfolding Florence*, the story of flamboyant Australian design pioneer Florence Broadhurst.  
Photograph by Anne Zahalka © NFSA



**The film and the filmmakers** > *Unfolding Florence – The Many Lives of Florence Broadhurst* premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in America in January 2006 at the World Cinema Documentary Competition. Its Australian premiere was at the Sydney Film Festival in June 2006. The film's director, **Gillian Armstrong**, is one of Australia's most acclaimed directors, having to her credit many feature films including *Oscar and Lucinda*, *Little Women*, *High Tide*, *Starstruck* and *My Brilliant Career*. She has also made a number of documentaries, including four films tracking the lives of three women from girlhood to motherhood, amongst them *Not Fourteen Again*. Her films have won numerous national and international awards. The film's writer, **Katherine Thomson**, has written for both theatre and television. Her television credits include *All Saints*, *McLeod's Daughters*, *Snowy*, *GP* and the award winning mini-series *Answered By Fire*, which she co-wrote. Her work has also won a number of industry awards.

**Curriculum Links** > *Unfolding Florence – The Many Lives of Florence Broadhurst* will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at middle to upper secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include English, Media Studies, Filmmaking, Visual and Creative Arts and Design and SOSE/HSIE at school level. The film is also relevant to Textiles and Design. Media Studies students should find the film of particular interest for the range of techniques used by the director to 'unfold' a life.

Clockwise top left: Gillian Armstrong; Katherine Thomson, the writer of *Unfolding Florence*, on set. Photograph by Anne Zahalka © NFSA;  
Director Gillian Armstrong (left) on location with actor Judi Farr as Florence Broadhurst in *Unfolding Florence*.  
Photograph by Anne Zahalka © NFSA



**Introducing *Unfolding Florence*** > This picture of a colourful but elusive figure is constructed in such a way that while aspects of Florence Broadhurst’s life and times are brought into focus, many aspects of her remain hidden.

For such an energetic self-promoter, much of her life remains a mystery. Gillian Armstrong uses a number of devices to quite literally ‘animate’ Broadhurst’s life. Despite having lived until 1977 and been well-known in Sydney society, there was not a lot of archival film available to Gillian Armstrong to use in this documentary, and we build our sense of her life from the often contradictory accounts presented of her, from both Florence herself and a number of people who worked with her or came into contact with her during her seventy-eight years. In the one brief television interview shown of her from the 1970s, where she talks about her business, she seems to be wearing one of her masks. It is for the filmmaker and viewer to ‘unfold Florence’.

**‘Who are all these people talking about me?’**

There are many people in this film who add little pieces to the puzzle that is Florence. Parts of their interviews are cut

into the film to construct the narrative. While this is not a complete list, these people can be grouped into:

**Family and people from Florence’s early life**

Robert Lloyd-Lewis (son), Phyllis Nicholson (niece), Mary Shield, Les Jensen and Ted Bettiens from Mt Perry in Queensland.

**Sydney society connections, acquaintances, friends, academics and designers**

Babette Hayes, Maggie Tabberer, Leslie Walford, Ivan Methot, Judit Korner, Marno Parsons, Diana Richardson, June Gollan, David Lennie, Peter Travis, Professor Ross Steele, Dr Juliette Peers, Akira Isigowa

**Broadhurst staff**

David Bond, Kate Dagher, Leonie Naylor, Phyllis Wright, Paulene Graham, Sally Fitzpatrick, Nerissa Greenwood, Karen Cope-Williams, Peter Leis

Clockwise Top Left: Judit Korner is interviewed in *Unfolding Florence*. Photograph by Anne Zahalka © NFSA; Maggie Tabberer is interviewed in *Unfolding Florence*. Photograph by Anne Zahalka © NFSA; Animated photographs of Florence Broadhurst. All graphics in the documentary are by SV2 Animation Studio. © NFSA the New South Wales Film and Television Office and SBS Independent.



**Using *Unfolding Florence* in the classroom >** Given that this film covers more than seventy years and includes a great deal of information as it unfolds Florence's many lives and times, teachers may choose to select one of the four sets of questions that follow, depending on the students' level and particular interests and/or area of study.

For **SOSE** (HSIE) students, the picture presented of a woman's life spanning the first seventy-eight years of the 20th century in Australia and elsewhere, *Living in the Seventies*, the first set of questions, may be the focus. **Media Studies** teachers and students may find the second set of questions, *Unfolding Florence*, most interesting, as they deal with the structure and style of the film as an example of documentary biography. Students of **Art and Design** may choose to look more closely at the second part of the film, when Florence is developing her wallpaper business and respond to the *Colour and Design* questions. **English** students may prefer to look at how Gillian Armstrong creates this complex and not always complimentary picture of

a woman who chose to live in her own way at a time when this was not always easy or admired. The *I am Florence* questions will best suit this approach.

Both the list of characters and the sets of quotes (following these activities), from both Florence and the people interviewed, are there to assist students in appreciating the film and responding to the questions.

Note: The Office of Film and Literature Classification has classified the film PG (parental guidance recommended), with the consumer advice: infrequent mild coarse language, mild themes.

From Left: Designer Akira Isogawa in front of an original Florence Broadhurst design. Photograph by Anne Zahalka © NFSA; Felicity Price plays the young Florence Broadhurst in *Unfolding Florence*. Photograph by Anne Zahalka © NFSA



## Student Activities

### 1. Living in the Seventies (and before)

- a. How is the personality of Florence set up in the opening sequence of the film, in the dramatizing of the *Black and White Ball* in Sydney in the 1950s?
- b. Where and when was Florence Broadhurst born?
- c. What do we learn about her family in the film?
- d. Which aspects of her childhood does Gillian Armstrong include that indicate something of Florence's determination to be 'somebody'?
- e. Where did she travel to in the early 1920s? How difficult would this travelling have been compared to today?
- f. What did she do in Shanghai and what did she call herself?
- g. When did Florence travel to England and what work did she do there? What sort of troubles did she get into in London in connection with her business activities? What did she call herself?
- h. What expectations did Florence have of married life? Were they realized?
- i. When Florence came back to Australia in 1949, how had her life and family situation changed? Where did she live and how did she go about setting herself up in Sydney society?
- j. Describe some of the projects she embarked on. How successful and satisfying were they?
- k. In 1964, aged sixty-four, Florence began developing a new business. What was this and how did she build the business?
- l. Ideas about class, celebrity and 'society' figure largely in many of the comments made by both men and women contemporaries of Florence in this film e.g. 'I think she could stand at the back of a room and put a price tag and a label on everybody in it'. Have these ideas about class and social status changed or do people achieve 'celebrity' in Australian society today in the same way Florence did?
- m. In what ways was Florence both 'of her times' and 'a bit bohemian'?
- n. What happened to Florence on 15 October 1977? What sort of speculation is there about this event by people interviewed in the film?

Above: Original Florence Broadhurst wallpapers from the documentary *Unfolding Florence*. Photograph by Anne Zahalka © NFSA



## 2. Unfolding Florence but not wrapping her up

‘No matter what, you have to have a structure for documentary. To tell a tale you need to have a form.’

Gillian Armstrong, Director.

- What would be some of the difficulties and challenges in making a film about a woman like Florence Broadhurst?
- How much archival and contemporary footage of Broadhurst, both still and moving images, seemed to be available to the filmmakers?
- How effective is the device of using three different actors to play Florence at different times in her life?
- At various points in this film, Gillian Armstrong uses animation to enliven static photographic images. Describe some of these animations and explain how successful you found this technique.
- Many people were interviewed in the making of this film. How does Armstrong avoid the ‘talking heads’ style of interview that can flatten the viewer’s response to a film and detract from its visual qualities?
- To what extent is this film a traditional biographical documentary?
- Make a list of the different methods used by Armstrong in reconstructing Florence’s life, e.g. interviews with friends, colleagues and family; use of contemporary photographs.
- Biography, whether on film or written, is always selective and can never hope to offer a complete picture of a person. Does the film show us much about Florence’s domestic and personal life?
- Apart from the director and writer, many people are involved in the making of a film, as you would know from watching credits roll by at the end of a film or from the many ‘thank you’s at awards ceremonies. Choose one of these key people in the making of the film – editor, composer, costume designer, production designer, actors playing Florence – and describe how successful

and important their part in the success of *Unfolding Florence* is.

- How satisfying, apart of course from the ‘unsolved murder’, did you find the ending of this film? Propose an alternative ending. Think carefully about how a different ending might change the emphases and mood of a portrait of Florence Broadhurst.

## 3. Colour and Design

- How does Gillian Armstrong ensure that Florence’s designs are prominent in the film?
- What age was Florence when she set up her wallpaper design business?
- What was there in Florence’s past that indicated she had both an interest and a talent for artistic activities?
- Look at some of the Florence Broadhurst designs on the Signature Prints website (see references) and describe the characteristics and style of several of her designs.
- How do some of the patterns suggest that Florence’s early travels in Asia have influenced the designs?
- How do members of her staff – designers, colourists, printers, personal assistants – remember Florence as their boss? Describe the working atmosphere in the factory. What would be the good and bad aspects of working with someone like Florence? (The quotations following these questions will help with this.)
- What was one of the important design innovations to extending the use of wallpaper initiated and developed by Florence and her staff?
- Why did the interior designer, Leslie Walford, prominently featured in the film, like using Broadhurst wallpapers?
- What happened in the 1980s that meant the Broadhurst wallpapers were less sought after by people?
- ‘When you look through the library, you see the level of excellence ... and it’s opulent ... and visually gorgeous.’  
(David Lennie)  
How important have David and Helen Lennie of Signa-

Clockwise Top Left: Felicity Price plays a model on a Florence Broadhurst photo shoot in *Unfolding Florence*. Photograph by Anne Zahalka © NFSA; Judi Farr plays Florence Broadhurst in *Unfolding Florence – The Many Lives of Florence Broadhurst*. Photograph by Anne Zahalka © NFSA

Positive/attractive qualities	Negative/unattractive qualities	Positive and negative
e.g. Skilled networker	Self promoter	

ture Prints been in ensuring that Florence Broadhurst's designs remain cared for, archived and available? How have they done this?

- k. Where does the film show her patterns and papers are now being used?
- l. Account for the renewed interest in these designs in the world of fashion and interiors. You may like to find retail outlets now selling bags and accessories using Florence Broadhurst patterns and designs.

#### 4. 'I am Florence ... or Bobby or Madame Pellier or ... ?

- a. What sort of child was Florence Broadhurst?
- b. How did her early experiences in Queensland shape her outlook and attitude to life and opportunities?
- c. Why did she want to leave Queensland as a young woman?
- d. Describe the way Florence Broadhurst is shown on the morning of 17 October 1977 as she walks to her business premises in Paddington.
- e. Why do you think Florence liked people to think of her as being English?
- f. Was she, as some people assert, a snob; if you believe she was, how is her snobbishness shown in the film?
- g. Florence Broadhurst has been described as a 'flamboyant design pioneer'. Is this complimentary? In the chart above make a list of her qualities in each column, and then tick those which could be considered as both positive and negative. Sometimes words can have either positive or negative connotations, e.g. determined or pig-headed.
- h. The writer of the film, Katherine Thomson, says that Florence *... had many lives: as a performer, in fashion, in art and as a fundraiser and socialite. All these lives fed into the very successful wallpaper business she set up when she was in her sixties.* Sixty is the age at which many people retire. Do you know of people who have begun new careers at this age and been successful?
- i. Florence's son Robert was born quite late in her life. What evidence is there in the film about what sort of mother she was? Does the film provide clues to why she was like she was?

- j. What are some of the insights Robert Lloyd-Lewis has into his mother today?
- k. Many of the people who worked with Florence Broadhurst remember her with warmth and affection. Describe the sort of employer you think she would have been and indicate whether you could work productively with someone with such a 'big personality'.
- l. How would you respond to Leslie Walford's suggestion that *... the fault is like a worm in the apple, it's there from the beginning ... and is going to destroy everything in the end ... the bad end ... is what she had.* What do you think he is implying?



Above: Florence Broadhurst, Shanghai, 1926-27. Collection: Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, Australia.



**The things people say** > Some of the phrases and sayings attributed to Florence suggest she had a strong belief in her capacity to re-invent herself and always keep moving forward.

What else do the following statements suggest about her personality?

- ‘The trick is always to stand out from the crowd and never let anyone see how desperate you are.’
- ‘Always make setbacks sound like opportunities.’
- ‘Visualize with faith and you will become the happy, winning, magnificent personality you would like to be.’
- ‘One must will oneself to be undefeated by circumstances.’
- ‘Second-hand trucks is not quite the fabulous life I had in mind.’
- ‘Dumped at sixty for a dame six months younger than one’s own son ... knocked for six for about six minutes.’
- ‘Great success starts when you least expect it.’
- ‘I always thought she was English.’
- ‘She was larger than life.’
- ‘She was never “a lovely little woman”, as someone said at her funeral.’
- ‘I had heard that she had sung with Dame Nellie Melba.’
- ‘She really wasn’t a designer at all, but she was a great promoter.’
- ‘In the history of design in Australia she’s a very significant figure.’
- ‘She was ... the little black sheep of the family.’
- ‘She was one of the most driven women I’ve ever known.’
- ‘Her mother and sister were paying off her debts for many years after she left.’
- ‘She never came to see me at boarding school. Neither did my father.’
- ‘She always tried to be something she wasn’t.’
- ‘She spoke on the meaning of Dunkirk ... and it was absolutely compelling.’
- ‘She was the worst of bosses and the best.’
- ‘She was a very hard lady but very fair.’
- ‘Motherhood was not her forte.’
- ‘She is one in a million.’

Members of her staff suggest that despite her apparently successful and busy life, she was really quite lonely. Here are some of the things said about her by various people who knew her and worked with her. What clues do they provide in the quest to ‘unfold Florence’?

- ‘She was sort of like a superstar.’
- ‘She never, ever, ever, smiled.’

Above: Producer Sue Clothier appears as an extra in *Unfolding Florence – The Many Lives of Florence Broadhurst*. Photograph by Anne Zahalka © NFSA



## Unfolding Florence further

- At several points in this film, both the filmmaker and people interviewed speculate on how Florence Broadhurst might have responded to things that were said about her and that have happened since her murder in 1977. For instance, Armstrong has Broadhurst expressing displeasure about her age being given in the newspaper account of her death and later someone speculates that 'she would have been flattered with the revival [of her wallpapers]. But at the same time she would have thought it was her due'.  
Write an extended review of this film in the voice of Florence Broadhurst.
- Write your own review of the film that describes and comments on how the use of creative and original approaches to biography creates a picture of a complex woman.
- What this film became ... is a tribute to a life lived*

*authentically, a life driven by creative impulses, lived with self-knowledge, pushed along by a sense of what it might become. Florence was always becoming something and filling herself out.*

(Katherine Thomson, writer of the film)

'She was a difficult person to work for. She was a taskmaster. And she expected perfection from her staff.'

(Karen Cope-Williams, Personal Assistant to Florence Broadhurst)

Conduct a class forum about how you see Florence, using these two statements as starting points.

- Construct a series of interview questions for Florence Broadhurst for a television program you are making about her life and work in 1976. You could role-play this interview with a partner.
- By investigating the Signature Prints website, develop a number of designs for clothing and accessories based on Florence Broadhurst designs.

Above: Animated photographs from the documentary; top right is of the Royal Family; others of Florence Broadhurst. All graphics in the documentary are by SV2 Animation Studio. © NFSA, the New South Wales Film and Television Office and SBS Independent.

## References and Further Resources

### BOOKS

Siobhan O'Brien, *A Life by Design: The Art and Lives of Florence Broadhurst*, Allen & Unwin, 2004.  
This biography was not supported by either the Lennies, as owners of the wallpaper collection, or by Robert Lloyd-Lewis, Broadhurst's son.

Helen O'Neill, *Florence Broadhurst: Her Secret & Extraordinary Lives*, Hardie Grant, Melbourne, 2006.  
This is a beautifully designed book, with many illustrations of Broadhurst's work.

### WEB RESOURCES

Signature Prints (See Florence Broadhurst's Amazing Adventure):  
<http://www.signatureprints.com.au>

Feature article from the *Sydney Morning Herald* from 2004 about the Florence Broadhurst revival:  
<http://www.smh.com.au/news/Cover-Story/Go-with-theFlo/2004/11/10/1100021847779.html>

Abstract of an academic paper from the University of Technology Sydney, looking at the sources and influences of Broadhurst's designs: <http://its-wu-web.its.rmit.edu.au/departments/af/intermesh/New%20Site/Refereed%20Papers.html>

Article from magazine *Luxury Home Design* about the wallpapers with illustrations of Broadhurst designs: <http://completehome.com.au/?p=4847&cid=6362&pid=101725>

### *Unfolding Florence – The Many Lives of Florence Broadhurst*

A Film Australia/Becker Entertainment Production produced in association with the NSW Film and Television Office and SBS Independent. A film by Gillian Armstrong.

**Writer:** Katherine Thomson  
**Producers:** Charles Hannah, Sue Clothier  
**Director:** Gillian Armstrong  
**Executive Producer:** Mark Hamlyn  
**Duration:** 82 minutes  
**Year:** 2006

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